

STUDENTS EXPERIENCING BULLYING

*This information is designed to help teachers respond to students who may need support. It is **not** intended to be used as a diagnostic tool or to replace the use of formal assessments employed by mental health professionals. Additionally, it is important to consider individual differences, the context of the situation, and cultural and linguistic factors.*

Teachers are an important part of establishing and maintaining healthy environments for children to learn and grow. Teachers are critical contributors to promoting safe school interactions and facilitating positive relationships.

WHAT IS BULLYING?

- Bullying, including cyberbullying, involves repeated actions intended to cause harm in relationships where there is a real or perceived power imbalance.
- Bullying can be verbal (e.g., purposeful humiliation, teasing, threatening), physical (e.g., hitting, kicking, shoving), or relational (e.g., social exclusion, spreading hurtful rumors).
- Bullying can occur in many contexts on school campus or off campus (e.g., in the virtual learning environment [VLE] or cyberbullying). Cyberbullying, for example, is not limited to either physical academic spaces or even the hours spent in them, but in fact, often occurs outside of both.
- Bullying and cyberbullying includes the interactions among students who bully, targets of bullying, and, at times, bystanders. Students may fall into one or more of these groups, depending on the social situation.
- Bias-based bullying is bullying that specifically targets a person because of characteristics of their identity (e.g., race, language, sexual orientation, ability, body size, gender identity, religion and/or practices).
- Cyberbullying is distinct from in-person bullying. It is willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices.
- Cyberbullying content can be very public and pervasive, and can exist permanently in a digital archive, such as via social media. It can also be targeted directly to a single student, such as via text or direct messaging.

HOW DOES BULLYING AFFECT STUDENTS?

There is the potential for long-term negative mental health outcomes (e.g., anxiety, low self-esteem, and depression) for youth who are the targets of bullying as well as those who bully.

Schools with healthy climates that discourage bullying have better academic outcomes.

The Students Who Bully Others

- Bullying may serve a function for students who instigate it (e.g., help them to achieve popularity, attention). Understanding the function that bullying serves can help teachers and professionals at school to identify other, more positive ways for students to succeed.
- Students who initiate bullying may have been in a situation where they themselves were bullied.
- Students who bully others are at a high risk for conduct problems (e.g., domestic violence, substance abuse).
- Students who bully others need support from teachers and professionals in the school.
- Students who engage in cyberbullying may feel more emboldened about doing so online than they would in person because of the actual physical separation, lack of school staff oversight, and/or anonymity offered by online communication.

Students Who Are Bullied

- Students who are targeted for bullying are often members of historically marginalized groups, such as racial and ethnic minorities, the LGBTQ community, and children with different abilities.
- Students who are bullied can disengage from school, which can, in turn, negatively impact their relationships and academic achievement. They may even engage in self-harm.
- Students who are bullied may seek self-protection behaviors such as avoiding recess, defending themselves, or, in cases of cyberbullying, attempting to retaliate in kind.
- Via device delivery, cyberbullying threatens the student with notifications, which can make them feel like the instigator is always near.
- Students who are bullied need support from teachers and professionals in the school.
- Students who are bullied should be encouraged to report bullying to trusted adults: a neighbor, mentor, parent, friend's parent, teacher, or coach.

The Bystander

- Bystanders are students who observe bullying but are not directly involved in bullying. These witnesses often fear being victimized themselves.
- Even if a child is not actively bullying, they may be contributing to the behavior. Witnessing bullying can also affect the bystander, so it is important for them to learn what to do when they see bullying happen.
- Bystanders can play four roles when they witness bullying:
 - » **Assistant:** these children may not lead in the bullying behavior, but serve as an "assistant" to the children who are bullying by encouraging the behavior or occasionally joining in.
 - » **Reinforcer:** these children are not directly involved in bullying, but they provide an audience. They will often laugh or provide other support for the children who are engaged in bullying, which may encourage the bullying to continue.
 - » **Outsider:** these children remain separate from the bullying situation—they do not reinforce the bullying behavior, but neither do they defend the child being bullied. They may not show that they are on anyone's side. However, just providing an audience can encourage bullying behavior.
 - » **Defenders:** these children may intervene when bullying occurs, actively coming to the defense of or comforting the child being bullied.
- Bystanders can play an important part in calling out and reporting bullying, and stopping it from occurring.
- When bullying is ignored, bystanders may conclude these actions are condoned by adults.
- Student witnesses who fail to intervene can experience guilt that they did not stop the incident.

IN-PERSON BULLYING ON SCHOOL GROUNDS	CYBERBULLYING VIA CLASSROOM CHAT, SOCIAL MEDIA, OR GAMING PLATFORMS
Name calling, fighting, humiliation, and public shaming in class or at school	Name calling, fighting, humiliation, and public shaming online
Excluding someone from a group or event, such as from the lunch table	Excluding someone from a chat or other online event
Gossiping or spreading rumors	Gossiping or spreading rumors, sometimes through a false impersonation/avatar/online personality
Physical acts such as shoving, pushing, punching, stealing, or even attempting to intimidate a peer to help them cheat in class or on homework..	Sharing incriminating or embarrassing pictures or texts
Stalking and following	Cyberstalking, inauthentically responding to a post or message, trolling, and “catfishing” or false on line personality

WHAT CAN TEACHERS DO?

DO	DON'T
Address the inappropriate behavior early and often.	Ignore problematic behavior. Inconsistent responses increase the likelihood of the behavior recurring.
Separately engage students who bully, targets of bullying, and bystanders in resolving the incident.	Focus only on a single individual in the situation or meet with all parties at the same time.
Ensure the target of bullying has a safe space to talk about their experiences and check in with them frequently.	Assume that the target of bullying is fine based solely on outward behaviors or appearances, or after just a single check-in.
Use consequences that repair the harm and help the student who bullies understand the impact of their actions. Express belief in the bullying student’s ability to engage in positive behaviors and offer praise for doing so.	Address the instigator with punitive, humiliating, and exclusionary disciplinary practices (e.g., suspension, public admission of guilt, zero tolerance policies).
Empower bystanders to intervene and report incidents of bullying, and affirm their integrity and courage.	Assume that witnesses are uninvolved, even in the VLE.
Be consistent: set expectations for student behavior and remind students of the expectations frequently. Specific expectations will likely differ between in-person classes and the VLE. Take the time to address microaggressions at the time of the incident.	Wait for a major event or a designated initiative (e.g., Antibullying Week) to address behaviors.
Accurately label the inappropriate behavior as bullying.	Minimize or downplay an incident based on assumptions about student characteristics or relationships.

RECOMMENDED PRACTICES

- Schools with safe and positive school climates often use an explicit social and emotional learning curriculum. Seek training on adopting a comprehensive social emotional learning curriculum to promote safe, positive school environments. Select a social emotional learning curriculum that specifically addresses bullying, cyberbullying, and bias-based bullying (bullying based on identity characteristics, such as race, language, gender).
- Consider the comfort of each student when planning meetings. Having the target of bullying and the student who bullies in the same room can be intimidating and embarrassing. Bystanders often wish to remain anonymous.
- With your students, develop a class contract that specifies mutual respect, inclusion, and antibullying. Refer to the contract throughout the year.
- Conduct classroom activities around bullying: Discuss its short-term and long-term impacts on health and personality. Have discussions to promote better peer relations.
- Discuss bullying in the context of students' sociopolitical contexts, including the possibility of bullying students because of their identity, and the importance of addressing bias-based bullying and hate speech.
- Be the adult your students need. Treat students with warmth and respect: Let students know that you are available to listen and help them.

REFER STUDENTS TO FURTHER HELP IF NEEDED.

- Be familiar with your state's antibullying legislation and your school's and district's policies regarding bullying.
- Encourage parents to report bullying to school staff, rather than attempting to resolve bullying incidents among themselves.
- Review your school policy for seeking student supports.
- Contact school counselors, psychologists, social workers, and other personnel.

LINKS TO RESOURCES

- APA Topics ([apa.org/topics](https://www.apa.org/topics))
- Stop Bullying (www.stopbullying.gov)
- Bullybusters Help and Advice (bit.ly/3oi9Aha)
- Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence (bit.ly/3lwysQw)
- APA Bullying Resource (on.apa.org/bullying)
- Cyberbullying resources:
 - » www.cyberbullying.org
 - » www.commonsense.org
 - » www.kidshealth.org
 - » www.childmind.org
 - » www.Cyberbully411.com
- Institute of Education Sciences Research-Based Strategies for Effective Remote Learning (bit.ly/3fILVUo)

Related Mental Health Primers

Anxiety, Trauma Exposure, Depression, Stress, Low Self-Compassion or Low Perceptions of Competence

LOCAL RESOURCES:
