SOCIAL NORMS THEORY AND BULLYING

Social norms are people’s beliefs about the attitudes and behaviors that are normal, acceptable or even expected in a particular social context. In many situations people’s perceptions of these norms will greatly influence their behavior. When people misperceive the norms of their peer group—that is, when they inaccurately think an attitude or behavior is more (or less) common than is actually the case—they may choose to engage in behaviors that are in sync with those false norms.1 Pluralistic Ignorance is the term that is used in academia to discuss social norms theory and refers to the incorrect belief that one’s private attitudes, judgments or behaviors are different from others.

With regard to bullying, many youth may falsely believe that name-calling, spreading rumors, teasing and other forms of social cruelty are approved of by their peers and that it would invite ostracism to refuse to participate in or to take a stand against such behavior. This misperception may cause young people to avoid acting as an ally to the targets of bullying and to even engage in negative behaviors with which they privately feel uncomfortable. Over time these behaviors may become normalized for youth and they may become desensitized to the damaging effects on others. However, interventions that correct students’ misperceptions by demonstrating that most young people don’t find name-calling, bullying and other forms of social cruelty to be “cool” could provide students with the awareness and confidence needed to avoid bullying behavior and to speak out against it. According to the Youth Health and Safety project, “the social norms approach to preventing problem behavior and promoting and reinforcing positive behavior, put simply, is to dispel the myths about the problem being the norm among peers.”2

In one study of five middle schools, for example, surveys indicated that students substantially misperceived peer norms regarding bullying—as predicted, they thought bullying behavior and pro-bullying attitudes were far more frequent than was the case. In response, adults supported students in creating a poster campaign to publicize the accurate norms and shift cultural expectations. This intervention led to significant reductions in bullying across the school sites as well as increased reports of bullying to adults at school and at home.

Cyberbullying expert Nancy Willard points out how this approach would work equally well to address issues of cyberbullying. For example, she imagines student-created posters or screen savers, public service announcements or other presentations with messages such as, “90% of students at [our] school have set their social networking profile to ‘friends only’”; or 87% of students at [our] school think that students should not post hurtful comments about other students online.”3

