

“Just Say No!” to *Anti-Bullying*

During the era of neon shoelaces and Members Only jackets, 1980s America geared up to go all Hulk Hogan on drug and alcohol abuse among teens. Amid this new “War on Drugs” campaign, *anti-drug* programs sprang up like weeds, and schools gobbled them up like Cookie Monster in a Keebler factory. As we look back, though, over the past 30-ish years to evaluate these anti-drug programs, three startling facts emerge:

1. They didn’t work then.
2. They don’t work now.
3. Schools still use them.

Mr. Homer Simpson, Springfield Nuclear Safety Inspector, and father of three, once summed it up this way—“Doh!”

The most popular of these programs is D.A.R.E. (Drug Abuse Resistance Education). Back in 2001, the U.S. Surgeon General listed the DARE program in the category of “Ineffective Programs,”¹ and in 2003, the U.S. General Accounting Office also found “no significant differences in illicit drug use between students who received DARE and students who did not.”² We’re fast approaching 2020, and schools are still implementing the DARE program.

Over the past decade, a new “epidemic” has reared its ugly head. Today, parents, school administrators, politicians, and other organizations are gearing up to go all Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson on—wait for it—bullying.

Just like the anti-drug programs of the ‘80s, anti-bullying programs are springing up, and in true Pavlovian fashion, schools are gobbling them up like skeksis at a dinner party. (Yep, that’s an awesome ‘80s movie reference.) Sadly, like all other “*anti-*” programs, the anti-bullying endeavors have also failed.

A University of Texas Arlington study³, released in 2013, conducted by criminology and criminal justice

assistant professor Seokjin Jeong, studied 7001 students between the ages of 12 and 18 from 195 schools across the country.⁴

Here’s what Jeong said when he saw the results: “A very disappointing and a very surprising thing. Our anti-bullying programs, either intervention or prevention, *do not work.*”⁵ [emphasis added]

The study’s conclusion noted: “... [S]tudents attending schools with bullying prevention programs were more likely to have experienced [bullying], compared to those attending schools without bullying prevention programs.”⁴

What gives?

Here’s what gives.

First, most “*anti-*” programs only deal with the “*what*” instead of the “*why*.” It’s easier to throw on a bandage instead of digging out a festering splinter:

- ✓ It’s easier to enforce a zero-tolerance policy ...
- ✓ It’s easier to shout “Don’t be a bully ...”
- ✓ It’s easier to suspend, expel, or even incarcerate ...
- ✓ It’s easier to bring in a motivational speaker to talk about why being a bully is bad ...

... instead of dealing with the source of the growing infection.

The approach of “*anti-*” programs also lean negative. They focus more on the evil they are trying to stop instead of the good they are trying to create.

Any math curriculum will tell you that adding two negatives will never equal a positive. “Anti-” + “-Bullying” = “Negative” + “Negative.”

I know it sounds simplistic, all new-agey and stuff, but think about the term “anti-bullying” for a second. Is there any *positive* behavior being promoted with this phrase?

Does it promote:

- Division or unity?
- Contention or acceptance?
- Anger or understanding?
- War or peace?

Consider another phrase that we use frequently: *Fight Against Bullying! (or Drugs, or Pornography, or Cancer, etc.)*

Can you find one positive word in that phrase?

“Fight.”

“Against.”

“Something bad.”

Why must we always be against something? Why are we inclined to phrase the ills we want to cure in terms of aggression?

Second, anti-bully programs begin by marginalizing the bully.

They create two war camps: the Bullies vs. the Victims. Such marginalization magnifies both the bully and victim mentalities—causing the bully to be more aggressive, and the victim to feel more vulnerable.

If we believe in the axiom “*it’s wrong to label others,*” then we also need to stop labeling the bullies. They’re just kids. Many of them may be victims in their own right. No child, deep down, wants to be the “bad kid,” unless they are led to believe they’re incapable of being the “good kid,” or they’ve been desensitized to the point where “bad” is cool, and “good” is lame.

Marginalizing, even with the best of intentions, still isolates the bully and reinforces their own belief that they are a “bad kid.”

Bullies know who they are, and when they hear they’re going to another anti-bullying assembly, cue the eye roll.

Let’s get all science-y for a minute.

In their book *Words Can Change Your Brain*, Dr. Andrew Newberg, a neuroscientist at Thomas Jefferson University, and Mark Waldman, a neuroscientist and communications expert at Loyola



Baloney (or Bologna)

Justin Young, Virginia



Photo by Olite Photography

Marymount University, prove why these “anti-” programs will never work.

The book goes in-depth on how “...a single word has the power to influence the expression of genes that regulate physical and emotional stress.” In layman terms, words are just as effective as sticks and stones.

In summary, they explain that the use of positive words strengthen our frontal lobes and increase cognitive reasoning. Using negative, or angry, words increases activity in our brain’s fear center, releasing stress-producing hormones that interrupt the logic and reasoning processes in the brain.

They also apply their research to self-image and its relation to those around us. From the book:

“By holding a positive and optimistic [word] in your mind, you stimulate frontal lobe activity ... which changes your perception of yourself and the people you interact with. A positive view of yourself will bias you toward seeing the good in others, whereas a negative self-image will include you toward suspicion and doubt. Over time the structure of your thalamus will also change in response to your conscious words, thoughts, and feelings, and we believe that the thalamic changes affect the way in which you perceive reality.”

As long as the current approach to bullying prevention retains its warlike disposition, where only symptoms are managed while leaving the disease untreated, instances of bullying will never go down—hence the results of the UTA study.⁴

In mentally healthy kids, the root of behavior is self-perception, or self-esteem. The “outside-in” approach of most “anti-” programs fail because the changes are superficial. They don’t promote permanent change. The “inside-out” approach, on the other hand, is the only course of treatment that can effectively create enduring change.

So ... maybe, instead of being “Anti-bully,” let’s try to be:

- ✓ Pro-acceptance
- ✓ Pro-respect
- ✓ Pro-civility
- ✓ Pro-love, and positive empowerment

May our mission as parents and educators be to reach into the core of every young person and help them yank out the splinter of poor self-perception. Let’s help them, regardless of past or current behavior, see the good within their own heart, to be true to themselves, to appreciate their differences, and to accept and love themselves first.

Once this happens, a ripple effect will occur, and behaviors will change. Some overnight.

Accepting and respecting themselves empowers “bullies” to be more accepting and respectful of others.

Loving themselves, in a healthy way, empowers them to love others a bit more.

If we want them to see themselves as a “good kid,” we have to see them as a good kid.

If we want them to respect themselves and others, then we need to teach them by example.

Before it can start with them, it has to start with us.

So let’s throw on our Members Only jackets, tuck our T-shirts in our jeans, make sure our bangs are perfectly coiffed with an ozone destroying cloud of hairspray, and proclaim “Just Say Yes” to Pro-Positive programs that promote a healthy self-image for our kids.

Justin Young is an author, speaker, and teen life development coach. Justin will be the Featured Speaker at the 2018 VaHomeschoolers Conference and Resource Fair.

- ¹ Alcohol Abuse Prevention, 2014. “Drug Abuse Resistance Education: The Effectiveness of DARE.” alcoholfacts.org/DARE.html
- ² U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2017. “Youth Illicit Drug Use Prevention: DARE Long-Term Evaluations and Federal Efforts to Identify Effective Programs.” gao.gov/products/GAO-03-172R
- ³ University of Texas Arlington, 2013. “Youth More Likely to be Bullied at Schools with Anti-Bullying Programs, UT Arlington Researcher Finds.” uta.edu/news/releases/2013/09/jeong-bullying.php
- ⁴ Journal of Criminology, Volume 2013 (2013), Article ID 735397, 2013. “A Multilevel Examination of Peer Victimization and Bullying Preventions in Schools.” hindawi.com/archive/2013/735397
- ⁵ CBS DFW, 2013. “Are Anti-Bullying Programs Having an Opposite Effect?” dfw.cbslocal.com/2013/10/08/are-anti-bullying-programs-having-an-opposite-effect

Editor’s Note: Justin Young is a nationally recognized motivational speaker who speaks to teens about self-acceptance and being true to one’s self. He will be featured in a series of sessions for and about teens at the upcoming VaHomeschoolers conference. Portions of this article have been previously published on his blog, but Justin has modified and expanded his thoughts for us here.