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# Bullying Intervention Practice Brief

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## DESCRIPTION OF TOPIC

Bullying is a form of interpersonal violence that is a barrier to learning and can lead to long term consequences that impact everyone involved including youth who bully, youth who are targets of bullying, and bystanders who witness the abuse of others (Juvonen, Wang, & Expinoza, 2010; McDougall & Vaillancourt, 2015). Bullying is typically defined by researchers and other entities like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the United States Department of Education (<http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/bullying-definitions-final-a.pdf>) as a situation where intentional harm is done, an unfair match exists so that there is an imbalance of power, and the bullying behaviors are repeated overtime (Carney, 2008; Gladden, Vivolo-Kantor, Hamburger, & Lumpkin, 2014). Bullying behaviors can be physical (e.g., hitting, tripping, shoving), verbal (e.g., name calling, making fun of others), social/relational (e.g., marginalization and exclusion, rumor spreading, being made to do something the target did not want to do), and electronic (e.g., cyberbullying through social networking). StopBullying is an excellent website for additional information and resources (<http://www.stopbullying.gov/>).

Secondary to increased public awareness of the long-term consequences associated with this form of interpersonal violence, 49 of 50 states in the U.S. have passed bullying legislation (Nickerson, Cornell, Smith, & Furlong, 2013). For a comprehensive view of all state laws and/or policies, see the interactive map provided on the StopBullying website (<http://www.stopbullying.gov/laws/>). *Analysis of State Bullying Laws and Policies* (U.S. Department of Education, 2011) is a useful document containing comprehensive information about state legislation related to bullying (<http://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/bullying/state-bullying-laws/state-bullying-laws.pdf>).

## PREVALENCE

An interactive map showing how often bullying occurs by state can be accessed from the CDC Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS; <http://nccd.cdc.gov/YouthOnline/>). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES; 2011) studies that asked students if they were bullied in the past year revealed that approximately 15%–23% of U.S. elementary, and 20%–28% of secondary school students reported being bullied (<http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2013/2013329.pdf>; <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2013/2013036.pdf>). Other research results concluded that 70–80% of students report being involved in bullying at one time during their school career (Graham, 2011).

## RISKS AND CONSEQUENCES

Youth targeted by peers who bully can be anyone in the school environment. Researchers have shown, however, an overrepresentation for students with disabilities including physical, developmental, intellectual, emotional and sensory disabilities (Rose, Monda-Amaya, & Espelage, 2011), students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT), and youth who are socially isolated (<http://www.stopbullying.gov/at-risk/factors/>). The negative consequences associated with bullying include physical, biological, psychological, emotional, cognitive, and social problems for all involved. Significant impacts of bullying include debilitating anxiety, depression, substance use, health complaints, truancy, and limited academic achievement.

Visit the StopBullying website for additional resources on significant issues related to the health effects of bullying (<http://www.stopbullying.gov/blog/2015/04/21/bullying-gets-under-your-skin-health-effects-bullying-children-and-youth>; <http://www.stopbullying.gov/>), and ways to create a safe environment for youth at-risk of being bullied

(<http://www.stopbullying.gov/at-risk/groups/index.html>).

## **BULLY SITUATION CHARACTERISTICS**

Bullying situations can be better understood by identifying the underlying components that center on aggression meant to overpower or control another person (Hazler, 2004). The impetus for this use of power by the abuser typically stems from wanting to confirm personal power, influence, and self-worth. Individuals come to learn, through social experiences, how to effectively dominate others in ways that can be obvious, but are often very subtle and hard to detect.

Bullying requires the perpetrator to maintain a situation that allows the abuse to happen and continue without intervention. Isolation, dehumanization, powerlessness, and inevitability are the core characteristics of a bullying situation. The person doing the bullying often has mastered the ability to manipulate the situation so that these characteristics make it difficult for targets and others to recognize, understand, and address them for successful intervention.

*Isolation* is recognized as a major factor in bullying situations and is typically a factor when someone is bullied over time. This isolation can take the form of being physically alone and apart from any potential sources of support. It can also happen within a large group of people when the abuser creates an atmosphere where bystanders believe they cannot step in to support the target, confront the perpetrator, or help following the bullying situation. Targets can also seek isolation in order to avoid feeling publically humiliated, and this isolation makes the abuser's task easier.

*Dehumanization* is a key strategy that abusers use against targets in order to strip targets of their humanness. Bullies form a belief that their targets are not comparable to them in terms of humanity and the need for personal dignity. Verbal abuse is the most common way to dehumanize another person and is accomplished through the use of derogatory language. Imagery and symbols that distort the target's self-perception, beliefs, values, and the opinions of others are additional forms of dehumanization. By dehumanizing targets, bullies have a rational for not treating them as valuable individuals thereby reducing the abusers' sense of responsibility for caring about others.

*Powerlessness* and *Inevitability* are characterized by the sense that one cannot stop the abuse and that it will continue, and this provides **bullies** with a sense of confidence that their actions will lead to their desired results, and is especially debilitating for **targets**. This sense of powerlessness strips targets of the energy needed to attempt resolution of the abuse, often resulting in feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, and worthlessness. This combination of emotions is particularly problematic as they can leave students with the sense that the only way to end their pain is to be totally removed from the situation. Examples of removing themselves from the situation include, high truancy rates, being home schooled, or more drastic steps like taking their own lives or the lives of their abuser. Inevitability for the target is a major concern because often it is the point in the process where the target believes that things are totally out of control and only extreme options are available. Inevitability is also disempowering for **bystanders** who believe that there is no chance to successfully prevent or intervene in the abuse. They, too, develop feelings of helplessness and in many cases hopelessness. Much research has shown the significant impact of chronic bullying on bystanders (Hazler, 2004).

## **INTERVENTION STRATEGIES**

Intervening in bullying situations requires involvement at various levels, and a variety of people working together (e.g., school counselors or teacher, parents/caregivers, and/or other students who are bystanders to the abuse).

### **Youth who are Targets of Bullying Behavior**

Actions for targets are meant to change the dynamics of the situation by changing the target's conceptualization of the situation and the target's actions before, during, or after the situation. Coping models focus on problem-

focused coping, emotional-focused coping, and various related self-defense strategies (Tenenbaum, Varjas, Meyers, & Paris, 2011). Key applications of the model include:

- *Increase target connections to others* who can provide immediate or follow-up support. The more friends and support from others that are acquired, the less vulnerable the target is to bullying.
- *Help targets change some aspect of their behavior* so that they are less predictable to their abusers, thereby reducing the abusers' confidence that the desired results will occur.
- *Teach targets appropriate physical, verbal, and social assertiveness* (not aggressiveness). Having a sense of assertiveness allows targets to understand their own power and influence in the bullying situations.

*Show targets how, where, and when to seek support* as this is necessary and even crucial to changing the situation. Additional resources and information about steps to take for youth who are targets of bullying - including interactive videos highlighting tips for advocates, parents, and peers - can be found at StopBullying (<http://www.stopbullying.gov/respond/index.html>).

Specific activities (e.g., teaching assertiveness) and teachable moments for responding to bullying situations can be found at PromotePrevent (<http://preventingbullying.promoteprevent.org/4-bullies-victims-and-bystanders>).

### **Youth who Perpetrate Bullying Behavior**

Specific actions can be taken with youth who bully others to decrease the unwanted behaviors and increase more desirable ones in their place. Accountability, empathy development, and building social competencies are primary factors in dealing with bullying perpetrators (Arsenio, Cooperman, & Lover, 2000; Denham, 2006; Izard, 2002).

- *Hold youth accountable to legal, social, and school-wide rules.* Teach students the guidelines associated with appropriate behavior and emphasize consistent consequences (<http://www.stopbullying.gov/prevention/at-school/rules/index.html>). Avoid some commonly used strategies such as zero tolerance, conflict resolution/peer mediation between bullies and targets, group counseling with bullies because of their negative consequences (<http://www.stopbullying.gov/respond/support-kids-involved/index.html>).
- *Develop relationships with youth who bully that emphasize the bully as a person rather than a relationship that focuses on only their abusive actions.* This type of relationship allows others to gain an understanding of the impetus for the behaviors and the issues that might be related to social learning. Professional counseling can allow a chronic abuser to identify and deal with his or her needs, difficulties, and skill deficits.
- *Provide experiences to gain an appreciation of human differences and needs as a way to increase empathy for others including their targets.* Assisting students who bully others to develop empathy for and an understanding of targets in a personalized way makes it harder for them to continue abusing. It is important to initially provide low-level risk opportunities for students to practice new skills such as problem solving, anger management, and various other social skills.

Visit PromotePrevent for specific activities (e.g., increasing empathy) and teachable moments for responding to bullying situations (<http://preventingbullying.promoteprevent.org/4-bullies-victims-and-bystanders>), and KidsHealth for additional resources on ways to help youth not become those who bully ([http://kidshealth.org/parent/emotions/behavior/no\\_bullying.html](http://kidshealth.org/parent/emotions/behavior/no_bullying.html)).

### **Youth who are Bystanders to Bullying Behavior**

Bystanders are peers who are present, witness, or know of bullying situations, but are unsure of how to intervene. Fortunately, research confirms that appropriate bystander actions can reduce continuation of bullying (Oh & Hazler, 2009; Padgett & Notar, 2013; Pellegrini & Van Ryzin, 2004; Polanin, Espelage, & Pigott, 2012; Salmivalli, Voeten, & Poskiparta 2011). A primary strategy is to teach a skill set that promotes confidence in bystanders' abilities to "stand by" a target, rather than just be a bystander.

- *Teach bystanders how to recognize and act on their feelings of discomfort in abusive situations.* Bystanders need to be taught how to differentiate bullying from other types of interpersonal violence and how to deal with their own feelings in order to intervene.

- *Stay calm* – take deep breaths; think about options and available support; talk to yourself about what to do.
- *Demonstrate casual disapproval* – show non-aggressive physical disapproval; do not join in the bullying or watch.
- *Tell the person to stop* – talk about what the person is “doing” with NO name-calling.
- *Gather people around* – create a group; reach out to other bystanders.
- *Try something different* – stop doing things that are not working; surprise and change can make a difference in the situation.
- *Get help* – when nothing is working, get help to change the situation (e.g., adults in the area); let others know so they can help.
- *Explore with bystanders ways to provide follow-up support for targets.* Bystanders can support peers being targeted outside of the specific bullying situation by simply talking to them, sitting or standing with them, or showing care in multiple other ways. Any of these actions help to reduce the social isolation that helps maintain the bullying.
- *Explore productive ways to interact with students who are bullying to help them change towards more productive behaviors.* Everyone can set a good example for how to treat each other respectfully, which can encourage the abuser to engage in more socially accepted ways as part of a group where no bullying is part of the school culture.

Reference StopBullying for additional information about steps bystanders can take including interactive videos highlighting tips for advocates, parents, and peers (<http://www.stopbullying.gov/respond/be-more-than-a-bystander/index.html>), and PromotePrevent for specific activities (e.g., increasing problem solving skills to deal with bullying) and teachable moments for responding to bullying situations (<http://preventingbullying.promoteprevent.org/4-bullies-victims-and-bystanders>).

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