

A PRIMER ON BULLYING

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Bullying is recognized as one of the major problems facing United States' schools today. It occurs along a continuum, with students assuming roles including bully, victim, and bully/victim.¹ Current estimates suggest that nearly 30% of American students are involved in bullying in one of these capacities.² Specifically, findings derived from a nationally representative sample indicated that among 6th to 10th graders, 13% had bullied others, 11% had been bullied, and 6% had both bullied others and been bullied.

What is the definition of bullying? “A student is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more students”.³ The preceding definition highlights the aggressive component of bullying as well as the associated inherent power imbalance and repetitive nature. In recent years scholars have recognized the wide range of behaviors consistent with bullying. Many people think that bullying involves only physically aggressive, face-to-face acts. However, verbal bullying is the most frequent form of bullying for both girls and boys, and girls are at an increased risk for relational bullying (gossip and rumor-spreading). “Derogatory speculation” regarding sexual orientation is another form of bullying.⁴

Are some youth more likely to bully others or to be victimized? Individual, family, and school factors all influence students' risk for being bullied or bullying others.

For victims of bullying, some of these factors include:



- Boys experience more physical bullying victimization (e.g., being hit)
- Girls are more likely to be targets of indirect victimization (e.g., social exclusion)
- Obesity
- Enrollment in remedial education
- Having developmental disabilities
- Insecurity and anxiety

For bullies, some of these factors include:



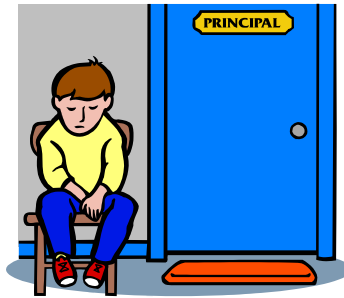
- Boys are more likely to bully their peers than girls
- Having behavioral, emotional, or learning problems
- Physical strength
- Authoritarian parents who condone “fighting back”
- Parents who use physical discipline
- Less social support from parents
- Have peers who also bully

This primer was made possible in part through a grant from the NH Charitable Foundation-Madison Fund

What are the effects of bullying? Victims, bullies, and bully/victims often report adverse psychological effects and poor school adjustment as a result of their involvement in bullying.⁵

Compared to their non-bullied peers, targets of bullying experience more:

- Loneliness
- Depression
- School avoidance
- Suicidal ideation



Bullies are more likely than non-bullies to experience:

- Externalizing behaviors (e.g., truancy, acting out)
- Conduct problems
- Delinquency



Students who bully peers and are also targets of bullying themselves (i.e., bully/victims) are considered to be a particularly at-risk group of youth. Bully/victims, as compared to their peers, are more likely to experience:

- Externalizing behaviors (e.g., truancy, acting out)
- Hyperactivity
- Psychiatric consultation referrals



Are there any long-term effects for victims or bullies? For some youth there are long-term effects from their involvement in bullying episodes either as victims or bullies. For instance, results from Olweus' (1995) longitudinal work indicated that at age 23, individuals who had been chronically victimized in their youth had lower self-esteem and were more depressed than non-victimized members of their cohort.⁶ Similarly, long-term outcomes for bullies also can be serious; compared to their peers, bullies are more likely to be convicted of crimes in adulthood.⁷ In addition, a study conducted in the United States revealed that youth identified as bullies in school had a 1 in 4 chance of having a criminal record by age 30.⁸

****WHAT CAN KIDS, PARENTS, AND TEACHERS DO?***

Bullying affects the entire school, and not just the students involved in the particular acts. Thus it is necessary that everyone (students, parents, teachers, etc) become knowledgeable about bullying and work to dispel the climate of fear and intimidation. Here are some practical suggestions.

What can kids do?

- Tell someone – school staff, parents, other trusted adults - if they are being bullied. Oftentimes, kids are afraid to talk to an adult because they fear retaliation or being viewed as a tattler.
- Take a friend, or group of friends, along with you when speaking to a trusted adult. This approach creates a community of support for you and provides a model for others of how issues like this might be addressed.
- If kids feel comfortable and safe enough to do so, speak up when a peer is being bullied.
- Treat their peers with respect.

What can parents do?

- Model respectful interactions.
- Talk with your child, and create a space in which they feel safe to discuss their fears. Knowing information about your child *before* problems occur is important because it establishes a baseline from which a change may signify that your child is being bullied or is bullying.
- Be aware of warning signs of bullying (e.g., child doesn't want to go to school) and talk to your child about what is going on.
- Know who your children's friends are. Subtle questions like, "Who do you hang out with?" and "Are there any kids at school you really don't like?"⁹ help familiarize you with your child without making your child wonder why you are asking.
- Take time to connect with your children; positive parental connections buffer long-term consequences of aggression and can reduce aggressive behaviors.
- If your child is being bullied, alert school officials and help your child get the assistance s/he needs. **NEVER** tell your child to ignore the bullying as this can increase the seriousness of the problem.¹⁰
- Expect the bullying to stop. By setting a high standard, you are demanding that change and consequences occur. You are also empowering your child to take action and shed the victim role.

What can teachers and other school staff do?

- Create a school climate that does not tolerate bullying; do not tolerate, ignore, or dismiss bullying behaviors.
- Oftentimes instances of bullying include a large audience of students and teachers. Include bystanders in discussions about bullying and how to better intervene the next time.¹¹
- Because those who bully often have peers that support and encourage the bullying behaviors, target interventions on peer groups.
- Respond quickly to bullying episodes. Most importantly, let students involved in the bullying episode and bystanders know that you do not condone this type of behavior. Then follow your school's policies regarding additional interventions for the bully and victim.
- Develop classroom activities that include all students.
- Increase adult supervision at times that bullying occurs most frequently, such as at recess and during lunch.
- Obtain training in how to recognize and respond to bullying.
- Integrate materials into the curriculum that address bullying. For instance, when selecting novels for English classes, pick a book that has a character that can be considered a bully, and engage class in discussion about bullying as it relates to this character.
- Model respectful interactions.
- Administer survey to students to determine the types and extent of bullying within your school. Then use findings to inform bullying prevention and intervention programs.
- Engage bullied students in designing policies to address bullying. This helps empower the students to speak out about bullying and mobilize their own resources.



What do I do if my child bullies others? Parents of bullies can play an important role in stopping the bullying by making it clear that they do not support these behaviors.¹² Contact the school if you suspect your child is bullying others. This demonstrates intolerance for the bullying and signals to the school your willingness to work together to resolve the issue. Establish and consistently enforce rules for behavior. Also help your child become involved with pro-social activities.

Bullies need your help and support too. Because family dynamics are among the risk factors for bullies, it is important to recognize that bullying behaviors may be a sign that there are problems at home. Help the bullying child build supportive relationships with adults and develop healthy peer relations.

Every child has unique strengths and qualities. Although it's easy to see the bully as "all bad", bullies too have contributions to make. Helping a bully recognize their potential for positive contributions and learning how to use their power in healthy and meaningful ways, such as focusing energy on hobbies or causes, will alleviate bullying problems and the long-term consequences associated with bullying.

For further information about bullying or a bibliography, please feel free to contact Dr. Melissa Holt at (603) 862-2532 or melissa.holt@unh.edu.

¹ Espelage, D. L., Bosworth, K., & Simon, T. R. (2000). Examining the social context of bullying behaviors in early adolescence. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 78*(3), 326-333.

² Nansel, T. R., Overpeck, M., Pilla, R. S., Ruan, W. J., Simons-Morton, B. G., & Scheidt, P. (2001). Bullying behaviors among US youth: Prevalence and association with psychosocial adjustment. *Journal of the American Medical Association, 285*, 2094-2100.

³ Olweus, D. (2001). Peer harassment: A critical analysis and some important issues. In J. Juvonen & S. Graham (Eds.), *Peer harassment in schools: The plight of the vulnerable and the victimized*. New York: The Guilford Press

⁴ HRSA Fact Sheet, *What We Know About Bullying*, accessed 9/22/04 at <http://stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov/indexAdult.asp?Area=resourcekit>

⁵ Juvonen, J., Nishina, A., & Graham, S. (2000). Self-views versus peer perceptions of victim status among early adolescents. In J. Juvonen & S. Graham (Eds.), *Peer harassment in schools: The plight of the vulnerable and victimized* (pp. 105-124). New York: The Guilford Press.

Nansel, T. R., Haynie, D. L., & Simons-Morton, B. G. (2003). The association of bullying and victimization with middle school adjustment. *Journal of Applied School Psychology, 19*(45-61)

⁶ Olweus, D. (1995). Bullying or peer abuse at school: Facts and interventions. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 4*(6), pg. 196-200.

⁷ Olweus, D. (1993). Bully/victim problems among schoolchildren: Long-term consequences and an effective intervention program. In S. Hodgins (Ed.), *Mental disorder and crime* (pp. 317-349). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

⁸ Eron, Huesmann, Dubow, Romanoff, & Yarnel, (1987). Aggression and its correlates over 22 years. In D. H. Crowell & I. M. Evans (Eds.), *Childhood aggression and violence: Sources of influence, prevention, and control* (pp. 249-262). New York: Plenum Press.

⁹ HRSA fact sheet *Warning Signs that a Child is Being Bullied* accessed 9/22/04 at <http://stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov/indexAdult.asp?Area=resourcekit>

¹⁰ HRSA Fact Sheet, *What to do if your child is being bullied*. Accessed 9/22/04 at <http://stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov/indexAdult.asp?Area=resourcekit>

¹¹ HRSA Fact Sheet *How to intervene to stop bullying: Tips for on-the-spot intervention at school*. Accessed 9/22/04 at <http://stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov/indexAdult.asp?Area=resourcekit>

¹² HRSA Fact Sheet *Children who bully*. Accessed 9/22/04 at <http://stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov/indexAdult.asp?Area=resourcekit>