

Understanding and Addressing Bullying in Schools

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Bullying is a widespread problem in schools and can significantly affect students' emotional, psychological, social, and academic lives. It does not result from a single personality trait or personal problem. Instead, bullying develops through interactions among individual behavior, peer relationships, family experiences, school environments, community conditions, and wider cultural attitudes. Addressing it therefore requires more than punishing individual students after an incident has occurred. Schools must understand how bullying develops, recognize its different forms, respond effectively to reported cases, and establish an environment in which aggression is neither rewarded nor ignored.

The original discussion correctly recognizes that psychological, environmental, and cultural conditions can influence bullying. However, it is inaccurate to assume that every student who bullies others has low self-esteem, poor anger control, a desire for dominance, or a history of childhood abuse. Some students who engage in bullying may have emotional or behavioral difficulties, while others may be socially confident and use aggression strategically to gain status, attention, influence, or approval from peers. Bullying behavior is therefore better understood through a social-ecological framework that examines the interaction between the student and the environments in which the behavior occurs (Swearer & Hymel, 2015).

What Is School Bullying?

Bullying is a form of repeated or potentially repeated aggressive behavior involving an observed or perceived imbalance of power. The power difference may arise from physical strength, popularity, social status, access to embarrassing information, group membership, age, or another advantage that makes it difficult for the targeted student to defend himself or herself. Bullying may cause physical, psychological, social, educational, or reputational harm (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2024).

Not every disagreement, argument, or unkind act between students is bullying. Students of relatively equal power may occasionally argue, insult one another, or become involved in a conflict. Such behavior may still require adult intervention, but it differs from bullying when repetition and a power imbalance are absent. Correctly distinguishing bullying from ordinary conflict helps schools choose an appropriate response.

Bullying can occur openly or in ways that are difficult for adults to observe. Physical bullying includes hitting, kicking, pushing, damaging property, or using threats of physical harm. Verbal bullying

includes insults, humiliating comments, persistent teasing, threats, and discriminatory language. Relational or social bullying involves spreading rumors, manipulating friendships, deliberately excluding someone, or damaging a student's reputation. Cyberbullying occurs through text messages, social media platforms, gaming environments, group chats, images, videos, and other digital communication.

These forms frequently overlap. A student may be mocked at school, excluded from a friendship group, and then targeted online after leaving the school building. Cyberbullying can be particularly distressing because harmful material may be distributed rapidly, remain accessible, reach a large audience, and follow the student into spaces that would otherwise provide safety.

Why Bullying Occurs

Bullying does not have one universal cause. Students who bully others are a diverse group, and their behavior may develop through different combinations of risk and protective factors. Swearer and Hymel (2015) explain that bullying should be examined across interconnected social settings rather than attributed to a single psychological weakness.

At the individual level, some students may struggle with impulse control, emotional regulation, empathy, or constructive conflict resolution. Others may hold beliefs that justify aggression, such as the idea that vulnerable students deserve mistreatment or that intimidation is an acceptable way to obtain respect. However, personal characteristics alone do not explain why bullying occurs in one environment and not another.

Peer-group processes are also important. Bullying often has an audience, and students may laugh, encourage the aggressor, share humiliating material, remain silent, or avoid helping the targeted person. These reactions can reward the student responsible for the bullying by providing attention or social influence. In some groups, aggression becomes a way to establish status and demonstrate loyalty. Students may participate because they fear becoming the next target if they refuse.

Family conditions can influence behavior without determining it. Harsh or inconsistent discipline, exposure to aggression, limited emotional support, inadequate supervision, and poor communication may increase risk for some students. Conversely, supportive relationships, clear boundaries, appropriate monitoring, and constructive problem-solving can reduce risk. It would nevertheless be inappropriate to assume that a student's family is abusive or negligent solely because the student has bullied someone.

The school environment may either discourage or unintentionally enable bullying. Poor supervision, inconsistent discipline, unclear reporting procedures, hostile teacher-student relationships, and widespread acceptance of humiliating behavior can create opportunities for aggression. Bullying may become more common in areas where adults are rarely present, including corridors, playgrounds, cafeterias, bathrooms, locker rooms, transportation areas, and online spaces connected with school

relationships. The design and supervision of physical environments can therefore influence student behavior and perceptions of safety (Izadi & Hart, 2024).

Cultural factors are equally important. Social messages that glorify dominance, normalize humiliation, reward extreme competitiveness, or treat aggression as entertainment may influence how young people understand power. Prejudice based on race, ethnicity, religion, disability, body size, socioeconomic position, gender expression, or other perceived differences may also be expressed through bullying. Schools must address both individual incidents and the discriminatory attitudes that sometimes support them.

Effects on Students Who Are Bullied

Students who experience bullying may suffer fear, embarrassment, loneliness, helplessness, anger, and declining trust in other people. They may become reluctant to attend school, participate in class, use transportation, enter certain areas, or join extracurricular activities. Some students attempt to avoid bullying by pretending to be ill, arriving late, missing school, or withdrawing from peers.

Bullying victimization is associated with increased risks of anxiety, depression, sleep problems, low self-esteem, psychosomatic complaints, self-harm, suicidal thoughts, and post-traumatic stress symptoms. These outcomes do not occur in every student, and bullying should not be presented as the sole cause of every mental health difficulty. Nevertheless, systematic reviews show that repeated victimization is an important risk factor for serious and potentially persistent psychological harm (Moore et al., 2017; Wolke & Lereya, 2015).

Academic consequences may develop when students cannot concentrate because they are watching for threats, worrying about humiliation, or trying to remain unnoticed. Absenteeism and reduced participation may cause grades to decline even when the student previously performed well. Peer victimization has been associated with lower academic achievement, although the relationship can also be influenced by school engagement, mental health, attendance, and pre-existing difficulties (Nakamoto & Schwartz, 2010).

Adults should avoid blaming targeted students for failing to defend themselves. Advice such as “ignore it,” “be tougher,” or “fight back” can imply that the victim is responsible for stopping behavior created by someone else. It may also expose the student to greater danger or disciplinary consequences. The responsibility for addressing bullying belongs to the adults and institutions responsible for student safety.

Effects on Students Who Bully Others

Students who engage in bullying also require intervention. Their behavior can contribute to disciplinary problems, damaged relationships, school disengagement, substance misuse, and

continuing patterns of aggression. However, intervention should not define the student permanently as a “bully.” Labels can encourage adults to treat a changing behavior as a fixed identity and may make rehabilitation more difficult.

Some students alternate between roles and may both bully others and experience victimization themselves. These bully-victims can present particularly complex emotional and behavioral needs. A school response should therefore investigate the student’s circumstances, the functions served by the behavior, peer-group dynamics, previous victimization, and any unmet educational or mental health needs.

Accountability remains essential. Understanding the influences on bullying does not excuse harmful behavior. Effective responses combine clear consequences with education, behavioral support, empathy development, supervision, and opportunities to practice healthier ways of obtaining attention, solving conflict, and participating in peer groups.

Effects on Bystanders and the School Community

Bullying affects more than the student targeted and the student responsible. Witnesses may feel fear, guilt, distress, or uncertainty about whether adults will protect them. Some may remain silent because they believe reporting will make the situation worse. Others may join the bullying to protect their own position within the group.

When aggressive behavior is repeatedly ignored, students may conclude that adults are unable or unwilling to protect them. Trust declines, reporting becomes less likely, and intimidation may become normalized. A school in which students feel unsafe cannot provide an ideal environment for learning.

A negative school climate may also affect teachers and other staff members. Considerable time may be spent managing conflict, responding to complaints, communicating with families, and addressing the consequences of absenteeism or poor performance. Bullying prevention should therefore be viewed as part of school improvement rather than as a separate campaign conducted only after a serious incident.

Recognizing Possible Warning Signs

There is no single sign proving that a student is being bullied. However, sudden or unexplained changes should prompt careful and private inquiry. Possible indicators include injuries, damaged possessions, missing belongings, school avoidance, falling grades, sleep disturbance, changes in eating, withdrawal from friends, emotional distress after using a device, or repeated requests for money.

A student engaging in bullying may show increased aggression, frequent disciplinary problems,

unexplained possession of other students' property, intense concern with popularity, association with peers who encourage cruelty, or a tendency to avoid responsibility for harmful behavior. These signs are not diagnostic and should not replace a fair investigation.

Many students do not report bullying because they fear retaliation, embarrassment, disbelief, loss of digital access, or being considered weak. Schools should provide more than one confidential reporting method and explain clearly what will happen after a concern is raised.

Establishing a Whole-School Prevention Strategy

Bullying is too complex to be addressed through isolated classroom lessons or occasional assemblies. Effective prevention requires a coordinated, whole-school approach involving administrators, teachers, counselors, support staff, students, families, transportation staff, coaches, and community partners.

Schools should begin with a clear definition of bullying and written procedures for reporting, documenting, investigating, and responding to incidents. Expectations should apply in classrooms, playgrounds, athletic activities, transportation, extracurricular programs, and relevant digital spaces. Policies must be communicated in language appropriate to students' ages and developmental levels.

Rules alone are insufficient when enforcement is inconsistent. Staff members need practical training on identifying physical, verbal, relational, discriminatory, and cyberbullying. They should know how to interrupt an incident safely, separate the students involved, preserve evidence, listen without blame, notify appropriate personnel, and arrange follow-up support.

Research indicates that school-based anti-bullying programs can reduce both perpetration and victimization, although outcomes vary substantially between programs and settings. An updated systematic review found average reductions of approximately 18% to 19% in bullying perpetration and 15% to 16% in victimization (Gaffney et al., 2021). These results show that prevention programs can help but should not be treated as guaranteed or one-time solutions. Quality of implementation, staff commitment, cultural fit, duration, and continued monitoring all influence effectiveness.

Improving Supervision and the Physical Environment

Schools should use incident reports, student surveys, staff observations, and confidential feedback to identify locations and times associated with increased risk. Greater adult presence may be required during class transitions, meal periods, recess, arrival, dismissal, and transportation.

Environmental changes may also improve safety. These can include clearer sightlines, adequate lighting, supervised common areas, better traffic flow, accessible staff offices, and removal of isolated

spaces where students can be targeted without detection. Izadi and Hart (2024) emphasize that school design and students' use of physical space can affect social behavior, school climate, and bullying.

Digital environments also require attention. Students need guidance on privacy, responsible communication, image sharing, group-chat behavior, documentation of harmful messages, and safe reporting. Schools should explain the boundaries of their authority while responding when online behavior substantially affects student safety or participation in education.

Supporting Positive Peer Behavior

Peer support is valuable because students often see bullying before adults do. Prevention programs can teach students to become active bystanders or “upstanders” who refuse to reinforce aggression. Safe options may include informing an adult, supporting the targeted student privately, redirecting the situation, refusing to share harmful content, or seeking help as a group.

Students should not be pressured to intervene physically or place themselves in danger. The appropriate response depends on the student's age, the seriousness of the incident, the power imbalance, and the availability of adult assistance.

A meta-analysis found that school-based prevention programs produced a modest but meaningful improvement in bystander intervention behavior (Polanin et al., 2012). This suggests that students can learn safer and more constructive responses when schools provide explicit instruction and reinforce those behaviors consistently.

Peer support should complement rather than replace adult responsibility. Students must not be expected to investigate serious incidents, mediate situations involving intimidation, or provide mental health treatment to classmates.

Responding to a Reported Incident

When bullying is reported, adults should respond promptly and calmly. The first priorities are immediate safety, separation of the students involved when necessary, preservation of relevant evidence, and assessment of physical or emotional harm. Interviews should generally occur separately so that the targeted student is not required to describe the experience in front of the alleged aggressor.

Investigators should gather information from multiple sources rather than relying entirely on one account or assuming that the absence of an adult witness means the event did not occur. They should examine repetition, power imbalance, intent, context, patterns of exclusion, digital evidence, witness accounts, and previous reports.

The targeted student may need a safety plan, counseling, schedule adjustments, supervised transitions, academic assistance, or an identified adult contact. Changes should not punish or isolate the student who reported the behavior. For example, automatically removing the victim from a class or activity may reinforce the idea that reporting results in loss.

The student responsible for bullying should receive proportionate consequences and individualized intervention. The response may include increased supervision, behavioral planning, social-emotional instruction, family involvement, counseling, restitution, and structured opportunities to repair harm when appropriate and freely accepted.

Ordinary peer mediation may be unsuitable when a continuing power imbalance exists. Mediation assumes that participants can negotiate from relatively equal positions, whereas bullying involves domination or intimidation. Schools should not force a targeted student to confront, forgive, or reconcile with the student responsible before safety has been established.

Involving Parents and Caregivers

Parental participation helps anti-bullying efforts extend beyond the school. Families should receive clear information about school policies, reporting options, digital safety, warning signs, and available support. Communication should remain factual and avoid disclosing confidential information about other students.

Parents of a targeted student should listen carefully, document relevant events, reassure the child that reporting was appropriate, and work with the school on a practical safety plan. They should avoid encouraging retaliation.

Parents of a student who has bullied others may initially feel defensive or shocked. Schools should communicate specific evidence, explain expectations, and invite cooperation without presenting the child as permanently bad. Families and schools can work together to establish consistent boundaries, supervise technology, identify emotional or behavioral needs, and reinforce respectful conduct.

Research on intervention after bullying-related trauma emphasizes the importance of coordinated support involving schools, parents, peers, health professionals, and other community members rather than expecting one person or program to solve the problem independently (Hikmat et al., 2024).

Monitoring Progress

A school cannot determine whether its prevention strategy works merely by counting formal complaints. Reports may increase after a new program because students have greater trust in the reporting system. Conversely, a low number of complaints may reflect fear or lack of awareness rather than safety.

Schools should examine several indicators, including anonymous student surveys, attendance, disciplinary records, school-climate measures, reports from families, locations of incidents, response times, repeated victimization, and whether affected students feel safer after intervention. Data should be reviewed by grade level, location, type of bullying, and relevant student groups while protecting privacy.

Policies should then be revised in response to evidence. Prevention is an ongoing process requiring consistent leadership, resources, training, and evaluation.

Conclusion

Bullying is a serious but preventable problem that affects individual students, peer groups, families, and the wider school environment. It may involve physical aggression, verbal abuse, social exclusion, discriminatory harassment, or digital behavior. Its causes cannot be reduced to a single psychological weakness or family experience. Bullying develops through interactions among individual characteristics, peer norms, family relationships, school climate, physical environments, and cultural attitudes.

Victims may experience anxiety, depression, school avoidance, academic difficulties, and long-term psychological harm. Students who bully others may develop continuing behavioral and social problems, while bystanders may experience fear, guilt, and declining confidence in adults. When bullying is tolerated, the entire school climate becomes less safe and less supportive of learning.

Effective prevention requires clear policies, trained staff, confidential reporting, careful investigation, appropriate supervision, positive peer involvement, parental participation, mental health support, and continued evaluation. Schools must hold students accountable for harmful behavior while avoiding permanent labels and addressing the conditions that allowed the behavior to develop. A coordinated whole-school approach can reduce bullying and help create an environment in which every student is respected, protected, and able to participate fully in education.

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