

Bullying Frequently Asked Questions

WHAT IS BULLYING?

In order to address the issue of bullying, it is important to clearly understand how bullying is defined. A commonly used definition is:

A person is bullied when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other persons, and he or she has difficulty defending himself or herself.¹

Expressed in more everyday language one might say: Bullying is when someone repeatedly and on purpose says or does mean or hurtful things to another person who has a hard time defending himself or herself.

The definition of bullying has three major components. First, it is aggressive behavior that involves unwanted, negative actions. Second, bullying typically involves a pattern of behavior repeated over time. Finally, it involves an imbalance of power or strength.

WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENT FORMS OR KINDS OF BULLYING?

There are several different forms of bullying. In the Olweus Bullying Questionnaire that is administered to your students as part of the *Olweus Bullying Prevention Program*, there are two general or global questions about being bullied and bullying others and questions about the following nine specific forms of bullying:

- being verbally bullied
- being socially excluded or isolated
- being physically bullied
- being bullied through lies and false rumors
- having money or other things taken or damaged
- being threatened or forced to do things
- racial bullying
- sexual bullying
- cyber-bullying (via cell phone or the Internet)

The Olweus Bullying Questionnaire asks students whether they have bullied others in these nine ways and whether they have been bullied in these ways. It is possible to divide the different types of bullying into direct and indirect forms. In direct forms, bullying involves relatively open attacks, usually in a face-to-face confrontation.

Typical examples of direct bullying include verbal bullying with derogatory comments and nasty names, and physical bullying with hitting, kicking, shoving, and spitting.

In indirect bullying, the aggressive acts are more concealed and subtle, and it may be more difficult for the bullied student to know who is responsible for the bullying. Typical examples include social isolation—that is, intentionally excluding someone from a group or activity—and spreading lies and nasty rumors.

Several forms of cyber-bullying may also be considered indirect in the sense that nasty messages are delivered from a distance and not in a face-to-face way. And in some cases, it may be difficult or almost impossible to find out who originally sent the message.

HOW DOES BULLYING DIFFER FROM OTHER TYPES OF AGGRESSION BETWEEN STUDENTS?

Bullying can be distinguished from other kinds of aggression between students in a number of ways, but most obviously by the following:

- the negative behaviors are intentionally targeted at a specific individual (it isn't an accident that this incident happened)
- the repetitive nature of bullying (it isn't usually a one-time event)
- the power imbalance between the students

WHY SHOULDN'T WE USE A CONFLICT RESOLUTION OR PEER MEDIATION PROGRAM TO ADDRESS BULLYING ISSUES?

Because one of the main characteristics of bullying is an imbalance of power, it cannot be considered “normal” relational conflict between two students. Bullying is a form of peer abuse, and the student who is being bullied needs to be protected from such victimization.

Because of the difference in power between the student or students who bully and the student who is being bullied, conflict resolution or peer mediation strategies should not be used to address bullying problems. Here are some more reasons why:

- Peer mediation/conflict resolution programs assume there is a bit of both right and wrong on both sides. Such programs may place some blame on the student who is being bullied and free the student or students who are bullying from some responsibility. These programs work toward a compromise that, in the case of bullying, could mean further victimization of the student who has been bullied.
- Another common assumption in such programs is that both parties have about the same negotiating power. This is usually not the case in bullying situations where there is an imbalance in power in favor of the student or students who bully. Chances are the bullied student will be the loser in such negotiations.
- In peer mediation/conflict resolution programs, the mediator is told not to take a moral stand on the issue at hand. In the case of bullying, it is very important that the adults take a moral stand and clearly communicate that bullying is not acceptable.
- Conflict resolution/peer mediation programs leave most of the responsibility for solving bullying problems to the students. Such problems are often complex and difficult to handle, even for trained school staff. To defer these problems to the students is giving them too much responsibility. By using peer mediators, staff may also think that bullying is not their problem to solve.

WHAT CAUSES BULLYING?

There is no single or simple “cause” of bullying behavior. Research clearly suggests that personality characteristics and a student’s tendency toward aggressive behaviors, combined with physical strength or weakness (in the case of boys) are important risk factors for bullying in individual students.

In addition, environmental factors such as the attitudes, routines, and behavior of important adults (in particular teachers and administrators) play a major role in determining whether bullying will appear in a classroom or a school. The attitudes and behavior of peers also play critical roles.

WHY DO SOME STUDENTS BULLY?

Research suggests at least three partly interrelated motives for bullying:

- Students who bully have strong needs for power and (negative) dominance; they seem to enjoy being “in control” and subduing others.
- Students who bully find satisfaction in causing injury and suffering to other students. This is at least partly due to the environment at home, which may have caused hostility within the student.
- Students who bully are often rewarded in some way for their behavior. This could be material or psychological rewards, such as forcing the student who is bullied to give them money or enjoying the attention, status, and prestige they are granted from other students because of their behavior.

Students who bully others may have some common family characteristics, such as parents who are not very involved in their children’s lives, who lack warmth and positive involvement. In addition, these parents may not have set clear limits on their children’s aggressive behavior and may have allowed them to act out aggressively toward their siblings and other children.

Parents of children who bully are also more likely to use physical punishments and other “power-assertive” methods of child rearing. In summary, too little love and care and too much “freedom” in childhood are conditions that contribute to bullying behavior.²

Notes

1. Dan Olweus, *Bullying at School: What We Know and What We Can Do* (Oxford, England: Blackwell Publishing, 1993).
2. Dan Olweus, “Familial and Temperamental Determinants of Aggressive Behavior in Adolescent Boys: A Causal Analysis,” *Developmental Psychology* 16 (1980): 644–60; Dan Olweus, *Bullying at*

School: What We Know and What We Can Do (Oxford, England: Blackwell Publishing, 1993).

3. A. C. Baldry, “Bullying in Schools and Exposure to Domestic Violence,” *Child Abuse & Neglect* 27 (2003): 713–32.

4. I. Endresen and Dan Olweus, “Participation in Power Sports and Antisocial Involvement in Preadolescent and Adolescent Boys,” *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 46 (2005): 468–78.

In addition, students who bully others are more likely to have seen or been involved in domestic violence.³ In all probability, they have also been exposed or exposed themselves to violence in the media and maybe through participation in “power sports” like boxing, kickboxing, and wrestling.⁴

It is important to emphasize once more that we are talking about main trends. Not all students who come from families with these characteristics will bully others, and not all students who bully come from these family environments. The peer group may also play an important role in motivating and encouraging bullying behavior in certain children and youth.

HOW COMMON IS BULLYING?

The first large-scale, nationally representative study of bullying conducted in Norway was done in 1983 with more than 40,000 students aged 8 to 16. This study found that 15 percent of children and youth reported that they had been regularly involved in bullying problems.⁵ This represents one out of seven students. Nine percent had been bullied, seven percent had bullied other students, and less than one and a half percent had been both bullied and bullied others.

A later (2001) large-scale Norwegian survey of 11,000 students from 54 elementary and junior high schools gave much the same picture but with two disturbing trends:

- The percentage of bullied students had increased by approximately 50 percent from 1983 to 2001
- The percentage of students who were involved in the most frequent (and serious) form of bullying had increased by some 65 percent⁶

OBPP researchers and others have also conducted studies to determine how prevalent bullying is in the United States. In a study of 6,500 students in grades 4–6 in rural South Carolina, *OBPP* researchers found that 23 percent had been bullied “several times” or more often within a school term, and 20 percent had bullied others.⁷

In the first nationally representative U.S. study of bullying, which included more than 15,000 students in grades 6–10, researchers found that 17 percent of students reported having been bullied “sometimes” or more often during the school

term, and 8 percent had been bullied at least once a week. Nineteen percent had bullied others “sometimes” or more often during the term, and 9 percent had bullied other students at least once a week.⁸

It should be emphasized that the data from these studies are average estimates that do not highlight the great variation between different schools. Within the same community/school district, one school may experience bullying problems at a level two or three times higher than that of another school.

IS BULLYING ALL THAT HARMFUL?

Yes. Students who are bullied may develop physical symptoms such as headaches, stomach pains, or sleeping problems. They may be afraid to go to school, go to the bathroom, or ride the school bus. They may also lose interest in school, have trouble concentrating, and do poorly academically.

Bullied students often lose confidence in themselves and start to think of themselves as stupid, a failure, or unattractive. They may even develop feelings of guilt for being bullied (“there must be something wrong with me since I am the one being bullied”). Although relatively rare, some students who have been bullied repeatedly attempt and actually commit suicide.

Bullying can also affect students who are bystanders. Students who observe bullying may feel anxious (perhaps they will be targeted next) or guilty (for not intervening to stop bullying). Over time, students who observe frequent bullying may feel less and less empathy for the student who is being bullied.

Students who bully others are more likely to become involved in other problem behaviors, such as criminality and drug abuse. One study found that by the age of 24, boys who were identified as bullies in junior high school were four times more likely to have been convicted of three or more criminal acts than boys who did not bully others.

It is important for schools to understand that when they initiate a bullying prevention program, they are doing so for the benefit of all students in the school—not just to protect the students who are being bullied.

5. Dan Olweus, *Bullying at School: What We Know and What We Can Do* (Oxford, England: Blackwell Publishing, 1993).

6. M. Solberg, D. Olweus, and I. Endresen, “Bullies and Victims at School: Are They the Same Pupils?” *British Journal of Educational Research* (in press).

7. G. B. Melton, S. P. Limber, P. Cunningham, D.W. Osgood, J. Chambers, V. Flerx, and others,

Violence among Rural Youth: Final Report (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 1988).

8. T. Nansel and others, “Bullying Behaviors among U.S. Youth,” *Journal of the American Medical Association* 285, no. 16 (2001): 2094–2100.