



Education brief: Promoting a positive school climate

A positive school climate is a combination of personal and contextual factors that increase prosocial interpersonal relationships among students and decrease problem behaviours (Zych, 2021).

What is a positive school climate?

Traditionally, schools have focused almost solely on the development of academic skills and understandings but, increasingly, these skills alone are not enough. Nowadays, high-quality education must prepare our young people for future work and for life.

Research shows that relationship styles learnt at school tend to be repeated later in life. Students who learn how to become popular and achieve their goals through desirable and prosocial behaviours continue to behave in a prosocial way in the work environment, within intimate relationships, with family members and other people in general. Children who learn antisocial behaviours during the school years tend to behave in an antisocial way in other contexts and are at increased risk of engaging in offending actions and behaviours later in life. Children who are victimised at school are at risk of associated negative consequences such as depression, low self-esteem and social impairment (Farrington, Lösel, Ttofi & Theodorakis, 2012).

Therefore, promotion of a positive school climate and prevention of problem behaviours must be included among the most important objectives of schools. Crucially, a positive school environment is related to a student's academic achievement, as well as success in life.

What is the theory behind the promotion of a positive school climate?

Research into positive school climates has frequently been approached from an ecological and systemic theory based on Bronfenbrenner (1994), where individuals are analysed in different environments that create an interconnected system of elements. According to this theory, students influence proximal environments (such as their families or teachers) and distant environments (such as their parents' work or political situation). At the same time, different proximal and distant environments influence young people.

There is also an interaction among different environments. For example, students interact with their peers, teachers and families; families interact with teachers; teachers



interact with each other and with teachers in other schools or even with local governments. There is a complex system of interpersonal and social relationships, and small changes in one part of the system might cause big changes in a different part of the system. Thus, promotion of a positive school climate and prevention of antisocial behaviours needs to be understood from a holistic, systemic and ecological approach (Ortega-Ruiz, Del Rey & Casas, 2013).

All these systems and environments need to work together to promote pro-sociality and prevent antisocial behaviours. For example, governments should issue educational laws and guidance focused on promoting a positive school climate; schools should then integrate these in their policy and practice; and all the members of the school community, including teachers, parents and students, should work together to achieve a positive school climate.

Another theoretical approach looks at the impact on school climate when problem behaviours are learnt as part of group norms. Research on bullying as a group process has been especially revealing. According to this approach, some children perpetrate bullying to achieve high social status. Bullying is a group process (Salmivalli, 2010) and bystanders might either defend the victim, or reinforce and follow the perpetrator. If bystanders reinforce the perpetrator, some students might perceive aggressive behaviours as a way to gain popularity or achieve their goals.



Moreover, according to social learning theories, behaviours learnt in one social context can be transferred to a different social context. So, for example, a student who perpetrates or reinforces aggression at school might learn to justify aggression elsewhere. Therefore, problem behaviours need to be addressed from a complex sociopsychological perspective that focuses on individuals and also on groups. It is especially important to discourage bystanders from reinforcing violence and eliminate normative beliefs about aggression (i.e. believing that aggressive behaviour is an appropriate response in different situations) from the peer culture.

Behaviours that negatively impact a positive school climate

There are several problem behaviours that negatively impact a positive school climate. Research has shown that the four harmful problem behaviours listed below are present and prevalent around the world, with at least one in every ten students, or in some cases, even one in every three students. Studies have found that these behaviours have some serious short- and long-term consequences and that they negatively impact students' academic achievement, health and wellbeing.

Bullying:

Frequent and long-term aggressive behaviour among students. Perpetrators intentionally harm victims who cannot defend themselves easily (Smith & Brain, 2000). There are several roles identified in the 'bullying' literature: perpetrators, victims, bully-victims and bystanders. Examples of bullying include:

- physical harm such as pushing, hitting and kicking
- verbal aggression such as name calling and insults
- indirect aggression such as social exclusion or spreading rumours.

Cyberbullying:

Intentional, repeated and long-term aggressive behaviour perpetrated by some students on victims through electronic devices (Smith et al., 2008). There are some unique features of cyberbullying such as perpetration at school and outside of school by known and unknown people. Cyberbullying roles are similar to bullying roles. Examples of cyberbullying include:

- harmful images or videos uploaded on social networking sites
- insults through electronic devices
- social exclusion in online groups
- spreading rumours through electronic devices.



Teen-dating violence:

Physical, sexual or psychological aggressive behaviour displayed towards a dating partner in early romantic relationships among adolescents. Examples include:

- physical or verbal aggression towards the other person in the relationship
- insisting on having sexual relationships even if not wanted by the other person in the relationship
- gender-based discrimination and control over the other person in the relationship.

Discriminatory violence:

Discrimination of different minority groups, including ethnic-cultural minorities, sexual minorities, students with special needs, different socioeconomic status, etc. Examples include:

- hate speech against certain individuals or groups
- cyberhate
- social exclusion related to the minority status
- physical or verbal aggression towards minorities.

How can schools promote a positive school environment?

An ecological and systemic approach to the promotion of a positive school climate requires focusing on personal and contextual factors which increase prosocial behaviours and decrease antisocial behaviours. It also requires implementing specific programmes and preventing short- and long-term consequences if undesired behaviours are detected (Zych, Farrington, Llorent & Ttofi, 2017). This is possible only if all the members of the school community work together implementing policy and practice to promote a positive school climate. This can be done by, for example:

- establishing a dialogue about the key issues involved in promoting a positive school environment
- exchanging information between the teachers and the families
- involving the students in promoting prosocial behaviours
- collaborating with school stakeholders and external experts.

Social, emotional and moral competencies play an important role in protecting children against problem behaviours (Divecha & Brackett, 2019). Students with high empathy, high self-esteem, good emotional management and social skills, and adequate moral functioning have lower rates of problem behaviours. Therefore, schools and families need to work together to promote these personal competencies in students. This can be done through:

- social and emotional learning programmes (see CASEL)
- interventions against problem behaviours such as anti-bullying (see Gaffney, Ttofi & Farrington, 2019)
- anti-cyberbullying programmes (see Gaffney, Farrington, Espelage & Ttofi, 2019).

It is also crucial to embed these competencies in the school curriculum. This means that curriculum planning needs to be done with an explicit and clear idea about how these competencies are going to be taught and learnt together, along with the academic programme. For example:

- physical education can be combined with emotional management exercises
- self-esteem can be promoted while performing a group task in mathematics
- empathy can be encouraged through readings in language.

These competencies should also be promoted at home. Based on social learning theories, it is also crucial that teachers and families act as role models to be followed regarding prosocial behaviours, peaceful conflict solving through dialogue, empathy and good emotional management strategies. It is therefore important that any policy development and implementation in this area involves parents and carers from the outset.

Personal factors need to be combined with contextual factors that encourage prosocial behaviours (Zych, Farrington & Ttofi, 2019). These include safety in the community and in the school, alleviating poverty,

school and classroom management (with clear rules and policies), and good human and material resources.

Desirable teacher–student relationships and family–school relationships can protect against problem behaviours. Desirable family–child relationships are also crucial, with high parental warmth and support, positive communication and reasonable (but not intrusive) supervision. High popularity and peer support gained through prosocial behaviours are also critical.

Working with the peer group, and encouraging and training the bystanders of problem behaviours to dissuade the perpetrators (and to defend and support the victim), will help students understand that aggressive behaviours are both harmful and unacceptable. Helping students build friendships and creating a peer culture based on pro-sociality will increase a positive school climate, as well as promoting inclusive education and embracing diversity.

How is Cambridge International supporting schools with promoting a positive school environment?

The Cambridge School Self-Evaluation service provides school leaders with an opportunity to uncover any behavioural problems being experienced within their schools. The surveys ask questions of students, parents and teachers to understand their perceptions and identify whether bullying is a problem.

To support school leaders in promoting a positive school environment, Cambridge International offers support and guidance through our School Consultancy services, where expert accredited consultants can provide advice, deliver workshops and work directly with the leadership team to draft policies or implement a new strategy. To find out more, please go to: www.cambridgeinternational.org/support-and-training-for-schools/school-self-evaluation

Where can you find more information?

Further reading on strategies to promote a positive school climate:

CASEL (The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning): <https://casel.org>

CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention): <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/intimatepartnerviolence/teendatingviolence/fastfact.html>

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Ortega-Ruiz, R., Del Rey, R., & Casas, J. A. (2013). La Convivencia escolar: clave en la predicción del bullying. *Revista Iberoamericana de Evaluación Educativa, 6*, 91–102.

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Additional reading:

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Manchikanti Gómez, A. (2011). Testing the Cycle of Violence Hypothesis: Child Abuse and Adolescent Dating Violence as Predictors of Intimate Partner Violence in Young Adulthood. *Youth & Society, 43*, 171–192.

Modecki, K. L., Minchin, J., Harbaugh, A. G., Guerra, N. G., & Runions, K. C. (2014). Bullying prevalence across contexts: A meta-analysis measuring cyber and traditional bullying. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 55*, 602–611.

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