Turning Negative Peer Interactions Positive
National Bullying Prevention Month (October) shines a spotlight on the critical issue in schools. Bullying undermines learning and development, and it can have tragic consequences for students. Whether as a bully, a victim, a bystander or “upstander,” each and every student is affected. And every student can be part of preventing it. The focus on bullying also shines a spotlight on the ways peers affect each others’ lives and learning — for better or worse. As adults, we too often focus more on the negative ways peers treat or influence each other, such as through bullying and negative peer pressure. This focus on the negative brings up four myths that need to be reversed.

**Myth #1:** Bullying is normal.

Sometimes people will dismiss concern about bullying, saying that it’s just part of growing up. In fact, the vast majority of young people do not bully others. However, when bullying behaviors evoke laughter, cheers or feelings of power, they are reinforced and create a culture that condones bullying. The good news is that the rate of students experiencing bullying in U.S. schools has dropped from 28% (in 2011) to 22% (in 2013), according to the U.S. Department of Education. So there’s still work to do — particularly with groups of youth who tend to experience higher levels of bullying, such as LGBT youth. But there’s progress. We don’t have to accept bullying as an inevitable part of school life. Rather, we can emphasize the many other ways peers interact with each other that are supportive, encouraging and inspiring.

**Myth #2:** Peer pressure is always negative.

Too often, we assume that peer pressure is what happens when someone gets gullible, vulnerable or maladjusted kids to do something bad or risky. Although negative pressure is part of the dynamic, peer influence or pressure is much broader than that. Through their relationships with peers, young people develop social skills, try new activities and figure out a lot about themselves and who they are becoming. All students absorb ideas, likes, dislikes and values from their friends and classmates. In fact, we want to help students learn to influence others — in positive ways. We help them learn to write and speak persuasively. We cultivate leadership skills. So being influenced by, and influencing, peers is an inevitable and important part of growing up and being part of society.

**Myth #3:** Peer relationships don’t really affect learning.

We may think we are teaching individual students. Yet, in reality, they are part of a web of relationships, all of which affect how they learn and what they learn. A growing body of research highlights the ways peers influence each other’s attitudes toward school and learning. That influence can be negative, when peers dismiss education or “being smart.” But the influence can also be critical for school success. If students enjoy being with friends in school, they’re more likely to show up and engage. Friends help each other problem-solve and learn. Peers often provide emotional support and safety through challenges, and they often reinforce positive educational aspirations.

**Myth #4:** Adults don’t play a role.

A great deal of peer influence (including bullying) occurs away from the watchful eyes of teachers, staff, parents and other adults. That can leave the impression that “kids will have to work this out among themselves.” Like most myths, there’s some truth here: young people do need to learn to solve problems on their own. But adults can also play important roles. Teachers and other school staff reinforce positive peer relationships by:

- Modeling positive, respectful relationships with all students.
- Creating a cooperative, respectful climate in a classroom.
- Giving students opportunities to work together cooperatively, talk about what they’re learning, support their opinions with evidence and provide feedback to each other — all important 21st century skills.

Positive peer relationships play a critical role in schools. Not only are they foundational for preventing bullying, but they are also an integral part of learning. National Bullying Prevention Month provides an opportunity to celebrate and harness this power for preventing bullying and for enhancing the learning experience for all students.
For decades, researchers have studied the role of peer relationships in young people’s lives. A lot of research has focused on the ways peers influence negative behaviors. However, there is increasing attention to the positive role that peer relationships play in learning and well-being, as well as ongoing attention to harmful ways peers sometimes treat each other.

**Peer Pressure is Just One Influence**

Sometimes we blame pressure from peers as the primary cause of problems we see among teenagers. Yet research clearly shows that other influences also matter. Teachers, parents, media and many other sources also shape young people’s attitudes and behaviors in different ways. Adolescent researcher Laurence Steinberg summarizes the research this way:

> “Peer pressure is not a monolithic force that presses adolescents into the same mold... Adolescents generally choose friends whose values, attitudes, tastes and families are similar to their own. In short, good kids rarely go bad because of their friends.”

**How Positive Peer Relationships Make a Difference**

When young people feel rejected, bullied or victimized by their peers, they tend to have less interest in school, be more disruptive and are more likely to drop out. But when students have support from, and feel accepted by, their peers in school, they tend to:

- Have better feelings about their school and their teachers.
- Be more engaged in school and in learning.
- Be more motivated in school, feeling competent and setting goals for their own growth.
- Take action to protect the safety of others.

**Fast Facts on Bullying in Schools**

Bullying exemplifies negative peer relationships. It involves unwanted aggressive behaviors by young people who have (or seem to have) more power. It can include making threats, spreading rumors, physical or verbal attacks, or intentional exclusion of someone from a group. The most recent federal statistics (2013) on bullying in schools from the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics demonstrate the breadth of the problem.

- Middle and high school students who report being bullied at school. This percentage represents a decline from previous levels, which were 28% for most years since consistent data started being collected in 2005. (There are, however, some subgroups of youth who experience much higher levels of bullying, particularly LGBT youth.)

- Students who report the most common form of bullying: being made fun of, called names or insulted. Almost as common: being the subject of rumors (13%) — which is the most common form of bullying reported by females (17%).

- Students age 12 to 18 who report being cyber-bullied during the past school year.

- Sixth graders who report being bullied, compared to 14% of 12th graders.

- Females who report being bullied at school (compared to 20% of males).

- White students who report being bullied at school, compared to 20% of African American students, 19% of Hispanic students and 9% of Asian American students.
Undermining Bullies’ Motivation

Bullies are often motivated by a desire to increase their social standing and to get people to notice them. So when friends or bystanders laugh or cheer, bullies’ harmful behaviors are reinforced or encouraged. But when people who see the bullying support or defend the target of the bullying, the bully no longer experiences those “benefits.” So when students see bullying taking place, four responses can make a big difference in preventing future bullying:

- Don’t laugh, cheer or encourage the bully. It only reinforces the bad behaviors.
- Do express concern, empathy or support for the person who is victimized.
- Do talk it over with a friend and together take action.
- Do get help from a trusted adult, particularly if it escalates or is repeated.

Breaking the Code of Silence

Most young people want to respond positively when their friends make risky choices or intend to do something harmful or dangerous. However, they prefer taking their own action, talking directly to their friend rather than getting an adult involved. Some youth worry that telling an adult may get their friends or themselves into trouble or have other negative consequences. So simple messages to “ask an adult for help” or “tell an adult” often go unheeded. What makes it more likely that young people will turn to an adult to intervene? Several factors can make a difference:

- Students see teachers as fair and open to students’ perspectives.
- Students have a sense of responsibility for the school as a whole.
- Students feel like they belong in the school.
- Students feel connected to other students and the adults in the school.

Creating a school climate where students experience these positive interactions is foundational, then, to ensuring that students will ask for help in serious situations, particularly when lives are at stake.

Shifts in Peer Influence

An important way peers influence each other is through what they model or do. That can include their engagement in school, helping others or participating in high-risk behaviors. Most students have “best friends” who model doing well in school through middle and high school, according to Search Institute surveys of about 90,000 students. However, the proportion who say most or all of their friends use alcohol or illegal drugs increases substantially through these years.
The simple act of greeting other people can open the door to new relationships. It can help students feel less like they’re anonymous or alone at school. This activity encourages students to think about how they usually greet each other and to consider new greetings they can use. This activity sets the stage for a more intentional focus on encouraging positive relationships. It can be used in any classroom setting or new group that forms and can be particularly useful during transition times, such as a new semester or between activities or units.

**Classroom Activity: How Do You Greet People?**

**Introduction**
Highlight the value of positive friendships in the classroom. Students will want to be there more, and they’ll also learn more when they’re comfortable with each other. Sometimes a simple greeting each time you see someone opens the door for a conversation and, perhaps, a growing relationship. But we get so caught up in our routines that we forget to notice the people around us, much less greet them. This activity helps us think about the ways we usually greet each other and encourages us to think of other ways to greet each other.

**Step 1**
Give each student a copy of the “How Do You Greet People?” worksheet. Ask them to star two ways they currently greet others and circle one they could do more often. If they think of other ways they greet friends, have them add more examples.

**Step 2**
Have each student find someone else to test out a different kind of greeting. Acknowledge that it is a bit forced or awkward to try something new with someone you know, but just doing it once can make it easier the next time. Remind them to practice nonverbal cues as well.

**Step 3**
Have students discuss their experiences.
- How did it go to try a new greeting?
- What value do they see in taking time to greet each other?
- What kinds of greetings seem to work best for them?
- What tends to flop?

**Additional Opportunities**
Decide together if the whole class wants to try a particular greeting as part of your daily routine. For example, you might set an expectation that students all greet each other individually with a simple “hi” before you get into the lessons or activities for the day. Remind and encourage them to use a variety of greetings.

Have your students create a billboard or poster with examples of positive greetings, or greetings in all the languages represented by the students in the classroom or the school.
When we hear “peer pressure,” we immediately think about ways some young people coerce others into doing something (usually bad). In reality, peers pressure or influence each other in many ways. This activity encourages students to “unpack” the ways peers influence each other, both good and bad. In the process, they learn to be more intentional about how they respond. This activity works best in a homeroom setting or in a class that examines human behavior or relationships, such as health. Allow 5 minutes to explain, 10 minutes for the small group brainstorm, then 5 minutes for each group to present.

**Step 1**
Give everyone a copy of the “Peer Pressure. In Reverse.” worksheet and assign each group one of the scenarios. The activity is to create a one-minute skit that shows an example of a negative and then a positive type of peer influence.

**Step 2**
Have each group present their scenario. Then have the rest of the class try to guess what kind of influence is being used. Have the group describe how they interpreted their type of influence.

**Step 3**
When all the groups have presented, write the labels for each type of influence on the whiteboard. Then discuss these questions:

- Which of these types of influence do you think is most common in our school? Why?
- We often talk about peer pressure as a negative influence. But we influence each other in both positive and negative ways. What are some other ways you or someone you know has been able to have a positive influence on others?

**Additional Opportunities**
Encourage the class to brainstorm additional positive examples for the various types of influence. Have them make posters, use social media or find another way to share these examples.

Ask your students to look at the tips at the bottom of the worksheet. Have them take 60 seconds of silence to think about a recent example of negative peer pressure and which one of these tips might have helped “reverse it” to become a positive influence. If they have journals, this could be a journal entry.

Distribute “Hi!” buttons to student leaders and challenge them to start a new trend of friendly greetings in the hallways.
Cultivating positive relationships among students is a difficult, often hidden, part of effective teaching. Yet doing it well bolsters teacher effectiveness and enriches student learning.

Try these strategies:

1. **Model positive, respectful relationships**
   with all students. Be particularly attentive to connecting with those who are more isolated or marginalized in the classroom.

2. **Getting to know your students**
   makes it easier to help them connect with others. Find out one or two things that they really enjoy and remember to check in with them about these interests from time to time. Then find natural ways to bring those interests and talents into classroom discussion or routines. A quiet student who is good with computers could be the tech problem-solver for the classroom.

3. **Build a culture of relationships**
   in which students get to know each other, are expected to look out for each other and support each others’ learning.

4. **Work with students to create shared expectations**
   for how they interact with each other, articulating norms and values for student relationships as well as learning. These expectations — that you can reinforce by practicing specific skills — might include:
   - Show mutual respect for everyone in the classroom.
   - Listen well to each other, without interrupting or checking cell phones.
   - Provide helpful feedback when asked.
   - Look out for each other by noticing and checking in when someone is having a bad day.
   - Avoid teasing, put-downs or laughing at others.

5. **Address behaviors that break class expectations**
   by providing specific feedback that helps students adjust their actions and then reinforce positive changes.

6. **Increase students’ sense of empathy**
   for those who are different, such as those who come from a different country. Use examples, stories and projects that introduce students to the strengths and experiences of people who are different from them individually. This can include celebrating the diverse experiences and cultures of students in the classroom.

7. **Encourage cooperative work**
   among students on classroom projects and assignments. Link students together who share common interests to bring out the best in each other.

8. **Talk privately to students**
   who may be shy or socially isolated. Coach them on how to navigate social situations in the classroom by, for example, making eye contact with others or greeting classmates before class starts. Identify specific strategies for connecting with other students. For example, suggest they form a study group or do a project with a couple of other students who share interests or have similar personalities.

9. **Help students work out problems and disagreements**
   in healthy ways. Help them learn and practice skills for resolving conflicts in ways that deepen rather than destroy their relationships.