

# RESEARCH SUMMARY

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## Preventing Bullying Through Moral Engagement

### Understanding Moral Engagement

Moral self-view – or morality – is an individual's standards of behavior or beliefs concerning what is and is not acceptable to do. Children and young people are still in the process of forming their beliefs and are influenced by the actions of the people around them. An individual's morals can be shaped by the actions and beliefs of people in their family, religious groups, culture, and in school and other social settings.

Moral engagement is a person's commitment to positive social interactions and thoughtful care of others. Research has shown that there is a connection between an individual's moral self-view and their behavior.<sup>1</sup> Individuals who value and express empathy and concern for others, and who behave positively in social settings, display a sense of moral engagement.

### Moral Engagement and Bullying

Empathy and moral self-view play a role in an individual's potential for aggressive and bullying behavior, as well as in their capacity for positive social interactions.<sup>2,3</sup> An individual who is socially kind and ethical may be less susceptible to bullying because they behave civilly toward others. A student who is morally engaged may be bothered by the mistreatment of others and find it harder to ignore. Their concern may lead them to take action and address the bullying in some way or to reach out to a trusted advisor to help deal with the situation. A morally engaged individual – including students, teachers, coaches, counselors, educators, parents, extra-curricular staff, and faith-based leaders – can influence others through their positive social behavior.



### The Role of Educators in Moral Engagement and Bullying

Because peer aggression and bullying commonly occur at schools, affecting students' wellbeing and learning environment, teachers, coaches, counselors, and other school staff have the important task of being role models for moral engagement and respectful behavior. Teachers' responses to bullying and other harmful acts send clear messages to students about acceptable and unacceptable behavior toward others.<sup>1</sup> In effect, not responding or intervening when bullying or aggressive behavior occurs can be perceived by students as silent agreement. When a teacher, coach, or school administrator consistently intervenes in bullying, it can positively influence the moral engagement of students by setting a standard for expected behavior. It also helps improve student peer relationships, which reduces moral disengagement and helps prevent bullying.<sup>4</sup>

Teachers can also utilize social-emotional learning strategies in the classroom to help develop students' moral engagement. Through social-emotional learning, students can gain a deeper understanding of their own emotions and how those emotions relate to their behavior. Social emotional learning activities can help students build empathy, foster healthy relationships, and manage their feelings. In turn, this can help them become more socially confident and secure about themselves and in their relationships with others.

### Addressing Bullying through Moral Engagement

To help prevent bullying, school staff can foster moral engagement and model pro-social behavior. They can implement successful bullying prevention and intervention strategies that are systematic and reliable, so everyone understands what bullying is and how it will be handled. This makes it clear to students that their teachers and other school staff are morally engaged and that bullying will be noticed and consistently addressed. When bullying occurs, teachers and school staff can defend the target of bullying by reinforcing their humanity and intrinsic worth, which helps to cultivate moral engagement and reduce victim blaming.<sup>1</sup> Another strategy is to provide individual support to targets of bullying, to help them address emotions and thoughts involved in the bullying situation.<sup>1</sup> Implementing moral engagement and bullying prevention and intervention strategies can promote a positive school climate, so everyone feels safer and more connected.

To learn more about evidence-based approaches to bullying prevention and social-emotional learning that builds moral engagement, visit [StopBullying.gov](http://StopBullying.gov).

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3. Wang, X., Yang, L., Yang, J., Wang, P., Lei, L., (2017) Trait anger and cyberbullying among young adults: A moderated mediation model of moral disengagement and moral identity. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 73 (2017) 519-526. DOI: 10.1016/j.chb
4. Thornberg, R., Wänström, L., Pozzoli, T., & Gini, G. (2017). Victim prevalence in bullying and its association with teacher–student and student–student relationships and class moral disengagement: a class-level path analysis. *Research Papers in Education*, 1-16. doi: 10.1080/02671522.2017.1302499



#### Source and Research Limitations

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This research summary is based on the most up to date research on bullying and prevention, but it is important to note that this research has several important limitations. Most of the research is cross-sectional, which means it took place at one point in time. This type of research shows what may be related at that time, but cannot tell us which came first or if one caused the other to occur.

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