

# Bullying

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## Introduction

According to some estimates, 160,000 children skip school each day because of intimidation by their peers. The National Center for Educational Statistics reports that 77 percent of middle and high school students in small mid-western towns have been bullied. And a newly released study from the National Institutes of Health published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* reveals that almost a third of 6th to 10th graders — 5.7 million children nationwide — have experienced some kind of bullying (Nansel et al., 2001). Bullying has been a persistent problem that, with the heightened attention to school violence, has only recently been recognized as a pervasive issue needing immediate focus.

## What is Bullying?

Bullying has been defined in many ways. It can be defined as a specific type of aggression in which (1) the behavior is intended to harm or disturb, (2) the behavior occurs repeatedly over time, and (3) there is an imbalance of power, with a more powerful person or group attacking a less powerful one (Mayo Clinic, 2001). Delwyn Tattum and Eva Tattum (1992) proposed the following definition: "Bullying" is the willful, conscious desire to hurt another and put him/her under stress." Dan Olweus, noted bullying researcher, defines bullying as exposing a person repeatedly, and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more students (Olweus, 1993). These definitions all convey the message that bullying is something that someone repeatedly does or says to gain power and dominance over another, including any action or implied action, such as threats, intended to cause fear and distress. The behavior has to be repeated on more than one occasion and the definition must include evidence that those involved intended or felt fear.

Bullying can take the form of name calling, put-downs, saying or writing inappropriate things about a person, deliberately excluding individuals from activities, not talking to a person, threatening a person with bodily harm, taking or damaging a person's things, hitting or kicking a person, making a person do things he/she does not want to do, taunting, teasing and coercion. Bullying can be physical, verbal, psychological, or a combination of these three.

## Types of Bullying

Two types of bullies are addressed in the literature: aggressive bullies and passive bullies. An aggressive bully is seen as an individual who is belligerent, fearless, coercive, confident, tough, and impulsive. This type of behavior typically comes from individuals who have a low tolerance for frustration coupled with a stronger inclination toward violence than that of children in general.

Passive bullies are also referred to as anxious bullies. They rarely provoke others or take the initiative in a bullying incident. Passive bullies are usually associated with aggressive bullies and, hence, often take the less-aggressive role. As groups, the aggressive bully will instigate the bullying situation while the passive bully supports his/her behavior and/or begins to actively participate once the bullying begins. The passive bully aligns with the more powerful and, relatively speaking, more popular, action-oriented aggressive bully, earning the passive bully the descriptors of "camp follower" and "hanger-on."

## Where Does Most Bullying Occur?

Some researchers have suggested that twice as many children are bullied in the school environment than in any other location. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, "bullying appears to take place more in middle or junior high schools than in high schools" (Nolin et al., 1995).

It has been suggested that bullying could be greatly reduced if teachers provided better supervision of students during free play, recess, the noon hour, or on the school bus. Teachers also need to be present in the hallway during class changes and during restroom breaks. Many schools have failed to address the problem and many ignore bullying when it is observed. Not only are students bullies but teachers have also been identified as bullies. Many teachers see bullying as a normal, natural part of growing up and are therefore indifferent when they see it occur.

## Racial Bullying

Ethnic minority children are at risk for racial bullying. Rather than being a part of the student body as a whole, they often cluster together in smaller groups similar to their own culture. Name calling is one of the common techniques utilized in racial bullying. Individual taunts, such as *fatty*, *carrot top*, and *four-eyes*, are directed toward the child but taunts are also directed to his/her family as well as his/her ethnic group. Racial bullying often begins in the preschool years and is transmitted intentionally from parents to children. The community attitude exerts a pervasive influence and may knowingly, or unknowingly, exhibit racist tendencies. Communities that address the problem up front are more likely to create an atmosphere where people of all ethnic and minority groups feel welcome.

## Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment is any unwelcome sexual behavior that interferes with an individual's life. It can be viewed as unwelcome sexual advances, a demand for sexual favors, touching in a sexual way or accusations of homosexuality and lesbianism.

Schools are currently responsible for protecting students from harassment based on sex. The U.S. Office for Civil Rights publishes the legal principles "requiring educational institutions that receive federal funds to take steps reasonably calculated to stop harassment when it occurs and prevent recurrence" (Office for Civil Rights, 2001).

## How Do Children Become Bullies?

The literature addresses three areas as to the possible reasons a child becomes a bully: child rearing influences, characteristics of the child and factors of the environment (Ahmad & Smith, 1994; Batsche & Knoff, 1994; Smith & Sharp, 1994).

### *Child Rearing Influences*

The child may not have received warmth and caring from the mother: there may have been a failure to bond with the parents or the child may not have felt loved. Many parents fail to set limits for their children's behavior and the parents may have used assertive disciplinary methods where control and coercion were a part of the discipline. There are also indications that inconsistent discipline on the part of the parents can produce a bully. If a parent exhibits aggressive behavior and if the child is encouraged to assert him/herself in socially unacceptable ways, the child may become a bully.

### *Characteristics of the Child*

There are no distinct characteristics of a child who bullies. Boys tend to be more aggressive and more overactive and hyperactive than girls.

The following characteristics are associated with predicting children with a high level of difficult behaviors:

- difficulties adapting to new situations;
- irregular eating and sleeping habits;
- negative moods, strong moods; and
- unpredictable behavior.

### *Factors of the Environment*

American homes and schools do not provide negative consequences for bullies and society sees bullying as transient or inconsequential. In fact,

on television and in movies bullies often go unchecked and are sometimes rewarded. For boys, bullying is seen as “standing up for himself” or as “all boy.” In the school environment, bullying is often unnoticed or ignored and supervision in the schools are many times inadequate. Crowded conditions, such as on school playgrounds, encourage bullying. Bystanders who admire the exploits of bullies serve as models for others.

### What Can Be Done About Bullying?

Schools that wish to address this problem have a variety of avenues to pursue. The school can introduce a code of conduct which is a whole-school disciplinary policy with a clearly spelled out set of rules and regulations that should make it possible for all school personnel to work together safely and productively. It should state clearly, with examples, what is good and bad behavior along with respective rewards and sanctions.

The school needs to establish a whole-school approach to bullying by establishing an awareness of the bullying problem. The school needs to evaluate how friendly it is toward bullying. Awareness of bullying both within and outside of the school can help reduce the act. Also, increased school safety features, such as video monitoring, can provide more protection to students.

Students should be encouraged to report incidents of bullying by promising the students anonymity. The school should develop a student watch program by training student volunteers to patrol and report instances of bullying. In the classroom teachers may use stories and drama to increase awareness of bullying and bully courts can be set up for addressing bullying issues. The school should provide training for students in problem-solving approaches, which include conflict resolution training, conflict management and quality circles. All of these can be positive ways of addressing inappropriate behavior. These activities make the school safer and let students know that bullying is a violation of children’s rights.

### Intervention Programs

A number of intervention programs are available for schools to utilize. The development of a whole-school bullying policy might be one of the first steps in addressing the problem. Improvement of the school environment by having the playground, corridors, and restrooms supervised by teaching personnel might be another priority. To further address the problem, empower students by offering training in conflict resolution programs, peer help and assertiveness training.

### Conclusion

Bullying is a destructive social problem that needs attention. Schools have the responsibility to create safe places for students where they can grow without fear. Greater awareness of the issue and a community-wide focus on prevention can begin to secure that our schools are safer environments.

### ERIC Resources:

ERIC/CASS Virtual Library on Bullying in Schools. ERIC Clearinghouse on Counseling & Student Services (ERIC/CASS)  
<http://ericass.uncg.edu/virtuallib/bullying/bullyingbook.html>

ERIC Parent Brochure: What Should Parents and Teachers Know About Bullying?

This brochure characterizes bullies and their victims, offers advice on how schools and parents can prevent bullying and intervene when it becomes a problem, and suggests sources for further information.

<http://www.eric.ed.gov/resources/parent/bullying.html>

ERIC Digest: Bullying in Schools (1997)

[http://www.ed.gov/databases/ERIC\\_Digests/ed407154.html](http://www.ed.gov/databases/ERIC_Digests/ed407154.html)

ERIC Digest: Easing the Teasing: How Parents Can Help Their Children (1999) [http://www.ed.gov/databases/ERIC\\_Digests/ed431555.html](http://www.ed.gov/databases/ERIC_Digests/ed431555.html)

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