



## What We Know About Bullying

### What is bullying?

Bullying is aggressive behavior that is intentional and that involves an imbalance of power or strength. Typically, it is repeated over time. A child who is being bullied has a hard time defending himself or herself.

Bullying can take many forms, such as hitting or punching (physical bullying); teasing or name-calling (verbal bullying); intimidation using gestures or social exclusion (nonverbal bullying or emotional bullying); and sending insulting messages by e-mail (cyberbullying).

### Prevalence of bullying:

- Studies show that between 15–25 percent of U.S. students are bullied with some frequency (“sometimes or more often”) while 15–20 percent report that they bully others with some frequency (Melton et al., 1998; Nansel et al., 2001).
- Recent statistics show that although school violence has declined 4 percent during the past several years, the incidence of behaviors such as bullying has increased by 5 percent between 1999 and 2001 (U.S. Dept. of Ed., 2002).
- Bullying has been identified as a major concern by schools across the U.S. (NEA<sup>3</sup>, 2003).
- In surveys of third through eighth graders in 14 Massachusetts schools, nearly half who had been frequently bullied reported that the bullying had lasted six months or longer (Mullin-Rindler, 2003).
- Research indicates that children with disabilities or special needs may be at a higher risk of being bullied than other children (see Rigby, 2002, for review).

### Bullying and gender:

- By self-report, boys are more likely than girls to bully others (Nansel et al., 2001; Banks 1997).
- Girls frequently report being bullied by both boys and girls, but boys report that they are most often bullied only by other boys (Melton et al., 1998; Olweus, 1993).
- Verbal bullying is the most frequent form of bullying experienced by both boys and girls. Boys are more likely to be physically bullied by their peers (Olweus, 1993; Nansel et al., 2001); girls are more likely to report being targets of rumor-spreading and sexual comments (Nansel et al., 2001). Girls are more more likely to bully each other using social exclusion (Olweus, 2002).
- Use of derogatory speculation about sexual orientation is so common that many parents do not think of telling their children that it could be hurtful (NEA<sup>3</sup>, 2003).

### Consequences of bullying:

- Stresses of being bullied can interfere with student’s engagement and learning in school (NEA Today, 1999).
- Children and youth who are bullied are more likely than other children to be depressed, lonely, anxious, have low self-esteem, feel unwell, and think about suicide (Limber, 2002; Olweus, 1993).
- Students who are bullied may fear going to school, using the bathroom, and riding on the school bus (NEA<sup>3</sup>, 2003).

- In a survey of third through eighth graders in 14 Massachusetts schools, more than 14 percent reported that they were often afraid of being bullied (Mullin-Rindler, 2003).
- Research shows that bullying can be a sign of other serious antisocial or violent behavior. Children and youth who frequently bully their peers are more likely than others to get into frequent fights, be injured in a fight, vandalize or steal property, drink alcohol, smoke, be truant from school, drop out of school, and carry a weapon (Nansel et al., 2003; Olweus, 1993).
- Bullying also has an impact on other students at school who are bystanders to bullying (Banks, 1997). Bullying creates a climate of fear and disrespect in schools and has a negative impact on student learning (NEA<sup>1</sup>, 2003).

### Adult response to bullying

- Adults are often unaware of bullying problems (Limber, 2002). In one study, 70 percent of teachers believed that teachers intervene “almost always” in bullying situations; only 25 percent of students agreed with this assessment (Charach et al., 1995).
- 25 percent of teachers see nothing wrong with bullying or putdowns and consequently intervene in only 4 percent of bullying incidents (Cohn & Canter, 2002).
- Students often feel that adult intervention is infrequent and unhelpful and they often fear that telling adults will only bring more harassment from bullies (Banks, 1997).
- In a survey of students in 14 elementary and middle schools in Massachusetts, more than 30 percent believed that adults did little or nothing to help in bullying incidents (Mullin-Rindler, 2003).

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## Myths About Bullying

### 1. Bullying is the same thing as conflict.

Wrong. **Bullying** is aggressive behavior that involves an imbalance of power or strength. Often, bullying is repeated over time.

**Conflict** involves antagonism among two or more people. Whereas any *two people* can have a conflict (or a disagreement or a fight), bullying only occurs where there is a power imbalance—where one child has a hard time defending himself or herself. Why is the difference between bullying and conflict important? Conflict resolution or mediation strategies are sometimes misused to solve bullying problems. These strategies can send the message that both children are “partly right and partly wrong,” or that, “We need to work out the conflict between you.” These messages are not appropriate messages in cases of bullying (or in any situation where someone is being victimized). The appropriate message to the child who is bullied should be, “Bullying is wrong and no one deserves to be bullied. We are going to do everything we can to stop it.”

For more information, see the tip sheet entitled, [“Misdirections in Bullying Prevention and Intervention.”](#)

What does work? Research suggests that the best way to deal with bullying is through comprehensive programs that focus on changing the climate of a school and the social norms of the group. For more information, see the tip sheet entitled, [“Best Practices in Bullying Prevention and Intervention.”](#)

### 2. Most bullying is physical (involves hitting, shoving, kicking).

Physical bullying may be what first comes to mind when adults think about bullying. However, the most common form of bullying—both for boys and girls—is verbal bullying (e.g., name-calling, rumor-spreading). It is also common for youth to bully each other through social isolation (e.g., shunning or leaving a child out on purpose).

### 3. Bullying isn't serious. It's just a matter of “kids being kids.”

Bullying can be extremely serious. Bullying can affect the mental well being, academic work, and physical health of children who are targeted. Children who are bullied are more likely than other children to have lower self-esteem; and higher rates of depression, loneliness, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts. They also are more likely to want to avoid attending school and have higher school absenteeism rates. Recent research on the health-related effects of bullying indicates that victims of frequent bullying are more likely to experience headaches, sleeping problems, and stomach ailments. Some emotional scars can be long-lasting. Research suggests that adults who were bullied as children are more likely than their non-bullied peers to be depressed and have low self-esteem as adults.

Children who bully are more likely than other children to be engaged in other antisocial, violent, or troubling behaviors. Bullying can negatively affect children who observe bullying going on around them—even if they aren't targeted themselves. For more information, visit [“Why Should Adults Care About Bullying?”](#)

#### **4. Bullying doesn't happen at my child's school.**

Bullying is more common at some schools than others, however it can happen *anywhere* children and youth gather. Studies show that between 15-25% of U.S. students are bullied with some frequency ("sometimes or more often") while 15-20% admit that they bully others with some frequency within a school term. The best way to find out about bullying at your child's school is to ask children and youth, themselves. One good way to do this is by administering an anonymous survey about where bullying occurs, when it occurs, and how often it occurs.

#### **5. Bullying is mostly a problem in urban schools.**

Bullying occurs in rural, suburban, and urban communities, and among children of every income level, race, and geographic region.

#### **7. Bullying is more likely to happen on the bus than at school.**

Although bullying does happen on the bus, most surveys indicate that bullying is more likely to occur on school grounds. Common locations for bullying include playgrounds, the classroom, the cafeteria, bathrooms, and hallways. A student survey can help determine where the hotspots are in any particular school.

#### **6. Children and youth who are bullied will almost always tell an adult.**

Adults are often unaware of bullying—in part because many children and youth don't report it. Most studies find that only 25%-50% of bullied children talk to an adult about the bullying. Boys and older children are less likely than girls and younger children to tell adults about bullying. Why are children reluctant to report bullying? They may fear retaliation by children doing the bullying. They also may fear that adults won't take their concerns seriously or will deal inappropriately with the bullying situation.

#### **8. Children and youth who bully are mostly loners with few social skills.**

Children who bully usually do not lack friends. In fact, some research finds that they have larger friendship networks than other children. Importantly, they usually have at least a small group of friends who support and encourage their bullying behavior. Bullies also generally have more leadership skills than victims of bullying or children not involved in bullying.

#### **9. Bullied kids need to learn how to deal with bullying on their own.**

Some children have the confidence and skills to stop bullying when it happens, but many do not. Moreover, children shouldn't be expected to deal with bullying on their own. Bullying is a form of victimization or peer abuse. Just as society does not expect victims of other types of abuse (e.g., child maltreatment or domestic abuse) to "deal with it on their own," we should not expect this from victims of bullying. Adults have critical roles to play in helping to stop bullying, as do other children who witness or observe bullying. To learn more about what you can do to help, visit

<http://www.stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov/adult/indexAdult.asp?Area=teacherscorner>

#### **10. Most children and youth who observe bullying don't want to get involved.**

The good news is that most children and youth think that bullying is "not cool" and feel that they should do something if they see it happen. In a recent study of tweens, (Brown, Birch, & Kancherla, 2005), 56% said that they usually either say or do something to try to stop bullying that they observe or tell someone who could help. These children and youth play a critical role in helping stop bullying in schools and communities.



## Children Who Bully

Bullying among children is aggressive behavior that is intentional and that involves an imbalance of power or strength. Typically, it is repeated over time. Bullying can take many forms such as hitting or punching (physical bullying); teasing or name-calling (verbal bullying); intimidation through gestures or social exclusion (nonverbal bullying or emotional bullying); and sending insulting messages by e-mail (cyberbullying).

There is no one single cause of bullying among children. Rather, individual, family, peer, school, and community factors can place a child or youth at risk for bullying his or her peers.

### Characteristics of children who bully

Children who bully their peers regularly (i.e., those who admit to bullying more than occasionally) tend to

- Be impulsive, hot-headed, dominant;
- Be easily frustrated;
- Lack empathy;
- Have difficulty following rules; and
- View violence in a positive way.

Boys who bully tend to be physically stronger than other children.

### Family risk factors for bullying

Children who bully are more likely than their nonbullying peers to live in homes where there is:

- A lack of warmth and involvement on the part of parents;
- Overly-permissive parenting (including a lack of limits for children's behavior);
- A lack of supervision by parents;
- Harsh, physical discipline; and
- A model for bullying behavior.

### Peer risk factors for bullying

Children and youth who bully are more likely to have friends who bully and who have positive attitudes toward violence.

### Common myths about children who bully

#### "Children who bully are loners."

- In fact, research indicates that children and youth who bully are not socially isolated.
- They report having an easier time making friends than children and youth who do not bully.
- Children and youth who bully usually have at least a small group of friends who support or encourage their bullying.

#### "Children who bully have low self-esteem."

- In fact, most research indicates that children and youth who bully have average or above-average self-esteem.
- Interventions that focus on building the self-esteem of children who bully probably will be ineffective in stopping bullying behavior.

### Bullying and other violent or antisocial behaviors

Research shows that bullying can be a sign of other serious antisocial or violent behavior. Children and youth who frequently bully their peers are more likely than others to

- Get into frequent fights,
- Be injured in a fight,
- Vandalize property,
- Steal property,
- Drink alcohol,
- Smoke,
- Be truant from school,
- Drop out of school, and
- Carry a weapon.

### Research also shows that

- Children who bully are more likely to report that they own guns for risky reasons, such as to gain respect or frighten others.
- Boys who were identified as bullies in middle school were four times as likely as their non bullying peers to have more than one criminal conviction by age 24.

### What do I do if my child is bullying others?

- Make it clear to your child that you take bullying seriously and that you will not tolerate this behavior.
- Develop clear and consistent rules within your family for your children's behavior. Praise and reinforce your children for following rules and use non-physical, non hostile consequences for rule violations.

- Spend more time with your child and carefully supervise and monitor his or her activities. Find out who your child's friends are and how and where they spend free time.
- Build on your child's talents by encouraging him or her to get involved in prosocial activities (such as clubs, music lessons, nonviolent sports).
- Share your concerns with your child's teacher, counselor, or principal. Work together to send clear messages to your child that his or her bullying must stop.
- If you or your child needs additional help, talk with a school counselor or mental health professional.

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# Understanding Bullying

## Fact Sheet

2011

Bullying is a form of youth violence. Although definitions of bullying vary, most agree that bullying includes: <sup>1</sup>

- Attack or intimidation with the intention to cause fear, distress, or harm that is either physical (hitting, punching), verbal (name calling, teasing), or psychological/relational (rumors, social exclusion);
- A real or perceived imbalance of power between the bully and the victim; and
- Repeated attacks or intimidation between the same children over time.

Bullying can occur in person or through technology (electronic aggression, or cyberbullying). Electronic aggression is bullying that occurs through e-mail, a chat room, instant messaging, a website, text messaging, or videos or pictures posted on websites or sent through cell phones.<sup>2</sup>

A young person can be a bully, a victim, or both (bully-victim).



### Why is bullying a public health problem?

Bullying is widespread in the United States.

- In a 2009 nationwide survey, about 20% of high school students reported being bullied on school property in the 12 months preceding the survey.<sup>3</sup>
- During the 2007-2008 school year, 25% of public schools reported that bullying occurred among students on a daily or weekly basis. A higher percentage of middle schools reported daily or weekly occurrences of bullying compared to primary and high schools.<sup>4</sup>
- In 2007, about 4% of 12- to 18-year-old students reported having been cyberbullied during the school year.<sup>4</sup>



### How does bullying affect health?

Bullying can result in physical injury, social and emotional distress, and even death. Victimized youth are at increased risk for mental health problems such as depression and anxiety, psychosomatic complaints such as headaches, and poor school adjustment. Youth who bully others are at increased risk for substance use, academic problems, and violence later in adolescence and adulthood. Compared to youth who only bully, or who are only victims, bully-victims suffer the most serious consequences and are at greater risk for both mental health and behavior problems.<sup>5</sup>



### Who is at risk for bullying?

A number of factors can increase the risk of a youth engaging in or experiencing bullying.<sup>5</sup> However, the presence of these factors does not always mean that a young person will become a bully or a victim.

Some of the factors associated with a higher likelihood of engaging in bullying behavior include:

- Impulsivity (poor self-control)
- Harsh parenting by caregivers
- Attitudes accepting of violence

Some of the factors associated with a higher likelihood of victimization include:

- Friendship difficulties
- Poor self-esteem
- Quiet, passive manner with lack of assertiveness

# Understanding Bullying



## How can we prevent bullying?

The ultimate goal is to stop bullying before it starts. Research on preventing and addressing bullying is still developing. School-based bullying prevention programs are widely implemented, but infrequently evaluated. Based on a review of the limited research on school-based bullying prevention, the following program elements are promising:<sup>1</sup>

- Improving supervision of students
- Using school rules and behavior management techniques in the classroom and throughout the school to detect and address bullying, providing consequences for bullying
- Having a whole school anti-bullying policy, and enforcing that policy consistently
- Promoting cooperation among different professionals and between school staff and parents



## How does CDC approach bullying prevention?

CDC uses a 4-step approach to address public health problems like bullying.

### Step 1: Define and monitor the problem

Before we can prevent bullying, we need to know how big the problem is, where it is, and whom it affects. CDC learns about a problem by gathering and studying data. These data are critical because they help decision makers send resources where they are needed most.

### Step 2: Identify risk and protective factors

It is not enough to know that bullying is affecting a certain group of people in a certain area. We also need to know why. CDC conducts and supports research to answer this question. We can then develop programs to reduce or eliminate risk factors.

### Step 3: Develop and test prevention strategies

Using information gathered in research, CDC develops and tests strategies to prevent bullying.

### Step 4: Assure widespread adoption

In this final step, CDC shares the best prevention strategies. CDC may also provide funding or technical help so communities can adopt these strategies.



## Where can I learn more?

**Centers for Disease Control and Prevention**  
[www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention](http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention)

**STRYVE**  
[www.safeyouth.gov](http://www.safeyouth.gov)

**Stop Bullying**  
[www.stopbullying.gov](http://www.stopbullying.gov)

**Surgeon General's Report on Youth Violence**  
[www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/youthviolence](http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/youthviolence)



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### Stop Bullying

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### Surgeon General's Report on Youth Violence

[www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/youthviolence](http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/youthviolence)



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