

What's Bullying?

The Definition -- Bullying is unwanted, aggressive behavior among students that involves an observed or perceived imbalance of power. The behavior is repeated multiple times or is highly likely to be repeated. Bullying includes actions such as making threats, spreading rumors, attacking someone physically or verbally, and excluding someone from a group on purpose.

Three Core Elements of Bullying

Although definitions of bullying can vary somewhat, three specific elements are present:

- Unwanted, aggressive behavior
- An observed or perceived imbalance of power between the student(s) doing the bullying and the student(s) being bullied
- Behavior that is repeated multiple times or is highly likely to be repeated

Aggressive behavior is not always negative. Throughout life, we are encouraged to pursue our aims vigorously and to play games competitively. Kids tussle. In some cases, rough play among friends may appear to be bullying, but neither party has the intent of actually hurting the other. Conflict is inherent in living, and we learn to deal with it through experience in the course of growing up. However, when one person is an unwilling participant in an interaction—when it's **unwanted, aggressive behavior**—the incident may constitute bullying.

A second central element of bullying behavior is an **observed or perceived imbalance of power**, which can include possessing private information about someone. The perception of that imbalance on the part of a student, whether it exists or not, is enough to constitute a bullying situation. If a student feels it, then it exists for that person. Given the sense of unequal power and control, the student or students being bullied may not be able to defend themselves in a specific *context* or type of situation—although they may be able to in other situations.

Students who engage in bullying behavior may target other students they perceive to be different physically. They also may target students they perceive to be different in terms of coordination or athletic ability, intelligence, popularity, social connectedness, or some other characteristic.

Bullying behavior is **repetitive or highly likely to be repeated** between and among the same students over time. The potential for bullying behaviors to be repeated over time is a critical element that differentiates this behavior from other forms of aggressive behavior. It is important to address even a single episode of aggressive behavior among students, when there is a clear imbalance of power, before the behavior becomes repetitive and develops into a pattern of bullying behaviors.

Four Types of Bullying

With the three core elements of bullying present, the behavior can take many forms and can be grouped into four general types:

Verbal bullying involves saying or writing mean things. Examples include taunting, name calling, making inappropriate sexual comments, threatening to cause harm, writing threatening or offensive notes, or saying things to embarrass or humiliate.

Social bullying (also referred to as relational bullying) involves harming someone's reputation or relationships. Examples include leaving someone out on purpose, telling other students not to be friends with someone, isolating someone, spreading rumors about someone, embarrassing someone in public, posting embarrassing images publicly or electronically, or making unwelcome contact of a sexual nature.

Physical bullying involves hurting a person's body. Examples include hitting, kicking, pinching, spitting on, tripping, pushing, or making rude gestures.

Damage to property bullying involves theft, alteration, or damaging the property of the targeted youth. Examples include taking someone's personal property and refusing to give it back, destroying someone's property secretly or in their presence, or deleting personal electronic information.

Cyberbullying

The online context for bullying, better known as cyberbullying, involves communication that uses cellular technology or the Internet. Because teachers and parents may not see or overhear the bullying behavior, it can be harder to recognize. Cyberbullying uses cell phones, computers, and other electronic devices that run e-mail, social networks, text messaging, game chat, messaging apps, discussion forums, and other applications to accomplish one or more of the following purposes:

- Send, post, or share negative, harmful, false, or mean content
- Share personal or private information
- Embarrass or humiliate
- Verbally harass
- Socially exclude
- Threaten physical or psychological harm

Cyberbullying imposes some specific dangers resulting from its digital nature. Teachers and parents not privy to student accounts may not observe it. Electronic and social media have become so widespread that anyone can post content at any time, and that content can be viewed by people known to the person being bullied and by strangers. Because digital devices allow 24-hour access, cyberbullying can be unrelenting, making it difficult for the person being bullied to find relief. Cyberbullying material also can be permanent because information can remain electronically and publicly available in perpetuity unless reported to and then removed by managers of the platform. The persistence of negative content online can harm students when they apply for college, jobs, associations, and credentials.

Context for Bullying

Bullying can happen anywhere. Whether you see the behavior or not, the four types of bullying can take place in any context that puts students together. In addition to at school and during school events, students can be bullied on the way to and from school, in their own neighborhood, and at the mall or park. Online bullying—yet another context—may not be physical, but it can be related to damage to property bullying as well as to verbal and relational bullying.

Prevalence of Bullying

In surveys conducted among 24 million students ages 12–18 during the 2014–15 school year, 20% said they had been bullied that year. The 2014–15 School Crime Supplement to the National Crime Victimization Survey indicates that, nationwide, about 20% of students ages 12–18 experienced bullying.

Common Forms of Bullying

The 2014–15 School Crime Supplement to the National Crime Victimization Survey reports that 20% of students surveyed (totaling 5 million students) said they were bullied, about the same number who reported being bullied on school property, and 3.8 million high school students (16%) said they were cyberbullied. Students identified the following most common forms of bullying behavior:

1. Make fun of, insult, or call a student names—3,223,000 students
2. Spread rumors about a student—2,968,000 students
3. Push, shove, trip, or spit on a student—1,235,000 students
4. Deliberately exclude a student from activities—1,220,000 students
5. Threaten a student with harm—941,000 students
6. Try to make a student do things against his or her will—607,000 students
7. Destroy property on purpose—440,000 students

Bystanders

The obvious students directly involved in a bullying episode are the ones exhibiting the bullying behavior and the ones being bullied. However, bullying almost always occurs in front of other students. One study found that peers were present in 85% of bullying episodes but intervened only 10% of the time. Some of these bystanders join in or encourage the bullying; others simply watch, and many—although possibly disturbed by the behavior—do nothing to stop it. The following are four main bystander roles:

Students who assist may not start or lead the bullying behavior, but they join in.

Students who reinforce give bullying an active audience—laughing, clapping, or encouraging the student engaged in the bullying behavior.

Outsiders remain separate from the situation, neither reinforcing the bullying behavior nor defending the student being bullied. Even if they say nothing, their behavior provides passive support to the student doing the bullying.

Students who defend act on behalf of the student being bullied, providing comfort, getting help, or even defending.

The Importance of the Terms We Use

These self-study modules use specific terminology to discuss bullying behavior. Instead of talking about students “being bullies,” we refer to bullying behavior; instead of referring to a student being a “victim of bullying” we speak of a student who is bullied or is the target of bullying. By doing so, we shift the focus from labeling an individual—practically the same as name calling—to describing behavior. Changing the words we use can shift our perspective from one of horror, condemnation, or pity to one of concern for all participants. It can also reduce the shame among participants and promote more productive interaction and resolution.

Perceived Differences

Any student at any age can become a target of bullying. At heightened risk are **individuals** perceived to—but not necessarily known to—differ from school norms. Perceived differences can include the following student characteristics:

Appearance or body size

Possible identity as gay, lesbian, or bisexual

Seeming masculinity or femininity

Ability in school

Race, ethnicity, or national origin

Religion

Family income

Disability or special needs

Targets of Bullying

Reliable data reveal a disturbing predictability about **groups of students** who often are targets of bullying. Regardless of type of bullying or context, there tend to be particular trends, including the following:

Females are bullied more than males.

Lesbian and bisexual females are bullied more than heterosexual females.

Gay and bisexual males are bullied more than heterosexual males.

Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and questioning students are bullied more than heterosexual students.

Electronic bullying is more common between students who have had sex with each other, whether same sex or different sexes.

Notice that in the last trend in the list, neither gender nor sexual identity is a factor. The important factor seems to be sexual contact of any kind between students and access to electronic media

Harm From Bullying

Whether as a student being bullied, doing the bullying, or witnessing bullying behavior, persons who are **involved in any way** have been known to be harmed. Independent of type, context, and form, recognized effects of bullying include the following: (1)

- n Poor school performance, including lower grades and test scores

- n Poor classroom attendance

- n Negative physical and mental health outcomes, including depression, anxiety, involvement in interpersonal violence or sexual violence, substance abuse, and poor social functioning

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “involvement in bullying, along with other risk factors, increases the chance that a young person will engage in suicide-related behaviors.” This is not to say that bullying directly causes suicide.

As for the **student being bullied**, the harm or distress can be even broader, including physical, psychological, social, or educational harm—any of which can limit a student’s educational opportunities.

Students can be physically hurt—from minor bruises to severe injuries such as lacerations, broken bones, and internal organ damage. Being bullied by others can lead to health complaints, depression and anxiety, increased feelings of sadness and loneliness, changes in sleep and eating patterns, and loss of interest in activities. These issues may persist into adulthood.

In the classroom, students may be unable to focus on their work, get poor grades, begin to withdraw from classroom activities, or be increasingly absent—missing, skipping, or dropping out of school altogether.

A small number of bullied children have been known to retaliate with extreme violence. (15)

Warning Signs

A variety of warning signs can indicate that someone is a participant in bullying—either bullying others or being bullied. Recognizing the warning signs is an important first step in taking action against bullying. Look for changes in behavior. Don’t ignore problems.

It is important to talk with students who show signs of being bullied or of bullying others. These warning signs can also point to other issues or problems, such as experiencing trauma, depression, or substance abuse. Talking to a student who shows signs can help identify the root of the problem.

Warning Signs for Students Who Bully

Even in combination, the indicators listed do not necessarily describe a student whose behavior constitutes bullying. At the same time, students who bully others frequently present one or more of the following characteristics.

Students may be bullying others if they do the following:

- Get into physical or verbal fights
- Have friends who bully others
- Are increasingly aggressive
- Get sent to the principal's office or detention frequently
- Have unexplained extra money or new belongings
- Blame others for their problems
- Don't accept responsibility for their actions
- Are competitive and worry about their reputation or popularity

Warning Signs for Students Being Bullied

Although not necessarily signs someone is being bullied, the following are red flags to which it is important to attend:

- Unexplained cuts, bruises, or scratches
- Lost or destroyed clothing, books, homework, electronics, or jewelry
- Frequent headaches or stomach aches, feeling sick, or faking illness
- Changes in eating habits, such as suddenly skipping meals or binge eating
- Difficulty sleeping or frequent nightmares
- Declining grades, loss of interest in schoolwork, or not wanting to go to school
- Social isolation
- 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, self-harming, or talking about suicide

Students May Not Ask for Help

According to *Preventing Bullying Through Science, Policy, and Practice*, published by the National Academy of Sciences, more than half of bullied students do not report being bullied. They may withhold information for any number of reasons such as the following:

- Feeling helpless and wanting to handle it on their own to feel in control again
- Wanting to avoid being seen as weak or a tattletale

- Fearing backlash from the student or students who bullied them
- Feeling humiliated and not wanting adults to know what is being said about them, whether true or false
- Expecting adults to judge or punish them for being weak
- Seeing themselves as socially isolated, believing no one cares or could understand
- Dreading being rejected by their peers (Although friends can help protect children from bullying, children can fear losing this support.)

Myths About Students Who Bully

Barriers to identifying students who bully arise from various myths that could easily lead to overlooking some students.

MYTH 1: Students who bully are loners.

FACT: Students who bully typically have larger groups of friends than other students.

FACT: Students who bully demonstrate more leadership skills than their peers but use those skills to engage in abusive behavior.

FACT: The segment of their friendship group that they control usually supports and encourages the bullying behavior.

MYTH 2: Students who bully have low self-esteem and are insecure.

FACT: Research indicates that students who engage in bullying behavior tend to have average or above-average self-esteem.

FACT: Students who bully are good at controlling and manipulating social relationships.

MYTH 3: Students bully others because they want attention.

FACT: Power and control are the two main motivating factors, and although the behavior may draw attention, it is not the motivating factor.

FACT: Bullying behavior does not stop if adults or peers ignore the behavior.

MYTH 4: Bullying is a normal part of kids being kids.

FACT: Abusing others is not a normal part of childhood, and, if reinforced, such behaviors will often continue into adulthood.

FACT: A strong correlation exists between bullying behavior and later patterns of criminal activity.

MYTH 5: Only boys bully others.

FACT: Girls are as likely as boys to bully their peers.

FACT: Differences lie more in the type of bullying exhibited. Girls are more likely to engage in relational bullying, whereas boys are more likely to engage in physical bullying.

Strategies to Avoid

Let's start this section with a quick word about some strategies that have been shown to be ineffective, although they are still being used in some schools.

Group treatment creates an audience for a student who bullies to brag and negatively role model. **Peer mediation and conflict resolution** requires equals in the conflict, which is absent because of bullying. This approach sometimes further harms the student being bullied.

Short-term or one-time approaches do little to prevent repeated episodes and provide insufficient opportunity to practice prevention and intervention skills.

Zero tolerance policies, which are typically exclusionary, tend to brand a student more or less permanently as a bully and eliminate important exposure to positive role models in a caring school climate.

REMINDER: Bullying behavior is never tolerated. Every episode is dealt with individually with responses that fit the needs of all participants.

Effective Strategies to Employ

The tasks for addressing a suspected bullying episode are less a sequence and more of a checklist to help you intervene effectively. As we discuss each one, keep in mind that you will likely be performing several tasks at nearly the same time.

1. Stop the behavior on the spot.
2. Find out what happened.
3. Support the students involved.
4. Report and follow up.

1. Stop the Behavior on the Spot

A potential bullying episode offers a teachable moment, and your mature, considered response models appropriate behavior for difficult situations. Acting in accordance with school policy, you must address the person being targeted, the person doing the attacking, and bystanders.

- Stay calm and keep your voice at a normal pitch.
- Reassure the students involved, including bystanders.
- If necessary, get another adult to help.
- Make sure everyone is safe.
- Separate all participants, preferably to different rooms.
- Ask the person being targeted, "What do you need from me?"
- Meet any immediate medical or mental health needs.
- Focus on student behavior rather than personalities

2. Find out what happened.

As you gather information, stay aware of any tendency to make assumptions about the incident or the persons involved. Listen carefully to as many sources as possible. Write down what you hear and say,

and make sure that you are writing down the accounts of students who saw or heard the incident directly.

Only through careful research can you determine whether the behavior truly constitutes a bullying episode according to the accepted definition.

Consider:

What, if any, is the history between the students involved?

Is there a power imbalance?

Has this happened before?

Is the student who was bullied worried it will happen again?

Listen.

3. Support Participants

Support the Student Being Bullied

- Listen to and focus on the student. Always ask, "What do you need from me?"
- Assure the student that the abusive behavior is not his or her fault.
- Be patient. They might not want to talk.
- Work together to resolve the situation, and protect the student.
- Be persistent.
- Follow up.

Support the Student Exhibiting the Bullying Behavior

- Make sure the student knows what the problem behavior is.
- Tell the student that you and the school take bullying seriously.
- Apply consequences to teach in accordance with school policy.
- Involve the student in making amends or repairing the situation.
- Follow up.

Support the Bystanders

- Listen to their concerns and suggest the following options for responding to an encounter that seems to involve bullying:
- Tell the student being targeted that bullying is wrong, and ask what you can do to help.
- Help a student being bullied get away from the situation.
- Help a student being bullied tell an adult.
- Seek help from an adult if you see someone being bullied.

Suggest that bystanders can help prevent bullying by doing the following:

- Set a good example by refusing to bully others.
- Be kind to a person who has been bullied.
- Listen to a student who has been targeted.
- Spend time with a student who has been bullied, talk with him or her, sit with him or her at lunch, or play with him or her at recess.
- Look for opportunities to contribute to the antibullying culture at school.

Turning Down the Heat

Control Yourself

- Present a calm, centered, and self-assured appearance.
- Use a modulated, low tone of voice.
- Act unsuspecting.
- Remain aware that the issue is not about you.
- Avoid speaking defensively about yourself or anyone else, regardless of comments, insults, curses, or misconceptions about roles.
- Be respectful even when firmly setting limits or calling for help.
- If you need help, call on a colleague, an administrator, security, or the police.

Communicate Nonverbally

What you do is as important as what you say. The following techniques have been shown to help restore a modicum of safety to a person who sees only danger.

- Stand at an angle to the agitated student.
- Keep an open pathway to the door.
- Leave extra physical space between you and the student—about four times your usual distance. Anger and agitation seem to fill space.
- Keep your hands out of your pockets and available to protect yourself.
- Place yourself at the student's eye level, and maintain eye contact. Allow the student to break his or her gaze and look away if he or she needs to.
- Avoid pointing or shaking your finger.
- Refrain from touching the student, even if touch is generally culturally appropriate and customary. Physical contact can easily be misinterpreted as hostile or threatening.

Communicate Verbally

- Remember that there is no content to the discussion, except whatever helps to calmly reduce arousal to a safer level.
 - "You seem upset."
 - "Your fists are clenched, and you're breathing fast. What is happening?"
 - "How can I help you?"
- Wait until the student takes a breath, and then speak calmly at your normal volume. Avoid trying to yell over a screaming person.
 - "Given what you just told me, it makes sense that you're really mad."
- Respond selectively, answering only informational questions no matter how rudely asked—for example, "Why do I have to do what you say?"
- Ignore abusive questions; say nothing—for example, "Why are all teachers jerks?"
- Explain limits and rules in a firm and respectful tone.
- Give choices when possible, as long as the alternatives are safe.
 - "Would you like to continue our meeting calmly, or would you prefer to stop now and come back tomorrow when things can be more relaxed?"
 - "Would you like to change seats?"
- Validate feelings without excusing the behavior.

- “You have every right to express your anger. I need you to do it without threatening me or anyone else.”
- Explain the consequences of inappropriate behavior without using threats or showing anger.
- Explore potential resolutions.
 - “Who can I call to come be with you?”
 - “How can we work this out?”
- Present consequences as institutional requirements rather than personal decisions.
- Do not ask how the student feels or interpret feelings in an analytic way.
- Refrain from arguing or trying to convince.

More De-Escalation Tips and Strategies

How To: Calm the Agitated Student: Tools for Effective Behavior Management

http://www.interventioncentral.org/behavior_calm_agitated_student

Dodging the Power-Struggle Trap: Ideas for Teachers <http://www.interventioncentral.org/behavioral-interventions/challenging-students/dodging-power-struggle-trap-ideas-teachers>

Common Symptoms of Trauma by School Age Group

Elementary Students

Evidence of Emotional Distress

- Anxiety, fear, and worry about safety of self and others (more clingy with teacher or parent)
- Worry about recurrence of violence
- Increased distress (unusually whiny, irritable, moody)
- Hyperarousal (e.g., agitation, sleep disturbances, tendency to startle)
- Statements and questions about death and dying
- Emotional numbing (e.g., seeming to have no feeling about the event)
- Reexperiencing the trauma (e.g., nightmares or disturbing memories during the day)

Changes in Behavior

- Increase in activity level
- Withdrawal from others or activities
- Angry outbursts and/or aggression
- Absenteeism
- Overreacting or underreacting to bells, physical contact, doors slamming, sirens, lighting, sudden movements
- Increased physical complaints (e.g., headaches, stomach aches, overreaction to minor bumps and bruises)

- Recreating an upsetting event (e.g., repeatedly talking about, “playing out,” or drawing the event)
- Avoidance behaviors (e.g., resisting going to places that remind him or her of the event)

Changes in Social Interaction

- Distrust of others, affecting how children interact with both adults and peers
- Increased difficulty interpreting and responding appropriately to social cues

Changes in School Performance

- Decreased attention and/or concentration
- Difficulty with authority, redirection, or criticism
- Decline in work quality or completion, diminished classroom contribution

Middle School Students

Evidence of Emotional Distress

- Anxiety, fear, and worry about safety of self and others
- Worry about recurrence or consequences of violence
- Irritability with friends, teachers, events
- Discomfort with feelings (e.g., troubling thoughts of revenge)
- Hyperarousal (e.g., sleep disturbance, tendency to be easily startled)
- Emotional numbing (e.g., seeming to have no feeling about the event)
- Repeated discussion of event and focus on specific details of what happened
- Reexperiencing the trauma (e.g., nightmares or disturbing daytime memories)

Changes in Behavior

- Increase in activity level
- Angry outbursts and/or aggression
- Withdrawal from others or activities
- Absenteeism
- Overreacting or underreacting to bells, physical contact, doors slamming, sirens, lighting, sudden movements
- Increased physical complaints (e.g., headaches, stomach aches, chest pains)
- Avoidance behaviors (e.g., resisting going to places that remind him or her of the event)

Change in School Performance

- Decreased attention and/or concentration
- Decline in work quality or completion, diminished classroom contribution

