



# NOT IN OUR SCHOOL (NIOS) PARENT GUIDE

## Preventing and Addressing Bullying and Intolerance

by Becki Cohn-Vargas, Ed.D. and Micaela Presti





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## Introduction

**A Not In Our School Campaign (NIOS)** is an ongoing commitment to empower students to create safe and inclusive environments that are free of bullying, anti-gay harassment, bigotry, racism, and all forms of intolerance.

Take a moment to listen to the innocent laughter of young children. Only sometimes it is not so innocent. Schoolyards, homes, and now, the Internet are not always the places a child can feel safe and accepted. Social cruelty (also known as bullying) is alive and well. Children are made fun of for the slightest perceived difference. They may get called names such as “fatso” or “shorty”, or told that they throw “like a girl.” Others are made fun of for their race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, or if they are in special education. At moments they might be left out, harassed, and mocked, in person and online. This public shaming can potentially be made known to all their friends or even hundreds of other kids. In the past, adults have excused these behaviors with “kids will be kids.” The victims of bullying repeat the mantra “sticks and stones will break my bones, but names will never hurt me”, but names and words

do hurt. We can no longer ignore these behaviors. We now know of the devastating emotional impact and life-long damage that can take place. The good news is that there are now powerful and proven ways to prevent and combat bullying and all forms of intolerance. One of the most powerful things you can do is talk to your child about bullying: what causes it, what to do when it happens and how to prevent it from happening to themselves or their friends by being an



Christopher and Ben George



Tracy Maier and family, Prospect Park, PA

upstander. Ninety percent of children will not tell an adult or a friend that they are being bullied. It is up to you to check in with them and ask about what is happening either to them or their friends.

**You don't need to wait for your child to be bullied to do something about it!**



*Morgan, daughter of NIOT leader, Susan Guess, Paducah Kentucky*

Over the last year, concerned parents from California, Maine, Kentucky, and Pennsylvania contacted NIOS; all the parents had very similar stories. In each case, their own children were being bullied. We also heard from other parents who shared horrific bullying incidents in their communities. What resulted from these cases were a suicide, a stabbing, and two cases of horrific beating of the target. Each of these tragic incidents left very distressed communities and parents who wanted to do something.

As a movement for lasting change, **Not In Our School**, which is a part of the 20-year-old national non-profit organization **Not In Our Town**, is an initiative that asks everyone to change the social climate in schools and communities from ones that tolerate bullying and intolerance to ones that promote safety and inclusion. A safer climate does not happen overnight. The process begins with taking a stand and building awareness. It calls for teamwork between students, parents, educators, and community members. Together, they model and practice empathy, thoughtful responses, and respect for different backgrounds. They share meaningful conversations and seek to create safer schools and communities for children of all backgrounds and gender identities.

School needs to be a place where each student feels unique and appreciated. All students need to feel comfortable in a warm and “identity safe” environment where all negative stereotypes are addressed and challenged. Involving students in the process of change can shift the school culture to one where offending or hurting someone else, either in person or online, is not seen as cool, but as something that is no longer tolerated.

**Bullying and victimization are already national issues. You don't have to wait for a tragedy.**

An “ounce of prevention” makes a big difference. Enough terrible things have already happened in other communities, and you can get yours to be ahead of the curve. Marshalltown, Iowa did a prevention campaign after a suicide in a neighboring town was linked to bullying. (<http://www.niot.org/blog/not-our-town-marshalltown-iowa>) Unless their own child has been a target, the issue of bullying is off of most adults' radar. Many adults think that it isn't an issue in their schools. One reason for that is that bullying is seriously underreported; ninety percent of kids who are targets will not tell *anyone*, not even an adult or a friend. So, the first thing you can do is to identify how much of a problem bullying is at your school or in your town. If bullying is an issue, it's easy to point your finger at the school administrators and teachers and expect them to fix the problem. However, it's not going to happen without everyone working together. This guide is designed to help you change a climate from one of intolerance resulting in bullying, to one of safety, where every child, no matter his or her difference, feels safe.

To begin, in this guide, we will first define bullying and intolerance. Next, we will offer you concrete ways you can support your child to prevent or respond to bullying and as well as steps to get help from the school staff. We will conclude with ways you can make a difference in your community to address and prevent incidences of bullying and intolerance.

(Many activities have been successfully implemented in schools and may be viewed in videos with lesson guides on the [notinourschool.org](http://notinourschool.org) website.)

## Part 1 Defining Bullying and Intolerance

### The Accepted Bullying Definition



Morgan and friends in an anti-bullying play

What do you think of when you hear the term “bully”? A common but outdated perception of a bully is a bigger kid physically overpowering another child to get his lunch money. However, bullying today, especially with the anonymity of the Internet, is far more complex than that. One accepted definition of bullying is “*an act of verbal or physical aggression with an imbalance of power between the perpetrator and victim, that is repeated, or has the potential to be repeated, again and again*” (Olweus, 1993). While all children can be mean, it is not always bullying. When it is repeated and there is an imbalance of power, it becomes an issue. An imbalance of power may allude to physical strength, access to embarrassing information, or threats to popularity that is used to try to control or harm others.

There are three main kinds of bullying: verbal, relational and physical.

- Verbal:
  - teasing
  - name-calling
  - inappropriate sexual comments,
  - taunting
  - threatening physical harm.
- Relational:
  - leaving someone out on purpose
  - telling other children not to be friends with someone
  - spreading rumors about someone
  - embarrassing someone in public
- Physical:
  - hitting/kicking/pinching
  - spitting
  - tripping/pushing
  - taking or breaking someone’s things
  - making mean or rude hand gestures

([Stopbullying.gov](http://Stopbullying.gov))



NIOT Oak Ridge sponsors



PHOTO BY PAM ALLEN-ELLIS

Toni Marie, daughter of Valerie Hughes, Oak Ridge NIOT Leader with friends Mathew and Kamry

Bullying usually happens under the radar of adults. It can happen two feet away and you may not know it; that's how sophisticated some kids are, and it takes a lot of energy and time to deal with bullying incidents. So if a child is accused of being mean to another child and she responds with "I was just kidding", don't immediately accept that answer.

Along with bullying, intolerance is often at the heart of victimization. Both are learned behaviors. Intolerance is often revealed through unkind remarks with stereotypical comments regarding a person's identity, such as their race, ethnicity, language, sexual orientation, religion, or physical ability. Peers, family, teachers, coaches, or other adults in a child's life can often even encourage these intolerant attitudes; but they are also learned through exposure to television, music, and the Internet. Students may express intolerance in a classroom or in public, or it can happen in online or other secret places. Adults are often not even aware it is taking place. If you live in a diverse community, you may assume that since your child has been exposed to different races, different sexual preferences, etc, that s/he will automatically be tolerant. Unfortunately, kids are going to see differences and they still need adults to discuss with them why these differences exist, and that it doesn't make a difference in how a person should be treated.

You can start talking with your child at pre-school age about his or her feelings and about being kind to others. Skills for social-emotional learning (SEL) can be taught: children can learn how to communicate and express feelings, how to be empathetic, and how to control their impulses and think before they act.

Photo Exhibit of Girls Who Were Bullied Speaking Up, Paducah, KY

## Part 2 How to Know if Your Child is Being Bullied



For weeks, your child has been coming home from school and locking himself in his bedroom. His answers are mostly one word and are delivered in an angry tone. Most mornings he wakes up and says he has a stomachache and doesn't want to go to school. When you ask if anything is wrong, he says no. You notice his grades are starting to drop and his appetite is off. These are all signs that your child is possibly being bullied. Other signs that your child is a target may include:

- Unexplained injuries.
- Lost or destroyed clothing, books, electronics, or jewelry.

- Frequent headaches or stomach aches, feeling sick or faking illness.
- Changes in eating habits, like suddenly skipping meals or binge eating. Kids may come home from school hungry because they did not eat lunch.
- Difficulty sleeping or frequent nightmares.
- Declining grades, loss of interest in schoolwork, or not wanting to go to school.
- Sudden loss of friends or avoidance of social situations.
- Feelings of helplessness or decreased self-esteem.
- Self-destructive behaviors such as running away from home, harming themselves, or talking about suicide.

([Stopbullying.gov](http://Stopbullying.gov))

**Ninety percent of children will not tell anyone they are being bullied.**

Often, children are embarrassed, they may feel like they deserve it, or they are afraid it will get worse with adult intervention. Finally after weeks of asking your child what is wrong, he breaks down and tells you a classmate is bullying him.

Your first response is sadness, followed by anger. Neither of these is helpful for your child. So....

### What do you do?

1. You LISTEN and BELIEVE. No one wants to think his/her child is a target, so we may try to find an excuse for the behavior, which can make your child feel unsupported. “Oh, he must have been joking around.” Oh, he didn’t really mean it.” “You’re just too sensitive.” “Just walk away when he does it.” None of these statements are helpful to your child.
2. Stay UNEMOTIONAL and avoid being inflammatory or accusatory. Express your concern and empathy for your child and what he is going through. However, do not show anger or sadness. This may make him afraid to tell you the truth again in the future.
3. DISCUSS with your child why bullying happens. Make sure he understands that it is not his fault he is a target. Explain that the person who bullies often has problems of his own and bullying another child is his inappropriate way of dealing with those problems.
4. REASSURE your child that you will work with his teacher and the school to make it better without retaliation from the bully. Often a child will feel like she is the only target. Explain that bullying is common but no one talks about it.
5. DO NOT SPEAK to the parents of the person who bullies about this, even if you know them well. This rarely is helpful. They are most likely going to be defensive if you say their child has been “bullying” yours.



*Emma, Sophie with their mother, Jessica Hopkins*

### Part 3 How to Get Support from the School



What you do next may decide how successful you are in fixing the problem. How you communicate your concerns can impact the outcome in a few ways, particularly if you don't already have a relationship with the teacher. Document all actions you take, as this will be helpful if you have to "go up the chain of command" to resolve your complaint.

1. If you don't already know, find out if there is a policy on bullying/harassment behaviors in the school. Read it, so you understand what expectations are.
2. Follow the school guidelines for communicating your concerns. Most schools ask that you communicate first with your child's teacher and then go up the chain of command if you feel the issue has not been addressed. (In secondary school, if the problem is occurring outside the classroom, communicate with the counselor first). If resolution is not reached, go up the chain of command. ALWAYS keep your tone civil, no matter how angry you may be. It's difficult to understand a message that is delivered in anger.
3. Keep the email brief and unemotional. Outline what your child has told you and express your concern without "attacking" the child who did the bullying. Remember it is still your child's word and the other child deserves to be listened to. It may be that your child unknowingly has had a part in the bullying situation (1). Ask to meet with the teacher, as soon as possible. Do not copy the principal or other superior on the email as that indicates you don't trust the teacher to handle it. (A sample email is found in Appendix A)
4. Try not to discuss with other parents unless it is to get guidance from one or two who have had experience with their child being bullied. Remember, the child who does the bullying needs as much support and intervention as your child. We refrain from labeling children as bullies. All children are capable of bullying at one time or another. And our goal is to help them all learn not to bully.

*Susan Guess, NIOS leader  
pictured with her daughter  
Morgan and anti-bullying  
author, Jodee Blanco*



The same guidelines about tone and content apply to your face-to-face meeting with the teacher.

If it becomes clear that the teacher does not, or cannot, intervene effectively, communicate with him or her that you need to go up the chain of command. However, do not base this on your knowledge or opinion of what the "punishment" is or should be for the bully. That



*NIOT Leader, anti-bullying activist and Parent Guide Co-Author, Micaela Presti and sons*

information is confidential. Base your communications with school administrators and staff on how your child is responding. Again, keep the tone civil. Show your documentation of what steps you have taken so far.

Follow the guidelines above for communicating up the chain of command. Remember, your goal is to advocate and find a solution for your child, not to get anyone “in trouble”.

### **Understand Why a Child Bullies Another Child**

There are several reasons why a child will exhibit bullying behaviors. One of the common reasons is that the child has been bullied, usually by a sibling or peer, but sometimes by other adults. Sometimes the bullying behavior is a defense mechanism against unwanted attention, fear, or a lack of understanding about how or why another child behaves or looks. Often children bully others to impress their friends or to raise their own social status. Sometimes the whole social environment is very unsafe for children. When there is a chaotic and violent environment at home or school, bullying behaviors thrive.

Ultimately, the child who bullies actually deserves as much intervention as the target of the bullying. If your child has been the one who bullies, help him or her to learn and exhibit empathy and kindness. You can do this through words, but even more importantly, by modeling those behaviors yourself. As a parent, it’s also incredibly helpful for you to talk to your child about physical, social, and emotional differences in children. Kids are afraid of what they don’t understand. Remember, bullying is a learned behavior, and every child who bullies can learn to stop bullying.

*NIOT leader, Valerie Holland Hughes and Andrya Bradford-Baker, Oak Ridge Tennessee*

## **Part 4 Taking Action for Change**



*PHOTO BY PAM ALLEN-ELLIS*

It is natural for parents to want to move into positive action after their child was bullied. Whether it is the grandmother from St. Louis who approached the principal after her second grade grandson was relentlessly bullied, the mother in Tennessee whose teen-age daughter was cyber-bullied, or the mothers in Pennsylvania and Kentucky who went straight to the Mayor’s office to demand an anti-bullying proclamation and the formation of an anti-bullying task force. The

main goal is to raise awareness and to work for sustained change by organizing a Not in our Town/Not In Our School (NIOS) Campaign.

Every NIOS campaign focuses on local issues and the needs of the school community. A Not In Our School campaign mobilizes everyone to be “upstanders” who take action to stand up for themselves and for others, and to create a climate that reflects the values of safety, respect, and inclusion in these ways:

*Prospect Park Borough, Pennsylvania adopts anti-bullying resolution presented by Hanna Maier, pictured with her mother Tracy Maier and civic leaders*



**Identification of problems of intolerance and bullying:**

The community focuses on its particular needs and on the problems that result from the bullying or hateful behavior of the students in the schools. Often, students are bullied because they are different in some way. The first step is to start with a dialogue about the particular problem. It’s critical that everyone has the same descriptions of the behaviors. What one adult calls bullying, another adult may think is just kids joking around.

**Solutions defined by students and peer-to-peer actions:**

Students are supported in defining the problems and finding their unique solutions to make their schools safe and help bystanders gather the courage to become upstanders.

**Use of a collective voice:**

The entire school community unites to say NOT IN OUR SCHOOL. This could be stated in many forms—buttons, banners, slogans, T-shirts, pledges, assemblies, and school wide activities. <http://www.niot.org/blog/sustaining-change-niot-retreat-marshalltown-ia>

**Steps for Parents to Start a Not In Our School Campaign**

**1. Use the Momentum to Gather Committed People Ready to Take Action**

When there has been an incident, people are angry and ready to do something. That is a great time to call them to action. Action brings people together and leads to both healing and to hope for keeping such incidents from happening in the future. Draw on that momentum and newly found community strength to create a unified force for positive change and to develop a sustained infrastructure to create a coalition to lead anti-bullying efforts.

- It only takes one person to get it started, but that person needs to immediately find others. We suggest a broad-based group with diverse participation by people of different ages as well as ethnic, religious, and socio-economic groups.
- Invite people from diverse sectors of the community: schools, faith groups, law enforcement, civic and business leaders and even the arts community. That will allow you to reach out in all directions.
- The impact of your coalition will be even stronger if it embraces representatives from both school and the community-at-

Parents and students standing up for unity to end intolerance. Palo Alto, California



PHOTO BY PAM ALLEN-ELLIS



Mayor Pontieri and students from Patchogue, NY



large. Possible groups to approach both on and off campus include student clubs, parents and PTAs, librarians, community organizations such as the YMCA and afterschool programs, interfaith groups, churches, synagogues, and local government officials (school board members, city council, the mayor).

- The broader the coalition, the more powerful the results become. However, it is important to remember that even very small groups can make a big difference.

### **Keep the Message Upbeat and Avoid the Blame Game**

There is a frightening scene of a Town Hall meeting in the “Bully” movie where community members are distraught and angry about the lack of response to bullying in their school community. While the anger and frustration are real, the key to the success of Not In Our School is to seek solutions and draw from positive energy of people uniting. Remember, this is not a problem that will be solved overnight!

Once you have secured a meeting with a person or group, the following guidelines can help in tailoring an attractive presentation:

- Create an inviting atmosphere and accept all levels and offers of time, energy and commitment. Try not to point fingers at others, whether they are school officials or parents. It only puts people on the defensive.
- Be inclusive and hear suggestions and ideas from all participants.
- Keep your goal in mind and communicate your passion, define your group’s mission.
- Be ready to enlist, support or encourage others to act.
- Be prepared for the next step, such as showing a video.
- Before leaving, remember to ask for participation and support.
- Stay flexible and adaptable.
- Create a leadership and decision-making structure that maximizes each person’s voice and lets them contribute based on their unique skills and gifts.



Mike Mortimer and daughter

PHOTO BY PAM ALLEN-ELLIS

**2. Propose your ideas to the school administrators at the district or site level.**

It is always important to approach the school leaders to get them on board. One community discovered this the hard way when a city council member loudly critiqued the school district. This only led to divisions and set their efforts back. Do some research to find out what has already been done to address bullying. Acknowledge what the schools are already doing. If the school district staff is reluctant to participate, you can still move ahead at the community level working with groups like the Boys and Girls Club, 4-H, and the YMCA.

**3. Identify issues in the school and community with students, staff and parents.**

Find out what data exists about your school and if your school has already surveyed students. Review that data before you do another survey. Several surveys are available online. You can ask questions to determine how safe students feel at school and to identify the issues that are keeping the classrooms and school from being safe. Some examples of questions to ask are below. Tally the results and identify the areas of the highest rating as the most unsafe.

*Sample survey questions are found in the Appendix B:*

Select and view NIOS videos for inspiration and learn from other NIOS campaigns. Hold class and staff discussions about the issues that keep a school from being safe.

**4. The leadership group chooses the identified issue(s) of the highest concern.**

For the most impact, a NIOS campaign needs to include meaningful discussions with the participation of all students for both exploring the issues and identifying authentic and sustaining solutions.

**5. Sign a Not In Our School/Not In Our Town pledge to stop bullying, teasing, and intolerance.**

Complete the NIOS pledge or adapt it to your community. Each person and whole classrooms can complete their pledge and submit it, or the pledge can be written on huge sheets of butcher paper and everyone can sign the bottom of the butcher paper.

It is important to discuss commitment to the words in the pledge and recite it together.

**6. Select three or more of the activities or design your own activities to implement with the entire community during Not In Our School Week.**

Keep in mind that a Not In Our School campaign can extend over an entire month, a week, or just a single day, as long as build-up and follow-through activities are in place to support focus, clarity and lasting change. (Examples of different activities are in Appendix C)

The pledge



PHOTO BY PAM ALLEN-ELLIS

PHOTO BY PAM ALLEN-ELLIS

**7. Document and publicize what is being done.**

Take photos, film interviews, write articles, and collect and publish the students' writing assignments. Go to your local newspaper, public media station, or Parent Blog to share the good news.

**8. Identify the impact of your NIOS Campaign.**

After the actions and activities, re-ask the students how safe they feel at school to determine the impact of the campaign and identify future actions.

**9. Review the data and determine next steps.**

Change does not happen overnight and these efforts need to be ongoing. Holding an annual "Not In Our School Week" assures the students that NIOS, the values of inclusion, and an environment free of bullying and intolerance are here to stay. It also can serve as a reminder to the students during the year to stay the course and hold true to the values.

**10. Join the NIOS Network.**

Put your school district on the NIOS Map. Send in a NIOS Campaign Form with a list of your completed activities. You will receive a certificate that your school community is a member of the Not In Our School Network.

*NIOS Sikh Youth Video Contest Winners, Fremont, CA*

**An Invitation  
to Partner  
with the  
NIOS Network**



Parents already partnering with NIOS have stepped up with innovative strategies together with others in their towns. As we work with them, they have become part of the larger NIOT network of schools and communities. These communities recognize that shifting a culture is an ongoing process of standing together against bullying, against intolerance and all forms of victimization, and learning to live by the words Not In Our Town and Not In Our School.

What is happening in your town? NIOT is ready to support you getting started. Contact us at: [info@niot.org](mailto:info@niot.org).

## Appendix

### A. Sample email to the teacher:

Dear Ms. Jones,

Joe has been coming home from school for the last several days very unhappy and in a bad mood. He keeps telling me nothing was wrong, but just today he broke down and said that Will has been incredibly mean to him and making fun of him in the classroom and during recess.

Can we meet, ASAP, to talk about how to help the boys develop a better relationship?

I can be reached either through email or my phone (xxx-xxxx).

Thanks so much,  
Karen Thompson

Even though you are incredibly angry and sad that your child is going through this, note that this sample email is unemotional, does not assume blame, and shows your concern for both children. You are more likely to find support for this kind of approach.

### B. Sample Survey Questions:

1. If you could change one thing about the climate and culture of the school, what would it be?
2. Have you or other students from different racial backgrounds been teased and bullied by others in this classroom/school?
3. Do you think that immigrant students feel welcomed? Do they actively participate in all school activities?
4. Do you hear racist slurs, or have you seen racist graffiti around the campus?
5. Have you or other students been teased or called anti-gay names?



6. Have you heard the phrase “that’s so gay”?
7. Have you or other students been teased or bullied about being overweight?
8. Have you or others been teased or bullied about being dumb (not as smart)?
9. Have you or others been teased for how much money you or your family has?
10. Where do you see bullying and cruelty taking place?
11. “I feel safe here.” Is this statement true for you? Why or why not?

**C.**  
**Examples of**  
**NIOS Activities**

- Create your unique NIOS slogan, for example, “Stand Up, Stand Out: Not In Our School.”
- Watch NIOS films in the classroom followed by discussions.
- Hold a schoolwide assembly with student skits and speakers.
- Do the “Dissolving Stereotypes” activity at school or at a community event where everyone recalls negative stereotypes that have personally impacted them. Record the memories on rice paper and gently place them into a pool where they dissolve.
- Hold a flash mob in the school cafeteria or on the city hall steps led by the leadership group.
- Sponsor a poster or video contest on the theme of NIOS.
- Design NIOS t-shirts, buttons, posters, or stickers and distribute to all students.



- Teach students to be upstanders and create scenarios where they can role-play and practice in their after-school program.
  - Organize a cross-age service-learning project where older students teach the younger ones and perform skits about responses to bullying.
  - Link your NIOS campaign to the curriculum: Have the students research the areas of most concern and write essays.
  - Have the students write letters to the newspaper and local officials describing their commitment to NIOS and making their school safe.
  - Map the places where bullying happens in the school.
- Have students prepare a presentation or video to teach younger students about bullying.
  - Collaborate with the city council or with the mayor’s office to craft and pass a resolution for Not In Our School Week or create a Mayor’s Task Force on Bullying Prevention.
  - Sponsor a kindness event. Examples include a “Walk for Kindness,” a Kindness Facebook Page, and a communitywide “silence is acceptance “ group painting event.
  - Sponsor a community event with a film showing of a NIOS film followed by student-led small group discussions.
  - Sponsor a broadcast of a NIOS film on the local cable station followed by a student panel.

# About NOT IN OUR SCHOOL and NOT IN OUR TOWN

Not In Our School (NIOS) is a project of Not In Our Town (NIOT), part of The Working Group, an Oakland based non-profit (501c-3) founded in 1988. NIOT was launched in 1995 with the production of a PBS film about people in Billings, Montana who stood together against hate and racism in their community. The Billings story inspired hundreds of communities across the U.S. and around world, launching a national movement.

Not In Our School is a network of educators working with schools and communities addressing intolerance and bullying. Resources include a set of short films, lesson plans, action guides and campaign materials.

A Not In Our School (NIOS) campaign is an ongoing commitment to empower students to create environments that are free of bullying, harassment and all forms of intolerance. Every NIOS campaign takes on the characteristics of the school community and responds to local issues and needs. A Not In Our School campaign mobilizes students to be “upstanders” who stand up for themselves and others and create a climate of safety, acceptance, and inclusion.

Find us at [niot.org](http://niot.org).

