



## Protecting God's Children For Parents

# When Bullying Gets Out of Control: A Ten-Step Plan to Break Up a Fight

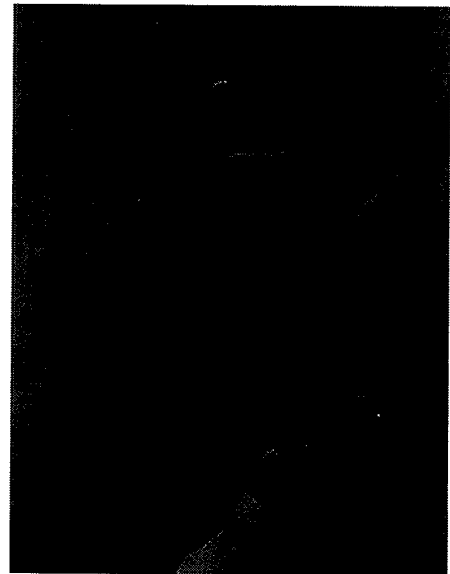
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Carlos, a 7<sup>th</sup> grade student had been teased, pushed, and knocked around on the bus for the past five months by two bullies, Sean and Harrison. One day when Carlos was walking down the steps of the bus, Sean pushed him. Harrison was directly in front of Carlos, and Carlos responded to this provocation by pushing Harrison. Once all three boys were off the bus, a fight broke out between Carlos and Harrison. Another Hispanic boy, thinking that Carlos was being beaten *because he was Cuban*, rushed in, and tried to break up the fight but instead ended up in the middle of it, and a larger melee erupted. Before the morning was over, six boys were suspended from school, and Carlos went to the hospital to receive stitches and to be examined for a possible concussion.

Responding to fights is not typically covered in college or university teacher education courses. Nor is it a skill that teachers, administrators, or support personnel learn in life. Breaking up a fight is difficult. There are many things going on at the same time and a teacher needs to respond quickly. Consequently, teachers should have a response plan and should practice it *before* a fight breaks out. Fortunately, Anthony Moriarty, Thomas Fleming, and Patrick Fitzgerald developed a 10-point strategy for intervening in the event of a fight. These 10 elements help defuse violent confrontations among students. A summary is presented here:



1. **Get help.** The first thing a teacher should do is to summon help. The best way to do this is by finding a bystander that the teacher knows, calling on that student by name, and asking them to get help. For example, "Steve, go to room 125 and ask Mr. Brown to come out here immediately, then go to the Assistant Principal's office and ask Sister Jean to bring three staff members." This will not only get additional help but will also get one of the bystanders out of the way.
2. **Dismiss the bystanders.** The main goal in step two is to send every possible student to a specific location. The idea is to parse the students to a manageable size. Often the fighting students fear backing down because this may cause them to be "disrespected" by their peers. Breaking up the crowd also prevents the bystanders from getting into the fray.
3. **Identify yourself.** Teachers need to identify themselves loudly, firmly, and clearly and say, "I am Mr. Graham, a teacher." Based upon the aforementioned authors' experience, at least one of the fighting students is likely to defer to the authority of the teacher. If as a result of the fighting, the teacher gets hurt, the fighters can't say they weren't forewarned.

4. **Give specific commands.** When students are in the midst of a fight, telling them to “cut it out” or “knock it off” is not sufficient. They need specificity. For example, the teacher may say, “Walk over to the cafeteria, right now.” This is specific and is more likely to be followed than saying, “Stop fighting.”
5. **Remind student of the rules.** It is best to defer to rules—not to personal authority. The teacher may not have the command necessary to bring the fight under control. Therefore it is best to say, “You both know the rules about fighting in school.”
6. **Identify the aggressor.** Usually the best way to identify the aggressor is to ask the bystanders, “Who is winning?” Most times a spectator will tell you. The person that is winning will likely be the aggressor and the one who poses the greatest threat. If possible, move the aggressor to a different site, such as a nearby classroom.
7. **Send the loser to a specific location.** In most instances, the loser is more interested than the winner in stopping the fight. Therefore the authors recommend telling the loser to go somewhere and wait for another teacher to arrive. The loser may welcome the arrival of an authority figure so they can back out of the fight without sacrificing their reputation.
8. **Obtain identification.** After the fighting has stopped, the teacher needs to identify the culprits. Then the teacher can settle them down. For example, the teacher could say, “Let’s chill out, Harrison. We are just going to stand here and talk for a while.” It is important for the teacher to speak calmly, slowly, and deliberately. Nothing will be gained by threatening or riling up an angry student. The intention is to defuse the situation. Also by asking for identification, the teacher can find out if any of the fighters are not students. Whenever a fight involves outsiders, is recommended that you call the police.
9. **Write it down.** Teachers, fighting students, and bystanders should write down what occurred as soon as possible. It is best to separate all parties in order to get to the truth. In this way, the fighting students will not have the chance to collaborate and make up a story. Also, people tend to remember details more clearly immediately after an event—much more clearly than hours, days, or weeks later. By having everyone put in writing the events leading up to and during the fight, administrators should be able to make informed discipline decisions. An additional suggestion is to have the perpetrators write how they could have solved their differences without resorting to violence.
10. **Debrief the teacher(s).** Teachers need to discuss what happened as soon as possible. This could be an informal meeting with an administrator or a discussion among all involved staff. The idea is to determine what went right, what may have gone wrong, and what was learned.

**Bottom line:**

Had the bus driver been trained in breaking up fights, could the fight between Carlos and Harrison have been prevented? No. It was already under way. However, if a bully-proofing program had been implemented in the school, perhaps this may have prevented the bullying. Therefore the fight may not have occurred in the first place. However, once the fight started, if all teachers, administrators, and support personnel had been trained in fight control, then perhaps the fight could have been defused with Carlos and Harrison remaining as the only participants.