

# FACTS ABOUT BULLYING

This research-based section provides a broad, general overview of what bullying is, who it affects, and why it is important for adults—including you—to get involved in prevention and intervention. Use it as a resource and inspiration as you work with your students to create a bully free classroom.

## WHAT IS BULLYING?

Bullying is a form of aggressive behavior that is intentional, hurtful, and repeated. The person who bullies has more power than the person who is targeted.

Important in this definition are the following criteria that will help you determine if a student is being bullied:

- The mistreatment is *intentional*.
- The mistreatment is *hurtful* (physically or psychologically).
- The mistreatment *occurs more than once*. (Some disagree and say one very hurtful event can be labeled bullying.)
- There is an *imbalance of power* (physical, intellectual, or social). The target has difficulty defending himself or herself.

Within this broad definition are many different types of bullying. **Physical bullying** can mean hitting, slapping, elbowing, shoving, kicking, pinching, or restraining. It can mean flushing someone's head in the toilet, cramming someone into a locker, or attacking someone with spitwads or food. Physical bullying also includes taking, stealing, damaging, or defacing a person's belongings or property.

**Verbal bullying** includes name-calling; making insulting, racist, or rude remarks; repeated

teasing; harassment, threats, and intimidation; and whispering behind someone's back.

**Relational (or social) bullying** is subtler than other types of bullying. It involves destroying or manipulating relationships (such as turning someone's best friend against him or her). It can mean destroying a person's status within a peer group, destroying others' reputations, humiliating and embarrassing someone, gossiping or spreading malicious rumors or lies, creating hurtful graffiti, excluding someone (social rejection or isolation), and stealing a boyfriend or girlfriend to hurt someone. Displaying negative body language (glaring, casting dirty looks, turning your back to someone), threatening gestures, passing mean notes, and circulating hate petitions (promising to hate someone) are also acts of relational bullying.

**Cyberbullying** is increasingly prevalent and is addressed in this book in specially focused sections on pages 16–19 and 143–144. It can include spreading gossip, rumors, and lies electronically; sending or posting defamatory or embarrassing photographs and video recordings; sending insulting or threatening email; sending malicious code; sending pornography and other junk email and instant messages (IMs); impersonating someone online to make them look bad; sending or posting cruel jokes electronically; sending or posting malicious gossip electronically; and creating a website designed to humiliate and embarrass someone.

All the different forms of bullying can and often do occur together. All of these behaviors can be interrelated.

## HOW BIG A PROBLEM IS BULLYING?

The short answer to this question is “very big.” Bullying leads to loneliness, low self-esteem, depression and anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress, eating disorders, and other long-lasting harmful emotional effects in the adult years. According to one study, being bullied during middle childhood doubled a person’s risk of experiencing psychotic symptoms in early adolescence, and experiencing *chronic* bullying increased the risk of having psychotic symptoms by 252 percent (Schreier, et al., 2009).

Bullying creates a stressful and fearful school climate. In 2007, approximately 5 percent of students ages 12–18 reported that they were afraid of attack or harm at school. Seven percent reported that they had avoided a school activity or one or more places in school in the previous six months because of fear of attack or harm (Robers, 2010).

Here are some other facts about the effects of bullying:

- People who bully others or witness bullying have a higher risk of abusing alcohol and other drugs as adolescents and as adults.
- Bullying contributes to poor school attendance. According to the National Association of School Psychologists, 160,000 students per day stay home from school because of bullying (Fried & Fried, 2003).
- Bullying encourages dropping out of school.
- It leads to decreased academic performance.
- It is a root cause of discipline problems for students who bully and students who are bullied.
- Bullying causes some students to engage in self-harm, such as cutting.
- It is often a motivation in school shootings, as students retaliate for bullying.
- Hostile children are more likely to develop diabetes and develop cardiac problems as they age (Elias, 2002).

- Some targets of bullying join a gang, cult, drug group, or hate group to find acceptance and a sense of belonging.
- Students identified as bullies by age eight are six times more likely to be convicted of a crime by age 24 and five times more likely than students who don’t bully to end up with serious criminal records by age 30 (Maine Project Against Bullying, 2000). Those who regularly bully in youth often bully in their adult years, too, which hinders their ability to develop and maintain positive relationships. They may grow up to abuse their spouse, children, and coworkers (Beane, 2008).

How often does bullying occur? Estimates vary according to different studies:

- Researchers at Penn State surveyed nearly 12,000 students in grades 5–12, with 22 percent reporting that they were targeted (called names, hit, threatened, or socially excluded) by peers at least twice a month (Davis and Nixon, 2010).
- In the same survey, 48 percent of students reported being regularly (at least twice a month) exposed to relational aggression: rumor-spreading, exclusion, or students working together to be mean to someone. Fifty-four percent of students reported being regularly exposed to verbal abuse: name-calling or threatening comments (Davis and Nixon, 2010).
- In a 2010 survey of more than 2,000 students by Naomi Drew, M.A., 73 percent of students in grades 3–6 in the United States and Canada said that kids are somewhat to very mean to each other; 44 percent said bullying happens often, every day, or all the time; and over 40 percent said they see conflicts happening often or every day (Drew, 2010).
- In a survey of K–12 public school principals, 49 percent said that bullying, name-calling, or harassment of students was a serious problem at their school (GLSEN and Harris Interactive, 2008).

- According to the American Medical Association, 3.7 million kids bully, and more than 3.2 million are targets of “moderate” or “serious” bullying each year (Cohn & Canter, 2003).

While these statistics paint a troubling picture, the problem of bullying is not insurmountable. Research suggests that if teachers, administrators, parents, and students are involved in stopping and preventing bullying, schools can create an atmosphere where making healthy choices is encouraged. An important step is understanding the problem. Read on for more information to help you identify bullying and recognize risk factors.

## WHEN AND WHERE DOES BULLYING USUALLY OCCUR?

Bullying occurs in all grades, beginning as early as three to four years of age. It generally peaks in junior high or middle school: three-fourths of junior high and middle school principals say that bullying or harassment is a serious problem at their school, compared to 43 percent of elementary school principals and 45 percent of senior high school principals (GLSEN and Harris Interactive, 2008).

It occurs virtually everywhere: in homes, childcare settings, preschools, elementary schools, middle schools, high schools, neighborhoods, places of worship, city parks, on the trip to and from school, and on the streets.

- It occurs two to three times more often *at* school than on the trip to and from school (Olweus, 2007).
- It is most likely to occur where there is no adult supervision, inadequate adult supervision, poor supervision, a lack of structure, and few or no anti-bullying rules.
- It is more likely to occur where teachers and students accept bullying or are indifferent to it.
- It occurs in large cities and small towns, large schools and small schools—and even one-room schools in other countries (Olweus, 2007).

## HOW ARE BOYS AND GIRLS DIFFERENT IN THEIR BULLYING?

Both boys and girls engage in all kinds of bullying. Nevertheless, there are some differences.

- In 2007, 33 percent of female students reported being bullied at school compared to 30 percent of male students (Truman, 2007).
- Boys bully both boys and girls. Girls are more likely to bully other girls, but sometimes they bully boys.
- Boys tend to use more direct behaviors (physical and verbal bullying) than girls do.
- Girls are aggressive, but may use more indirect behaviors to damage relationships.
- More than boys do, girls seek to inflict psychological pain on their targets.
- Boys are just as likely as girls to use social and emotional taunting.
- Girls bully in groups more than boys do.
- Girls often attack targets within a tight networks of friends, which intensifies the hurt.
- Girls are generally better than boys at disguising bullying by behaving well around adults.

See pages 91–93 for guidelines to help you identify students who may potentially bully or be bullied. As you will see, bullying is not often reported to adults, so it is incumbent upon us to be on the lookout for warning signs.

## HOW OFTEN DO CHILDREN REPORT BULLYING?

Adults are often unaware of bullying problems, in part because bullied students and bystanders keep it a secret from them. The reasons children keep it secret are varied. They are taught not to “tattle” and think telling someone is wrong. They may have told adults about bullying before, or heard someone else tell adults before, and nothing was done about it, so they see reporting as unhelpful. Many targeted students worry that adults will make the situation worse. Many are embarrassed or feel shame because they feel no one likes them; they feel defective. They may feel shame because they cannot stand up for themselves as they have been taught. Finally, many targeted students do not want to worry their family. They love their family and want to protect them from worry and anxiety.

What else does the research say about the perception of adults in regard to bullying?

- Among students who were bullied regularly, 42 percent told an adult at school. Among those students, only 34 percent reported that the bullying got better after telling; 37 percent reported no change; and 29 percent reported that it got worse (Davis and Nixon, 2010).
- In a survey of students in 14 Massachusetts schools, over 30 percent believed that adults did little or nothing to help with bullying (Mullin-Rindler, 2002).
- Bullied students often feel that adult intervention is infrequent and unhelpful, and fear that telling adults will only bring more harassment from the people who bully them (Cohn & Canter, 2003).
- Almost 25 percent of girls surveyed felt that they did not know three adults they could go to for support if they were bullied (Girl Scout Research Institute, 2003).
- Twenty-five percent of teachers see nothing wrong with bullying or put-downs and consequently intervene in only 4 percent of bullying incidents (Cohn & Canter, 2003).

An anti-bullying program that includes discussions and activities about bullying can help increase the likelihood that children—both targets and witnesses of bullying—will report it.

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