

A Primer on Bullying for Parents and Community Members



What is Bullying?

Bullying is often characterized as a *form* of aggression with three unique components: 1) intent to harm, 2) repeated aggressive acts, and 3) an imbalance of power¹. The bully's power may come from physical size, age, or group status (e.g. popularity). Victims are perceived as physically or psychologically weaker than the bully, and victims often perceive themselves as unable to fight back². For example, a group of popular children who repeatedly tease and ostracize less popular children would be considered bullying; however, two students, from rival gangs, who often ridicule and provoke each other into fights, might not be considered bullying. Indeed, there is no consensus on the exact definition of bullying or how it should be measured. Consequently, researchers focus on different types of bullying such as *direct* (overt physical or verbal acts) and *indirect bullying* (covert social manipulation and exclusion which is also termed relational bullying), or *cyber bullying* (bullying through the use of computers or digital communication devices).

Who's involved in bullying?

The Bully. Bullies are the perpetrators of the repeated aggression who generally see themselves as powerful or strong. Bullies might enjoy the feeling of control or the feeling of satisfaction from inflicting pain on their victim³. Similarly, bullies experience little anxiety or insecurity and do not suffer from low self-esteem. Additionally, bullies may receive other benefits such as prestige, popularity, or tangible items of value (e.g. money) from coercing their victims⁴.

The Victim. Victims are the children who are the targets of bullying and suffer from negative psychological and social consequences of bullying.

Bully-Victims. Bully-victims are a type of victim who also bully³. In one study, almost a third of the adolescents who reported being bullies or victims were identified as bully victims; thus, it is likely that a considerable amount of victims also bully.

Bystanders. Bullying is a social process that involves more than the bully and victim. *Bystanders* are peers that witness the bullying episodes and are present in many school bullying incidents⁴. Bystanders may or may not take sides, and they consequently have an impact on the outcome of the bullying episodes. The four types of bystanders are assistants, reinforcers, outsiders, and defenders⁵.

- *Assistants* are students that join in the aggression with the bully.
- *Reinforcers* are students who provide an audience for and take sides with the bully. Reinforcers might incite or encourage the bully by cheering or laughing.
- *Defenders* are students who take sides with the victim. Defenders may comfort the victim or attempt to stop the bullying.
- *Outsiders* are students who are apathetic. They do not side with either the bully or the victim and try to stay away from the bullying episodes.

What are the consequences?

The Bully. Children who bully have been found to be unhappy and more depressed than typical children⁴, and these effects persist into adulthood. Furthermore, children who are bullies are at a higher risk of growing up into anti-social adults. For example, early experience as a bully is a predictor of criminality in adulthood⁶. Furthermore, as parents, they are more likely to be violent toward their own children, have poor interpersonal relationships, and are more likely to get into trouble with the law⁷.

The Victim. Children who are victims of bullying suffer educational, bodily, and psychological consequences. First, many studies have documented that children who are bullied fear going to school⁸. Second, students who report being bullied more often report not sleeping well, feeling sad, experiencing headaches,

and stomach aches versus students who do not report being bullied⁹. Finally, there are long lasting effects as well; children who were victims are likely to have low self-esteem and have depressive symptoms into their 20s even when they are no longer bullied¹⁰. Furthermore, victims, when they grow up and have children of their own, tend to have children who are also victims⁸.

Bully-Victims. Bully-victims tend to suffer the consequences of both being a bully and a victim. Specifically, bully-victims are also at a high risk for developing other anti-social behaviors as well as developing depressive and anxious symptoms. Research suggests that bully-victims tend to be boys, and bully-victims may be more prevalent in lower grades; however, the research around bully-victim is still developing¹¹.

What causes bullying?

Many theories about what causes bullying exist. One theory suggests that students who bully are socially skilled but knowingly select aggression as a strategy to maintain power in social situations¹⁴. Under this theory, it might be possible that bullies feel more confident about utilizing violent strategies as opposed to nonviolent strategies to get what they want. Another theory proposes that bullies have trouble processing social information accurately. In other words, bullies may have a difficult time reading others' thoughts and feelings and how they are perceived. In contrast, other theories view bullies as socially intelligent and that they utilize their social intelligence to hurt people. In summary, as there is no consensus on a definition, there is no consensus on the cause of bullying. Indeed, because of the different views on the causes of bullying, there are many different types of interventions to address school bullying.

What can schools do?

Generally, there are two types of prevention programs: targeted and universal¹⁵. Targeted programs focus on students who are at a high risk for bullying and seek to reduce the risk factors that promote the occurrence of violence. In contrast, universal programs focus on training students and school staff and modifying the school environment in an effort to prevent violence. Only a few targeted programs have been scientifically evaluated, and generally, they only show a modest reduction in aggression¹¹. In contrast, promising findings have been found for universal programs, and universal programs have been shown to enhance many other factors such as self-esteem and reducing participation by students in bullying^{13, 14, 15}. In either case, bullying is a social process that involves many students as

well as teachers and families. Therefore it is likely that effective interventions make changes in the social environment of schools (e.g. school wide and classroom levels) as well as individual levels.

What can parents do?

First, it is important that parents encourage their child to communicate with them. Parents may need to realize that the child may be embarrassed or ashamed; thus, parents need to react in a way that is sympathetic and understanding. Second, parents can talk about strategies to deal with bullies. Parents can role play scenarios with their child to build their confidence. Specifically, it is important to teach their child to respond to bullies assertively rather than be aggressive or passive. Finally, it is important that parents collaborate with schools to address the bullying problem. Parents should know the school policy on bullying and whether or not the school is adequately addressing the problem. If the problem escalates, professional help (attorneys, law enforcement, and mental health professionals) may be sought; however, working with school officials should be parents' first strategy¹⁶.

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