

## The Youth Voice Project

This study is the first known large-scale research project that solicits *students' perceptions* about strategy effectiveness to reduce peer mistreatment in our schools. We believe that students' voices are an invaluable resource to increase our understanding of effective prevention and intervention efforts.

The goal of this project is to compile a body of knowledge describing the most helpful interventions in order to help adults and youth reduce bullying and harassment in their own schools. It is our hope to use this information to guide educators, parents, and youth in applying effective interventions to reduce bullying and subsequently, optimize students' development.

Thank you for your interest in our youth.

Sincerely yours,

*Stan Davis and Charisse Nixon*

Stan Davis and Charisse Nixon, Ph.D. began the Youth Voice Research Project to give young people a voice in defining the effectiveness of different interventions which are intended to reduce negative peer behaviors, along with the harmful impact that often accompanies those behaviors. Educators and other professionals have implemented a wide range of interventions to reduce the negative effects of bullying and other negative peer behaviors on youth. Past efforts have included, but are not limited to:

- telling all students that negative behaviors are harmful
- advising and training students who are mistreated by peers to use a range of assertive behaviors to discourage the mistreatment
- building staff-student connections
- planning for and using consistent and effective disciplinary responses to negative peer behaviors
- encouraging bystanders to confront and discourage the unkind behavior
- classroom discussions and schoolwide assemblies
- encouraging peers to include excluded youth
- meeting with students who mistreat others and with the students who are mistreated to restore connections and build empathy
- peer norms interventions that make clear to young people that most of their peers oppose mistreatment.
- social skills training for all students, for youth who are mistreated, and for youth who mistreat others.
- whole-school programming
- and more.

To the best of our knowledge, the Youth Voice Research Project is the first large- scale national effort that asks young people who have been mistreated by their peers about the effects of different specific actions by themselves, by adults at school, and by other students. We will be analyzing the data from this survey project for some time. The purpose of this preliminary summary is to provide an *initial description* for some of these data.

### **Methodology:**

Working with several colleagues and adolescents themselves across the United States, we created an on-line survey instrument to assess school connectedness, varying forms of peer victimization, as well as students' strategies used to address the victimization. We were particularly interested in examining effective and ineffective strategies from students' perspective.

### ***Organization of the survey***

The confidential online questionnaire first asks young people demographic information about themselves and then asks them how often they were victimized by their peers (i.e., called names, hit/threatened, and socially excluded). Students in grades 5 – 12, representing 25 schools in 12 states completed the survey (N = 11,893).

Consistent with past work (see Olweus, 1993; 1997), this initial report includes those students who reported peer victimization regularly, that is, at least 2 two times a month or more (~ 22% of our sample; N = 2614). These students were then directed to a series of questions focused on what they, adults, and other peers did about what was done to them.

Knowing the importance of perceived trauma, we then asked those students who were being mistreated to assess the impact of the victimization. Responses ranged from mild to very severe. Students were given four choices:

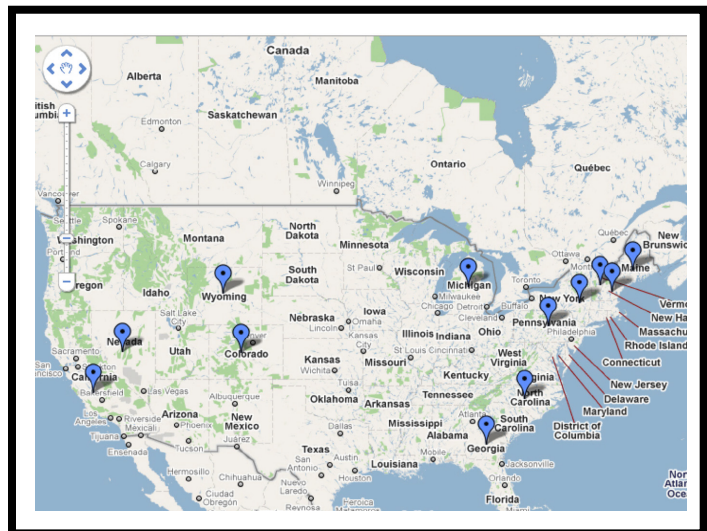
- **Mild:** What they did bothered me only a little (1192 students or 46% of students reporting peer victimization).
- **Moderate:** It bothered me quite a bit (948 or 36% of students reporting peer victimization).
- **Severe:** I had or have trouble eating, sleeping, or enjoying myself because of what happened to me (294 or 11% of students reporting peer victimization).
- **Very severe:** I felt or feel unsafe and threatened because of what happened to me (180 or 7% students reporting peer victimization).

The other students in the survey- those who reported that they were *not mistreated* or victimized by peers- were directed to an alternative survey about their observations and experience as **bystanders**.

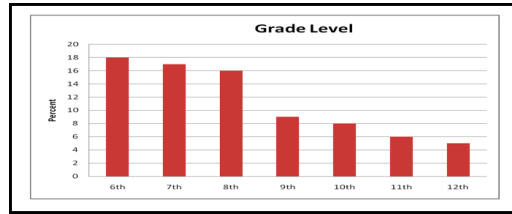
**This summary highlights the data from those students who reported they were mistreated by peers twice or more in the past month AND were moderately, severely, or very severely affected by the peer victimization (N = 1,420). These students make up 54% of the students who reported peer mistreatment and 12% of our entire survey group.**

### Demographics of those students reporting at least moderate trauma from peer victimization:

Students surveyed were from Elementary, Middle, and High Schools in many parts of the United States. Schools were assured of anonymity and confidentiality to encourage participation in this research. The map indicates the states (but not the exact locations) of schools that are currently represented in the survey. Some states are represented by more than one school.

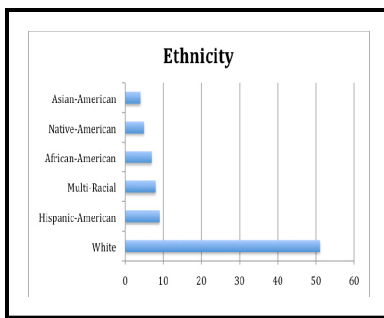


**Gender:** Students were asked to identify themselves as either male (42%) or female (54%). To be sensitive to issues surrounding sexuality, students were also able to identify themselves as ‘prefer not to answer’ (4%).



**Grade Level:** The majority of traumatized students were in grades 6-8.

**Special Education and Physical Disability:** Approximately 6% of those traumatized students reported receiving special education assistance. Ten percent of students reported having some form of a physical disability.



**Ethnicity:** The majority of traumatized students described themselves as White, followed by Hispanic American and Multi-Racial.

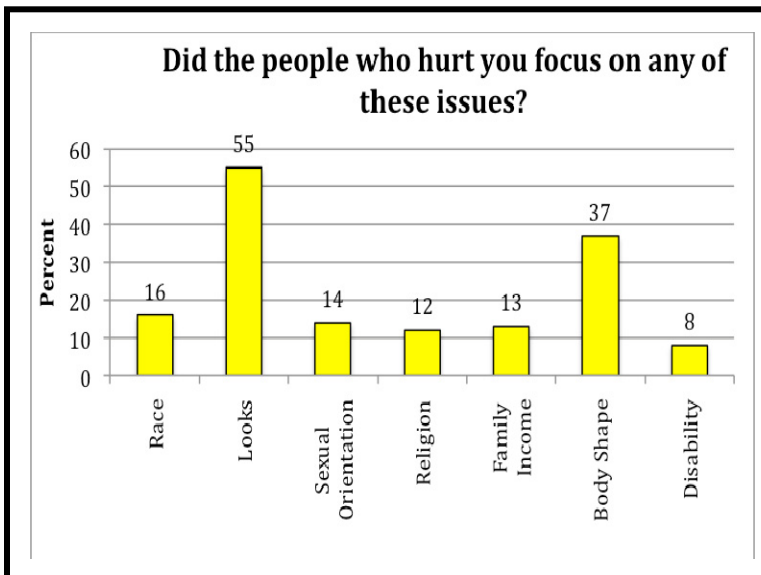
**Reduced or Free Lunches:** Thirty-two percent of traumatized students reported eligibility for free or reduced lunch.

**Immigrated to U.S:** Approximately 9% of those students' families immigrated to the United States within the past two years.

## Students report on the focus of peer mistreatment.

We asked these students to describe the focus or foci of their mistreatment. Students could select more than one option. The graph below represents the responses for the traumatized group of students (i.e., those students reporting moderate, severe or very

severe trauma as a result of their peer victimization).

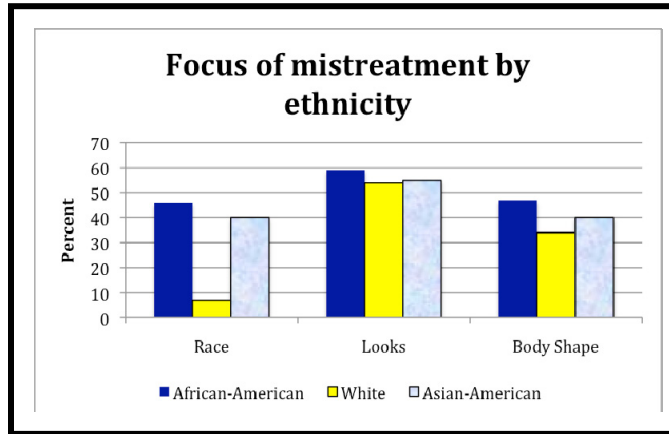


**Implications for Educators:** Pay particular attention to issues related to LOOKS, BODY SHAPE, AND RACE. Integrate this information into existing curriculum when teaching important lessons related to the development and maintenance of discrimination.

**Which ethnicities are being targeted?**

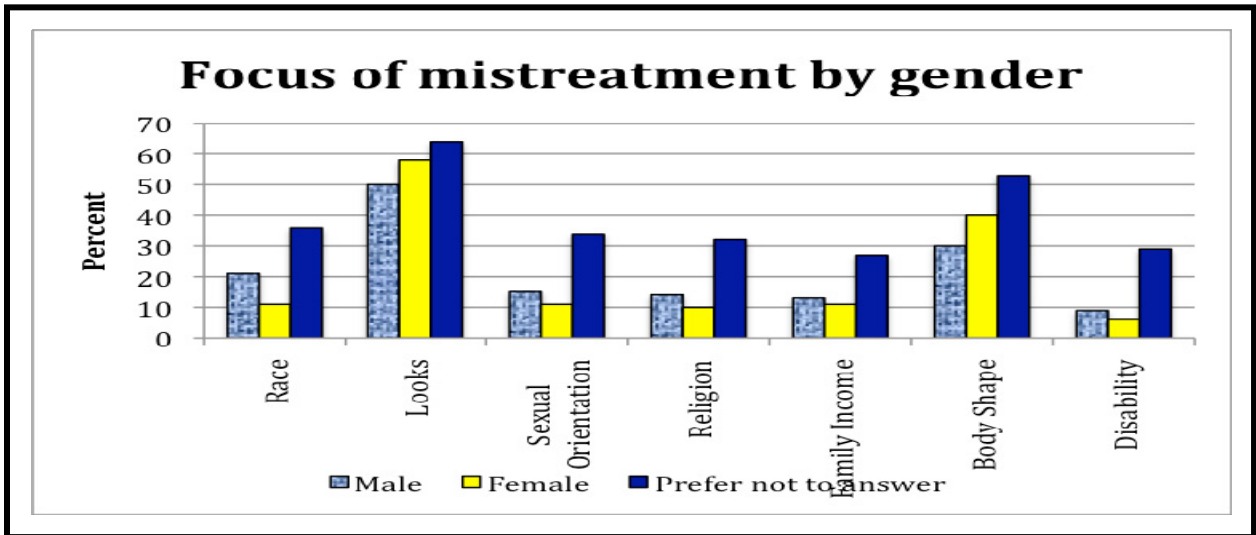
We then examined the responses for different ethnicities within this traumatized group of students for the top three places of peer mistreatment. The graph represents the focus of mistreatment by ethnic group.

Most striking in this comparison is the difference between the frequency of White students who reported a racial focus in their peer mistreatment (7%), compared to African-American students (46%) and Asian-American students (40%).



**Does focus of peer mistreatment vary by gender?**

Yes. We compared reports of focus of peer mistreatment by gender. All three groups reported the most peer mistreatment in areas related to *appearance* (i.e., looks and body shape). The “prefer not to answer” group, which we believe includes a significant proportion of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender students, reported strikingly more negative behavior focused in every area.



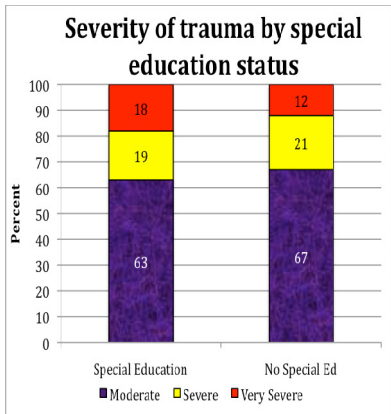
**Does focus of peer mistreatment vary by special education status?**

Yes. Students in special education reported higher levels of mistreatment based on disability.

**Effects of peer mistreatment by subgroup**

The following graphs represent the proportions of youth in different subgroups who reported that they were moderately, severely, or very severely affected by peer mistreatment as a percentage of our moderate-to-very severely affected group.

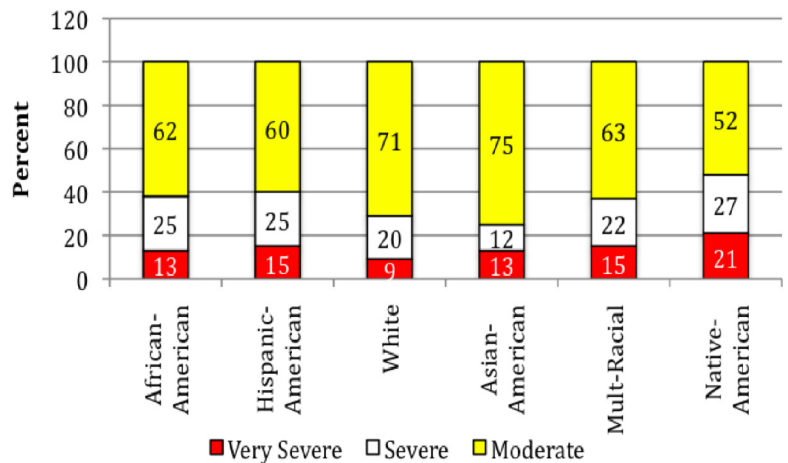
**Do students’ reported levels of trauma change with special education status?** Yes. Those students receiving special education services were somewhat more likely to report severe trauma as a result of the peer victimization compared to those students *not* receiving special education services.



**Do students’ levels of reported trauma vary with ethnicity?** Yes. As is evidenced in the graph below, Native-American students were significantly more affected (severely/very severely) by the peer victimization than the other identified ethnicities,  $X^2(10, N = 1159) = 22.34, p = .01$ .

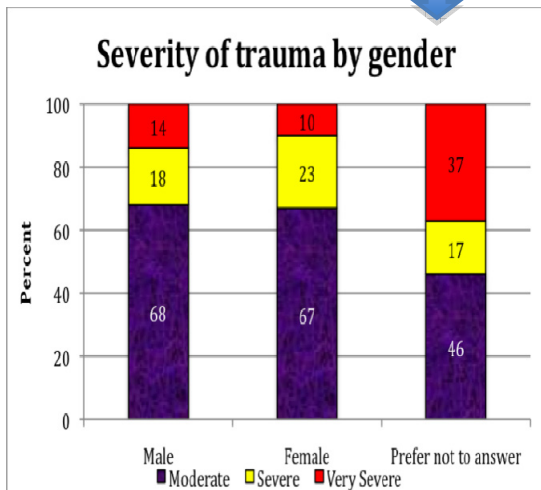


**Severity of trauma by ethnicity**



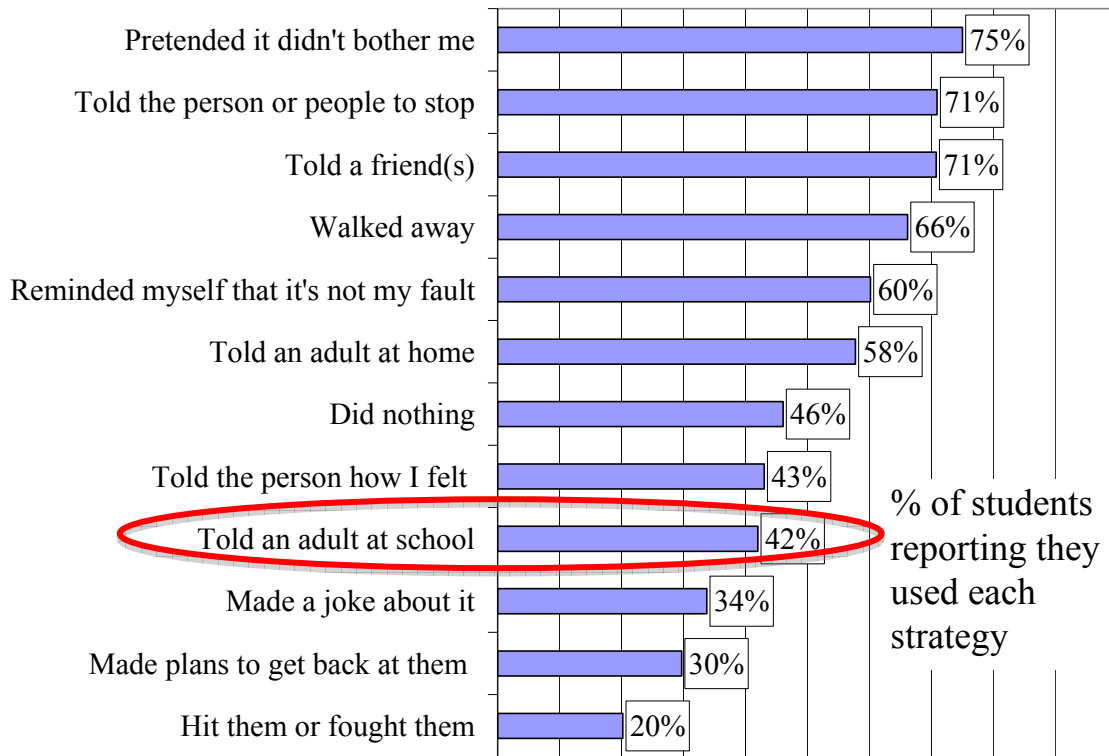
**Do students’ reported levels of trauma change with gender status?** Yes.

It is clear that students who “preferred not to answer” about their gender were significantly more likely to report very severe effects and less likely to report moderate effects,  $X^2(4, N = 1420) = 44.23, p = .000$ .



**Effects of different actions by the mistreated student (self actions)**

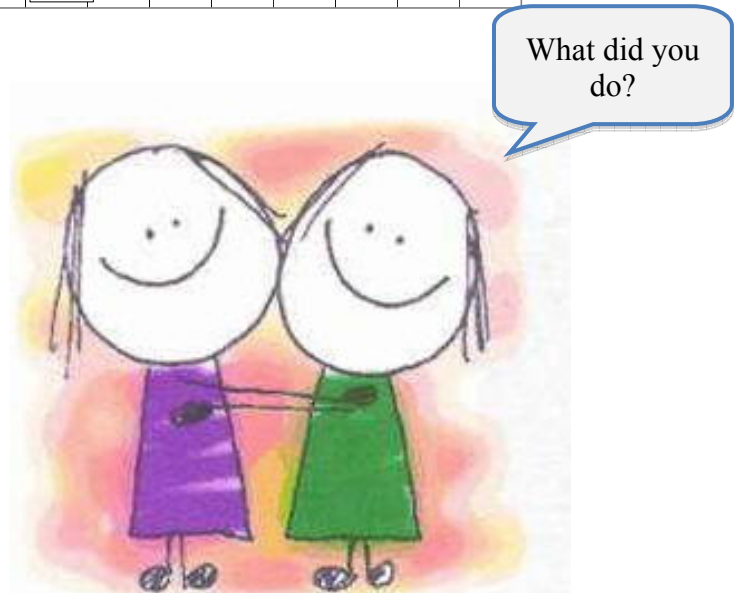
We developed a list of behaviors that students might use when peers mistreat them and reviewed that list with adolescents. That review led to the following list, sorted in this chart by how many of our moderately to very severely affected youth reported that they used the following strategies.



**Implications for Educators:**

*Less than half* of our moderately to very severely affected students tell an adult at school when they are mistreated by their peers.

Important to identify *safe* ways for students to communicate with adults at school about their negative peer interactions.



**BUT...WHICH STRATEGIES ARE *HELPFUL* FOR OUR STUDENTS?**

**Which strategies were effective (“made things better”) and which strategies “made things worse.”**

What happened when you did that?

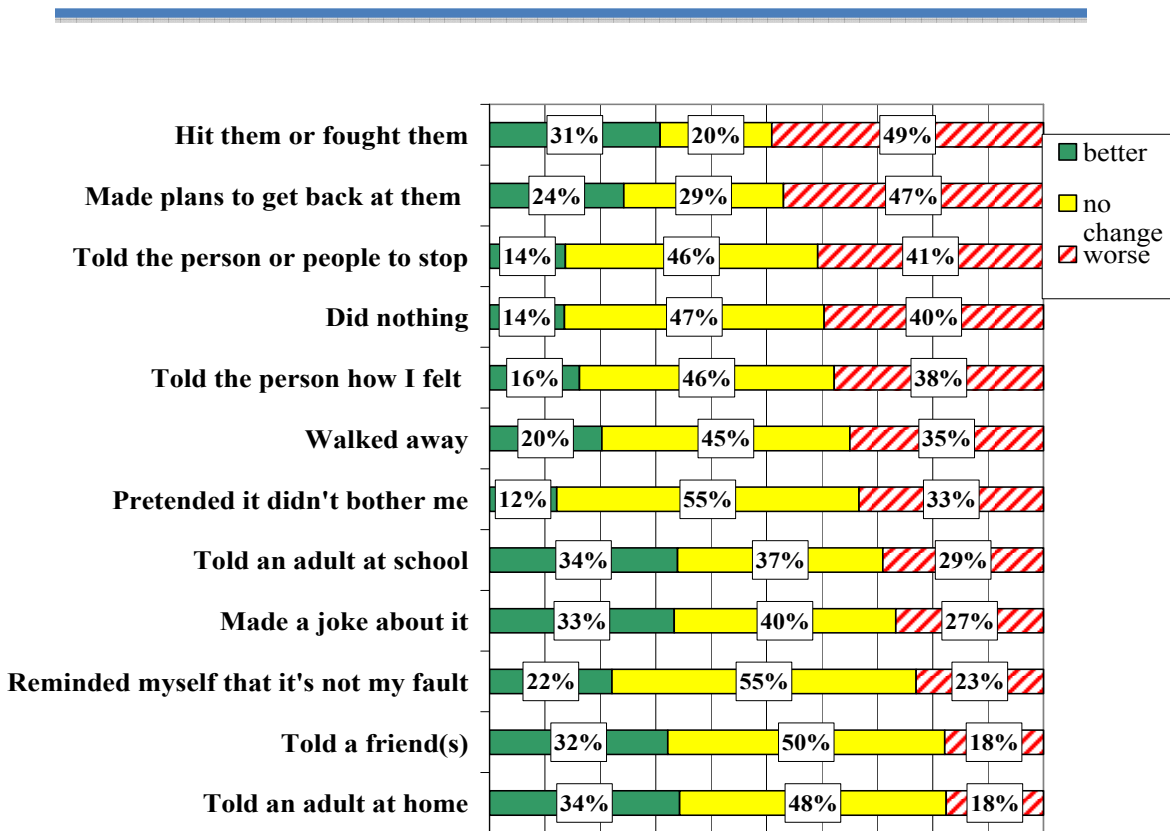
**Which strategies “made things better?”**

We asked the students who reported using each strategy what happened afterward. The following graph shows their answers, sorted by the number reporting that things got better after they used each strategy. **Youth were most likely to report that actions that accessed support from others made a positive difference.** They were least likely to report that actions directed at changing the behavior of mistreating youth made things better. Some of the actions that our students reported as unlikely to make things better have routinely been taught as tools in bullying prevention.



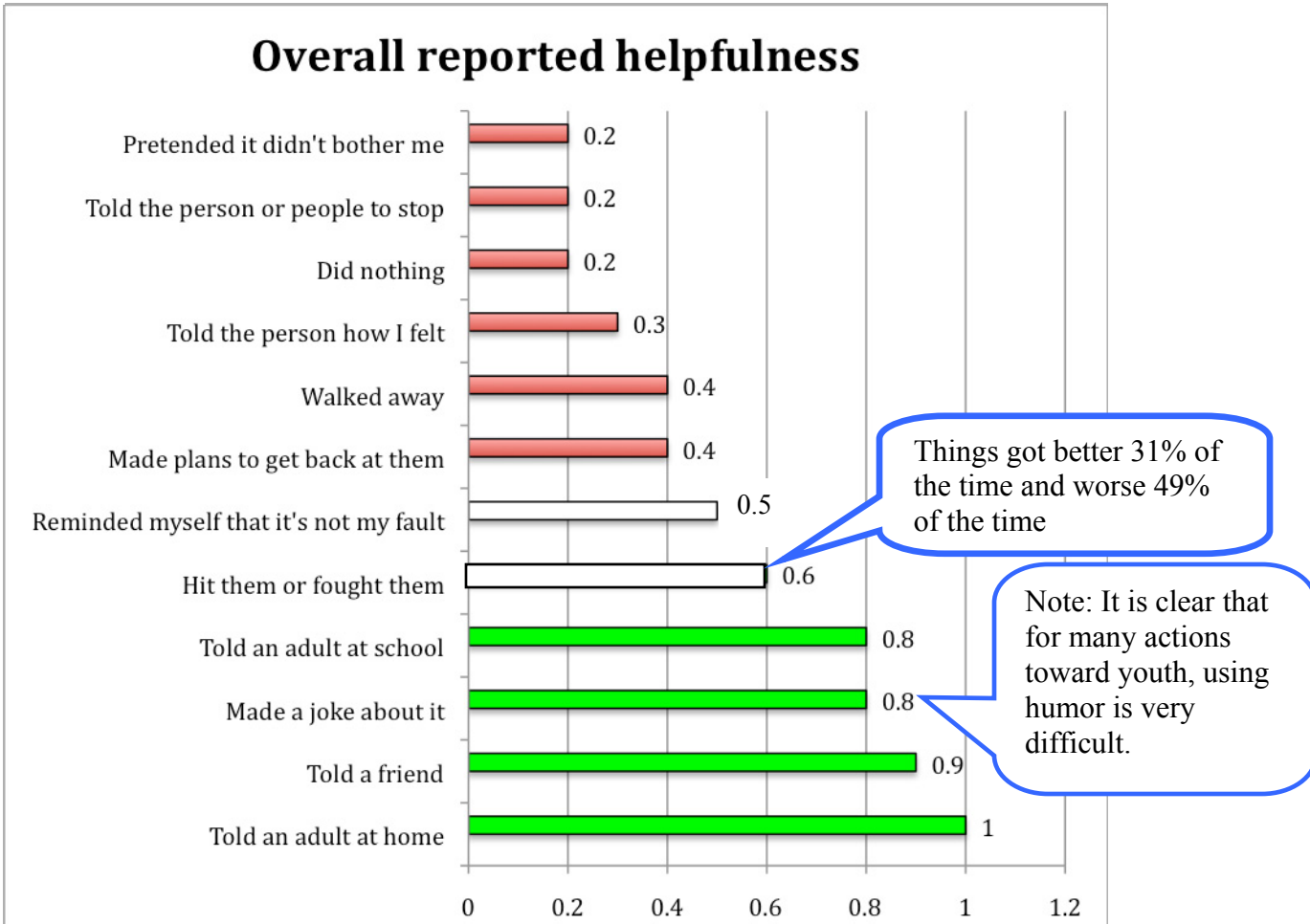
### WHICH STRATEGIES MADE THINGS WORSE?

The graph below represents the same data sorted by the number of students reporting that things got worse following the actions. The same pattern applies. Actions that access support from peers and adults were rated as relatively unlikely to make things worse. **Actions aimed at changing the behavior of mistreating youth rated as more likely to make things worse.**



### How helpful is each strategy?

We created a formula to compare the overall reported helpfulness of each strategy, which combined the three student answers: “things got worse” “things got better” and “no change.” The green bars represent the behaviors that our students told us *were most helpful overall*, and the red bars represent behaviors that they reported being least likely to help and most likely to harm..

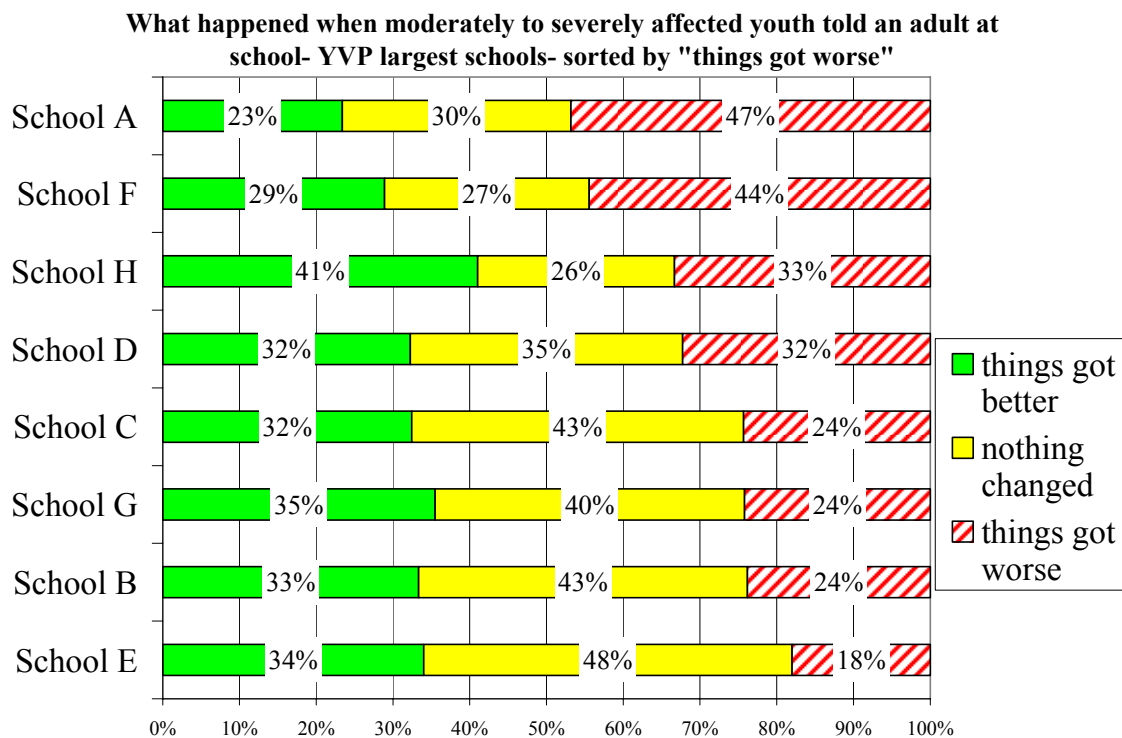


#### At least three patterns emerge from these data:

- Our students reported that *accessing support* from peers and adults was the most helpful strategy to make things better.
- Our students reported that the actions that victimized youth are often advised to use to solve the problem (e.g., “tell the person how you feel”) made things worse much more often than they made things better. These actions were so likely to make things worse that “*hit them or fought them*” was experienced by our students as a more effective strategy than any of these commonly-advised actions. We believe that this means that when we tell youth to solve the problem of peer mistreatment themselves, we are making it likely that they will use physical aggression to do so.
- Telling an adult at school was described as making things better *only slightly more often* as making things worse. There were large differences in this rating between schools.

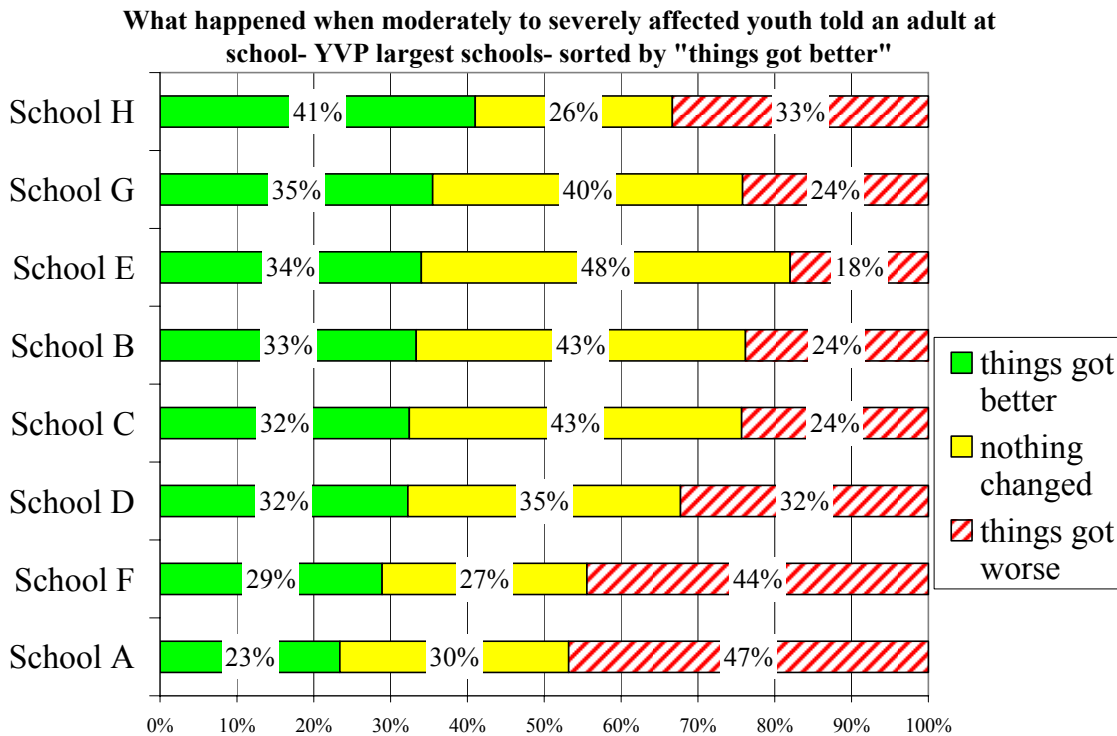
### Variability between schools

We compared the reported results of telling adults from the schools having the largest number of survey respondents. There is clearly a difference between schools in the response students report from telling a teacher. We plan to learn about and report the practices of the schools where students report that they have experienced more positive effects after telling adults at school. The two graphs below show comparative data between the eight largest schools in our survey; showing a range of differences in what happened after youth told adults about peer mistreatment.



Note the % of students telling us that things got worse after they told an adult at school is more than **twice as high at schools A and F compared with school E.**

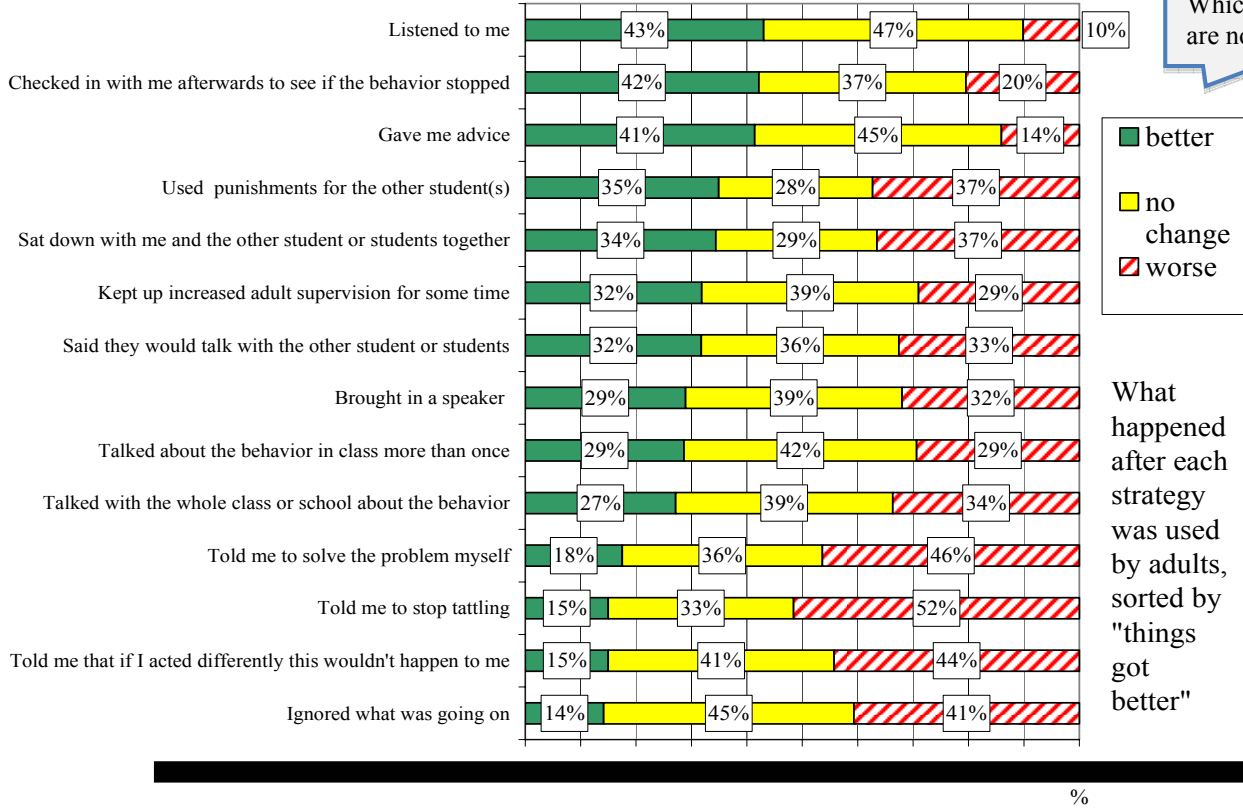
The % of students at school H who told us that things **got better after they told an adult at school** is almost twice as high as the percentage of students reporting that things got better at school A. We plan to study schools E, B, G, and H to identify the practices and programs that have led to their improved effectiveness in responding to student reports of peer mistreatment.



**Results of actions by EDUCATORS—sorted by “MADE THINGS BETTER”**

We asked the victimized students what adults at school did, and what happened after the adults did that (i.e., did things get better, was there no change, or did things get worse?) The first graph is sorted by “things got better.”

Which adult strategies are working to *help* our students? Which strategies are not?



■ better  
■ no change  
■ worse

What happened after each strategy was used by adults, sorted by "things got better"

Sorted by “things got worse”



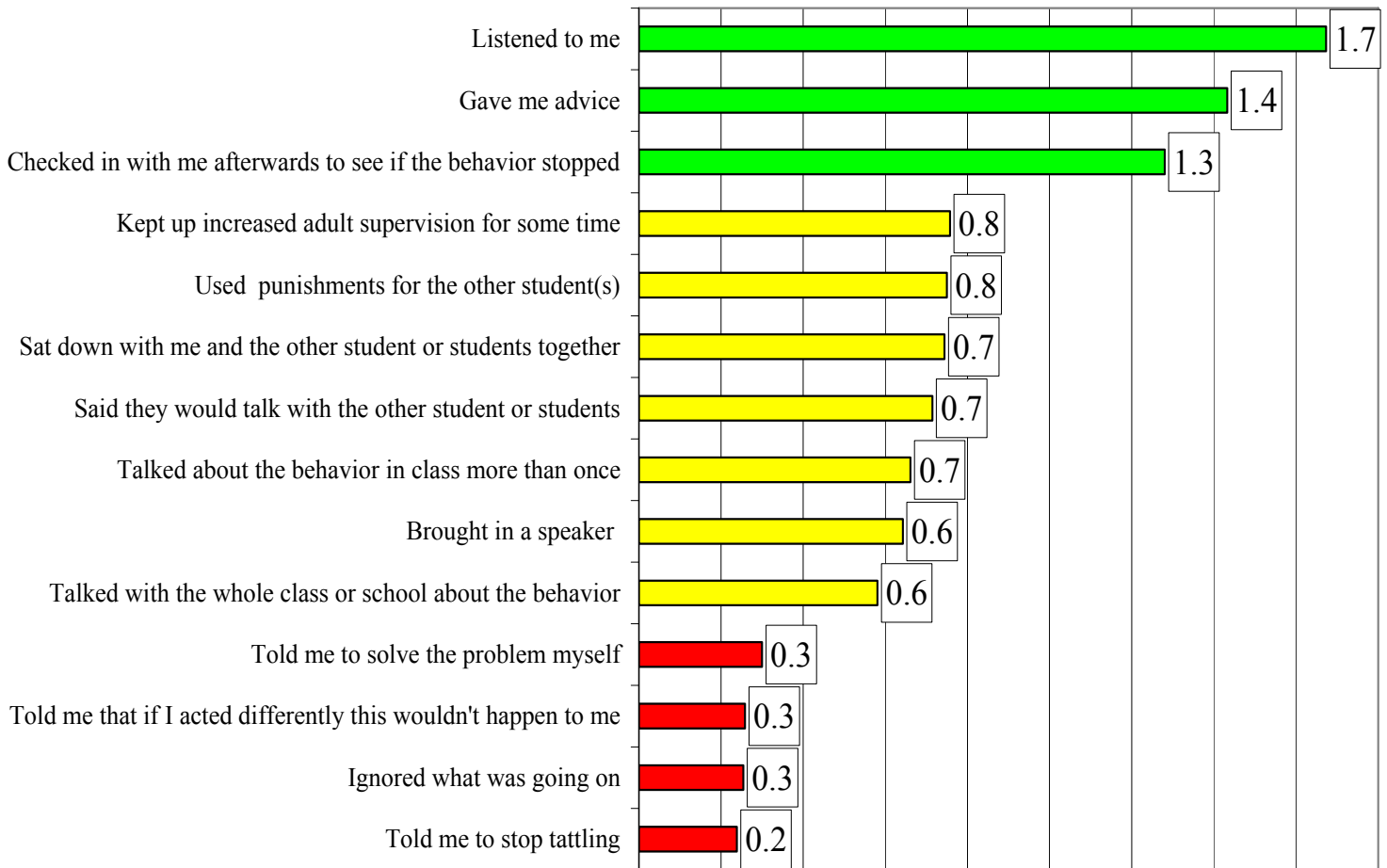
■ better  
■ no change  
■ worse

What happened after each strategy was used by adults, sorted by "things got worse"

Preliminary results from the Youth Voice Research Project: Victimization & Strategies

Which adult strategies are working to *help* our students?  
Which strategies are not?

Overall reported helpfulness of **adult** actions: Number of targeted youth reporting that things got better divided by (the number reporting that things got worse + 1/3 the number reporting that things didn't change)



NOTE: From our analysis of the data and of youth comments in the survey, we see the adult interventions represented by yellow bars in this graph as ones whose effectiveness depends on context, school culture, climate, as well as the way in which each intervention is carried out. We plan further investigation of the factors which make these yellow interventions more or less helpful.

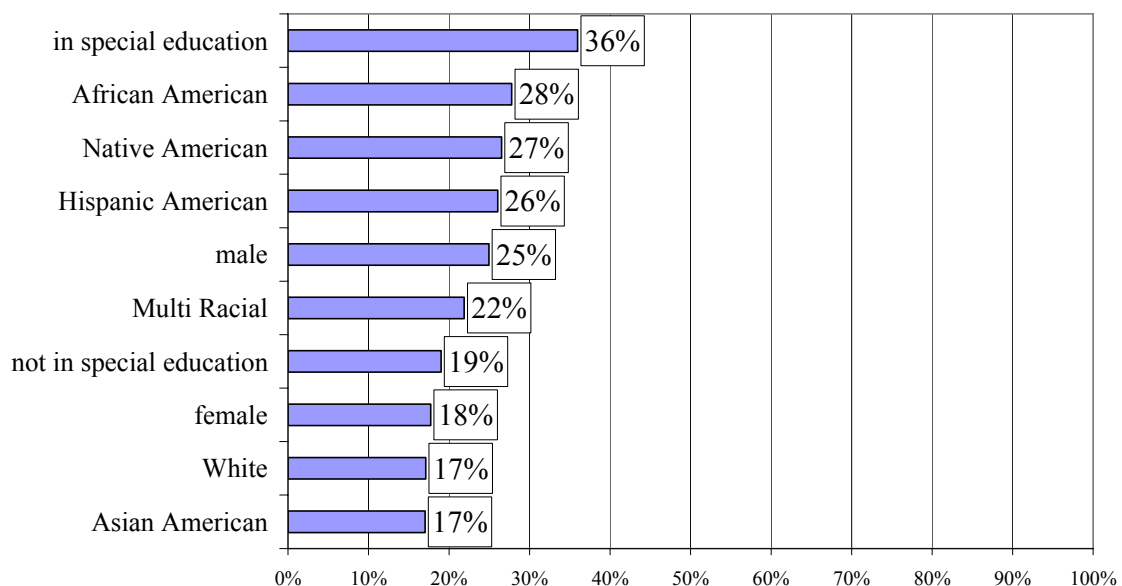
### SOME PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS FROM THE SURVEY

- ◆ **Strategies accessing support** (e.g., listened to me, checked in with me) were reported as much more likely to lead to things getting better for the student than to things getting worse.
- ◆ School-to-school comparisons showed marked differences between schools in the effect of “used punishments.”
- ◆ Students’ text comments on the survey helped us clarify their meaning of “gave me advice” as distinct from “told me that if I acted differently this wouldn’t happen to me.” The kind of advice reported in the text comments seemed best described as **encouragement**. Students reported adults telling them that they had done the right thing, that the mistreatment wasn’t their fault, and that things would **get better**.
- ◆ Adult interventions reported to be most likely to lead to things getting worse were those that either would be perceived as **blaming these students** for what had been done to them or **telling these students to stop telling adults**.

*Being told not to tattle* was reported as having the most negative impact on our survey students. We went further with this adult action and analyzed the number of students reporting that adults told them not to tattle by subgroup, yielding the following striking result: **Youth in special education, youth of color (except for Asian American youth), and males reported that adults told them not to tattle more often than did youth not in special education, white or female students. Youth in special education were told not to tattle almost twice as often as youth not in special education.** These data suggest that young people in distress who are told not to tell adults about their mistreatment are being silenced by adults more than are majority youth.

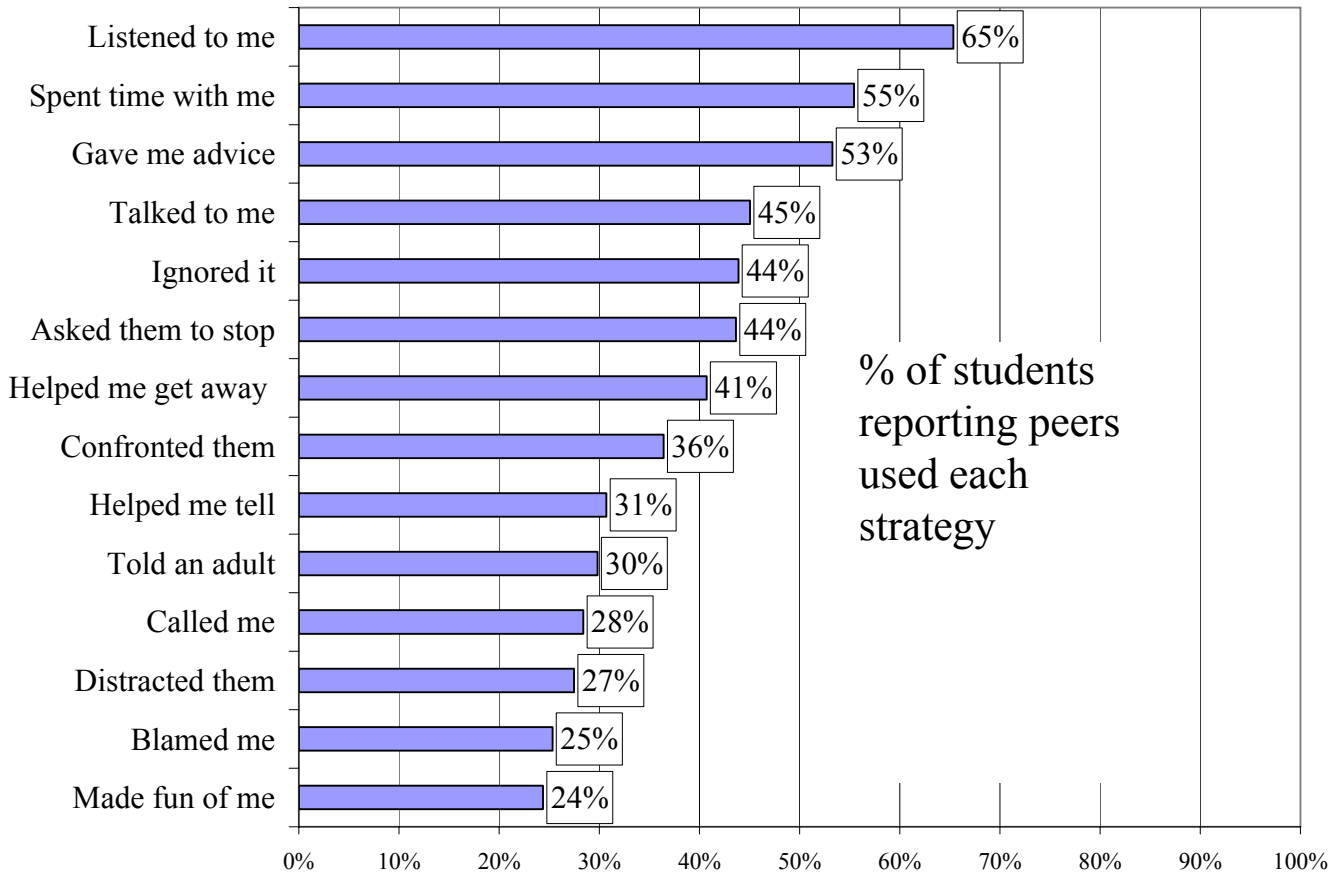


"Adults told me not to tattle": reports from youth in grades 5-12 who were frequently mistreated by peers and who described the effect on them as moderate to very severe

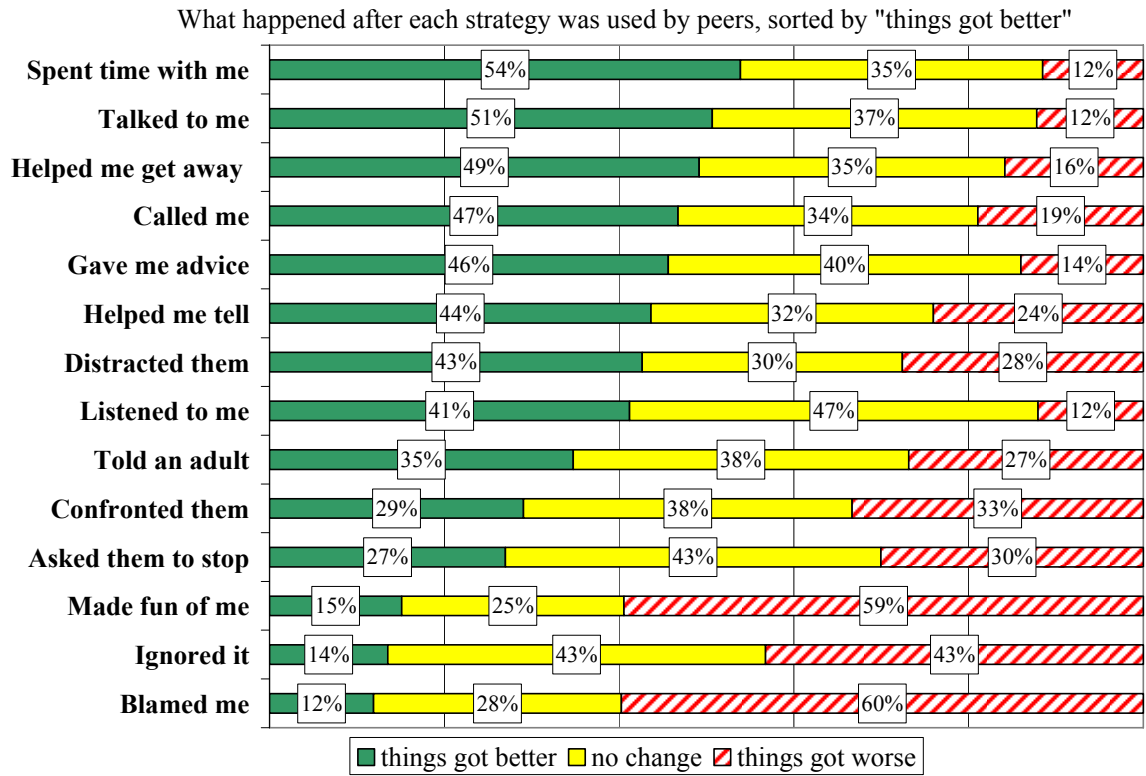


### PEER ACTIONS AND THEIR CONSEQUENCES

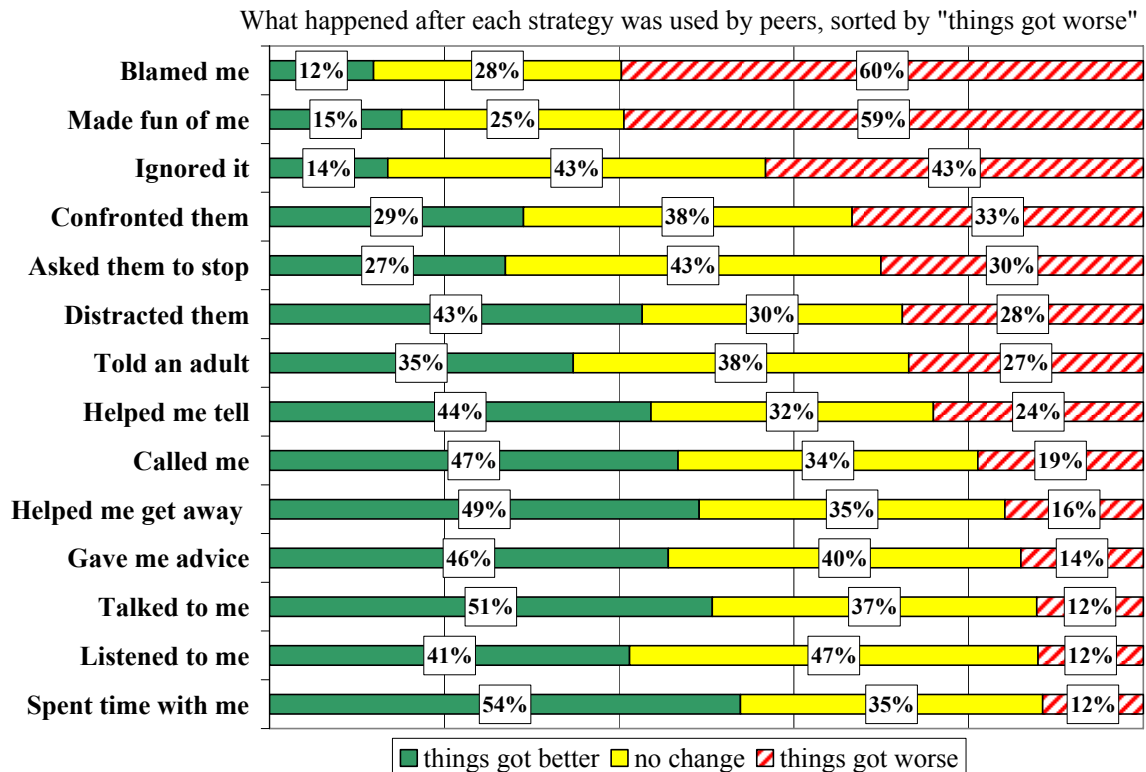
We also surveyed our students about the frequency and effects of actions by peers. These are the numbers of our moderately-to-very severely affected group who reported that peers used each of the strategies listed.



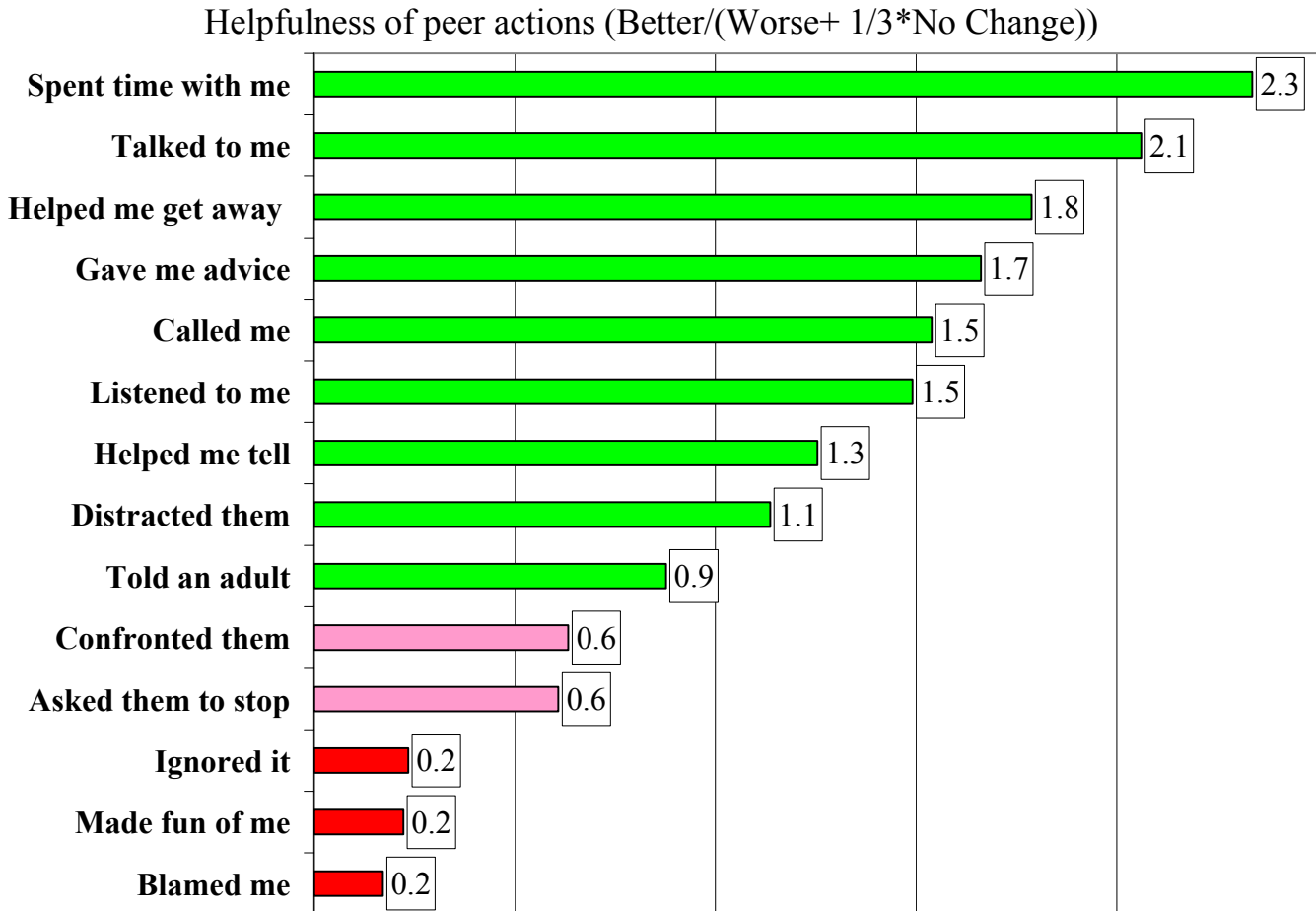
**What happened after peers did that? – Sorted by “THINGS GOT BETTER.”**



**What happened after peers did that? – Sorted by “THINGS GOT WORSE.”**



**HOW HELPFUL WERE THE PEER ACTIONS?**



**As with the effects of different adult actions, it is clear that our students reported allying and supportive interventions as the most helpful.**

Peer confrontation of mistreating youth (whether done angrily or in a friendly way) was reported by our students as equally likely to do harm as good.

Actions that blame the victim made things significantly worse.

Positive peer actions were strikingly more likely to be rated more helpful than were positive self actions or positive adult actions.

**It is notable that the peer actions reported as most helpful are also the safest for peers as well, and represent acts of alliance rather than of confrontation.** Even the relatively silent and thus totally safe action of calling a student at home to give support was reported to be helpful much more often than it was unhelpful. Consistent with our data about teachers, these data suggest that students feel that giving advice is most helpful when the peer is giving encouragement.

**Preliminary conclusions from our data:**

- **A significant number of American students are being negatively affected by peer mistreatment.** Thirteen percent of our survey population reported being moderately, severely, or very severely affected by peer actions. Thirteen percent of the USA's entire student population of approximately 50,000,000 is more than 7,000,000 students moderately to very severely affected by peers' actions toward them. More than 4% of our survey population reported that they were severely or very severely affected by peers' actions. Four percent of the USA's entire student population represents 2,000,000 students severely or very severely affected.
- **Some groups of youth are more severely treated and more severely affected than others.** Youth of color report more frequent negative actions focused on race and religion and more likelihood of very severe effects than do white youth. Youth reporting "prefer not to answer" on our question about gender report more frequent negative actions focused on many issues and more likelihood of very severe effects than youth reporting as male or female. Youth reporting that they are in special education report more frequent negative actions focused on disability and more likelihood of very severe effects than youth not in special education.
- **Our students report that asking for and getting emotional support and a sense of connection has helped them the most among all the strategies we compared.**
- In some schools, students report that telling teachers and having the school use disciplinary strategies makes things better more often than it makes things worse. In other schools, the opposite is true. **We believe that this measure of adult responsiveness is a key indicator of school safety and climate.** We plan to study the differences between our schools to further identify which practices and interventions make adult intervention more positive.
- **The actions by self that had some of the most negative impacts (i.e., telling the person to stop, telling the person how I feel, walking away, and pretending it doesn't bother me) were often used by youth and are often recommended to youth.** We hope that the voices of our students can have an effect on the extent to which youth are advised to use these strategies.
- **Both staff and peers gave significantly positive support through connection, encouragement, affiliation, and listening.** The effect of peer support and affiliation was even more powerful than that of staff affiliation.
- **School staff was reported as being able to have significant negative impacts when they told students that if they had acted differently they would not have been mistreated, told youth to solve the problem themselves, and when they silenced youth by telling them not to tattle.** Some groups of youth were strikingly more likely to report having been told not to tattle than others.
- **Peers were reported as being able to have a significant negative effect by blaming or making fun of mistreated youth.** Our students also reported that when peers confront mistreating youth or ask them to stop their behavior, there is a significant likelihood that things will get worse.

**About the researchers:**

Charisse Nixon received her Ph.D. from West Virginia University and is currently an Associate Professor in Psychology at Penn State Erie. Her primary research interest is relational aggression, including both prevention and intervention. She is the coauthor of *Girl Wars: 12 Strategies That Will End Female Bullying* (Fireside, 2003) as well as several scholarly articles. Dr. Nixon trains educators throughout the United States; her workshops and consultations provide a unique integration of empirical research and practical strategies to help educators create learning environments that optimize students' development.

Stan Davis received his B.A. degree in psychology from Brown University and has worked as a child and family therapist and school counselor since 1969. He is the author of *Schools Where Everyone Belongs: Practical Strategies for Reducing Bullying* (2nd edition, Research Press, 2007) and *Empowering Bystanders in Bullying Prevention* (Research Press, 2007). He trains educators throughout the United States and works as a school guidance counselor in Maine. Stan maintains the website [stopbullyingnow.com](http://stopbullyingnow.com)