Introduction

Today, we often hear about someone being bullied, someone being a bully, or someone who has witnessed bullying. This does not have to be the case. Bullying is often misunderstood and believed, by many, to be a normal part of life. Most of us have felt bullied at least once in our lives. Likewise, many of us have also been bullies. However, bullying should not be normalized by society. In fact, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) indicates the effects of bullying can be devastating for the person being bullied, those who witness the bullying, and, surprisingly, the bullies themselves (CDC 2020; Evans et al. 2019). This publication focuses on bullying at school and what educators and schools can do to address and stop it.

Definition

Bullying is defined by the CDC (2021) as “any unwanted aggressive behavior(s) by another youth or group of youths, who are not siblings or current dating partners, that involves an observed or perceived power imbalance, and is repeated multiple times or is highly likely to be repeated.”

Bullying Is a Big Problem

Research has shown that bullying is common. Bullying can occur in places where children and youth can be found. For example, studies have shown that bullying can be found in schools, neighborhoods of all types, homes, and online. Students can be a bully, be bullied, or even be both. If a student is a bully and a victim, he or she is called a bully/victim.

Almost 12 percent of public schools have reported that some form of bullying occurs at least once a week. In addition, bullying can happen within any age group. Reports of bullying can be found in middle school (28 percent), combined-age schools (12 percent), high schools (16 percent), and primary schools (9 percent) (Diliberti, Jackson, and Kemp 2016). Moreover, one in five high school students has indicated he or she has been bullied while at school or on school property, and one in six students says he or she has been cyberbullied in the last year (CDC 2020).

While everyone has the potential to be a victim of bullying, a student’s race, gender, and sexuality may affect the likelihood of that student being bullied. For example, females experience bullying more than males (30 percent of females compared to 19 percent of males), and almost 29 percent of White high school students experienced bullying compared to 19 percent of Hispanic students and 18 percent of Black students. In the
area of sexuality, heterosexuals (22 percent) are bullied less than students who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (40 percent) or those who are unsure of their sexuality (33 percent) (CDC 2020).

Effects of Bullying

Many negative consequences can result from bullying. Youth who are bullied often experience academic problems, including earning lower grades, skipping school, or dropping out of school. Children and youth who are bullied are at greater risk for depression, anxiety, and/or sleep issues. Bullying can cause physical injury, social issues, and emotional challenges (CDC 2020), and self-harm, which can include suicidal thoughts and behaviors and death (Kuehn, Wagner, and Velloza 2019).

Bully/victims—those who bully others and are bullied—have an increased risk for exhibiting problem behaviors and suffering from mental health issues (CDC 2020).

Types of Bullying

There are several types of bullying. The first type of bullying is physical. Physical bullying is any type of physical aggression, including but not limited to hitting, kicking, spitting, slapping, pushing, and tripping, and stealing someone’s personal possessions. The second type of bullying is emotional. Emotional bullying usually involves some type of verbal or written assault, such as name-calling, malicious teasing, making sexual comments, or making threats. Social bullying is another common type of bullying. Social bullying is also called relational bullying, and it involves making up and/or spreading rumors about a person, deliberately excluding someone from an activity, making embarrassing comments about someone, extortion, and intimidation. In today’s world, emotional and social bullying can be done in person or online. If a bully uses technology to bully, it is called cyberbullying. Finally, property damage is also considered a form of bullying (CDC 2020).

Bullying has been reported to happen in the hallway or stairwell at school (43 percent), inside the classroom (42 percent), in the cafeteria (27 percent), outside on school grounds (22 percent), online or by text (15 percent), in the bathroom or locker room (12 percent), and on the school bus (8 percent) (National Center for Education Statistics 2019).

New Form of Bullying in the Twenty-First Century

Cyberbullying is when an individual uses digital media to intentionally harass and embarrass someone repeatedly. This type of bullying often includes lies, pictures, embarrassing texts, and/or videos that could cause stress to the person being bullied. The recipient of cyberbullying often feels angry, sad, and/or scared (CDC 2020).

The effects of cyberbullying can be destructive and disastrous. Youth who are cyberbullied feel anger, sadness, frustration, and fear (CDC 2020). They have reported experiencing anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts/behaviors, and they often have increased school problems, including poor grades, violence, and delinquency. Reactions such as suicidal thoughts and suicide are more prevalent with cyberbullying than any other type of bullying (Kuehn, Wagner, and Velloza 2019). Swansea University (2018) indicated that cyberbully victims (under the age of twenty-five) were twice as likely to commit suicide or self-harm in other ways.

Over 25 percent of thirteen-year-olds have been a victim of cyberbullying. Additionally, 27 percent of fourteen-year-olds, 27.7 percent of fifteen-year-olds, 20.2 percent of sixteen-year-olds, and over 16 percent of seventeen-year-olds have been cyberbully victims. Females are more likely to be cyberbullied (23.7 percent) than males (21.9 percent). However, at 35.4 percent, transgender youth are the most likely (Hinduja 2021).

What Educators Can Do About It

Strategies for Teachers

Up to half of today’s children are victims of school bullying. Parents, educators, and students must work together to help stop bullying in their classrooms, playgrounds, and schools. The following strategies can help teachers and administrators combat bullying in their schools.
Practice Inclusion and Discussion
Involve all members of the school community, including pupils, parents, teachers, and nonteaching staff, when forming the bullying policy. Provide a range of in-person and online opportunities for pupils to talk about bullying. Some discussion should be established so discussants can speak or post anonymously.

Safeguard Honesty
Students feel safe reporting bullying when teachers, administrators, and other school personnel respect the anonymity of the victim and/or reporting students.

Create a Bullying Policy and Make Consequences Clear
An effective strategy for schools to reduce bullying is to create and enforce a schoolwide policy that defines bullying, outlines how teachers and school staff should address the issue of bullying in the classroom, and delineates how incidents of school bullying will be handled and what consequences (disciplinary actions) will result from the bullying. All students need to be aware of the consequences of bullying. The school policy must clearly define all forms of bullying behavior. Bullying behavior can be classified under four main headings: physical bullying, social/relational bullying, cyberbullying, and property damage.

Many bullies (and adults around them) may try to pass off acts of aggression as roughhousing between friends or just having fun. However, there is a difference between play and bullying. An episode of bullying has three identifying characteristics:
1. A power difference between the individual being bullied and the bully
2. A negative intent on the part of the bully to hurt, embarrass, or humiliate the other person
3. Repeated behavior, which is bullying that happens more than once with others, the same person, and/or the same person over time. For example, the behavior cannot be misconstrued as an innocent mistake such as mispronouncing a name one time versus continually mispronouncing another person’s name.

Adopt Effective Strategies
There is no one strategy that works for everyone or every school. Employ several ongoing strategies that students, school personnel, parents, and community members can help create. The following are examples of effective strategies:
• **No-blame approach**: This step-by-step technique allows for early intervention because it does not require anyone to be proved at fault. A group of young people, which includes observers of bullying (often called bystanders) and viable bullies, is made aware of a victim’s distress and asked to suggest solutions. This technique can be used for all types of bullying, especially to address social/relational and cyberbullying.
• **Peer-support efforts**: Mobilize students to take a stand against bullying behavior. Peer monitoring and positive peer pressure can come into play with this strategy.
• **Safe-space discussions**: Ask students, teachers, and school professionals to address the issue of bullying, explore the effect of bullying on the school atmosphere, and brainstorm solutions to potential and real problems. Have the group visualize what a safe space or a bully-free space might look like and discuss ways to create that space.
• **Power of students**: Have students who do not feel as though they are victims of bullying and who have not been identified as a bully come together to address bullying. Students can act in many ways: refuse to watch bullying, report bullying incidents, initiate conflict-resolution strategies, use distraction with either the bully or the victim, and/or stand up for the victim.
• **Question**: Create and disseminate a questionnaire that asks students, parents, and teachers to describe any bullying situation they are aware of in their school. The results can be used to increase awareness of the extent of the problem with their own students and within their individual school. The results of the questionnaire can also be used to justify intervention efforts and serve as a benchmark to measure the impact of improvements in school climate once an intervention is initiated. The results can also be used to conduct a bullying-awareness campaign. The campaign could be co-designed by students, teachers, and the administration—giving students a voice allows them to have some power in combating bullying at the individual and school levels. In addition, a campaign can be conducted during parent-teacher conference days, through parent newsletters, and at PTA/PTO meetings. Potential goals of a campaign include increasing parental awareness, educating parents of the problem, highlighting the importance of parental involvement for program success, and encouraging parental support of program goals.
• **Create bully-free zones**: Have peer or staff monitors in areas where bullying is most likely to occur.

In-Class Strategies
Teachers can work with students at the class level to develop rules against bullying. Engage students in a series of formal role-playing exercises and related assignments and/or activities. These could include showing bullies alternative methods of interaction or implementing cooperative learning activities to reduce social isolation. Increasing adult supervision at key times (such as recess or lunch) is another strategy.

Teachers can specifically combat cyberbullying by being adept with current technology (US Digital Literacy n.d.). For example, today’s youth are often referred to as digital natives. Digital natives do not know life without digital media. They use digital media daily (even hourly) and are in a constant learning mode—they keep up with the newest technology.
and use it accordingly. Most teachers today are considered *digital immigrants*, or adults who have learned in a different time and format. To meet the needs of students academically and socially, teachers should strive to be *digital transients*—those who are skillful in today's ever-changing technology. By being digital transients, teachers can specifically address cyberbullying by teaching *digital literacy*. Digital literacy is the understanding of and the ability to use technological tools and networks specifically to locate, research, evaluate critically, and create information. Teaching digital literacy helps students become good *digital citizens*. A good digital citizen understands netiquette (the appropriate manners of the internet, such as what one should or should not post, text, or email) and recognizes and utilizes appropriate privacy settings and controls. For free lessons for various age groups, see [https://thrive.psu.edu/for-professionals/resources](https://thrive.psu.edu/for-professionals/resources).

**Strategies for Schools**

The following are some specific measures that have been used successfully to combat school bullying:

- **Bully boxes/website:** Children can anonymously write down their concerns and post them in a bully box or on a website.
- **Mediation:** Some schools have introduced schemes in which two parties in a relationship problem agree that a third person, who may be either an adult or another young person, will help negotiate a solution. This approach is helpful in many situations, especially if the imbalance of power between the bully and victim is not large.
- **Peer counseling:** A small number of secondary schools have used older teenagers as peer counselors. Good training and continuing support must be given to these young volunteers so they are able to help victims who may be coping with serious emotional and mental distress.

**Sample Classroom Activities to Help Prevent Bullying**

Before starting any activity that involves potentially sensitive material, always begin by creating ground rules. Having ground rules can help students feel safe. Discuss rules with the students who will participate in the activity. Before any of these activities, form a circle with chairs or allow children to sit on the floor. This will help to create an atmosphere that encourages discussion. Remind students that they are expected to respect the group rules, which may include the following:

- No one must talk unless they want to.
- Respect what other people say—no laughing.
- One person talks at a time.

Post rules in a visible place during any activity and encourage students to hold one another accountable to the rules. This prevents the teacher from becoming the referee of the activity.
Define Bullying

Prepare a list of simple scenarios to present to children in your class. Scenarios should describe an interaction between children that could be perceived as either teasing or bullying. Here are some examples:

- Every day at recess, John takes the basketball from Bob and will not let him play.
- During gym class, Tom purposely tripped David while they were playing a game.
- Sarah refused to allow Sue to sit at the lunch table, even though there was plenty of room, and told her nobody wanted to be around her.

Create a variety of scenarios that deal with many different problems like exclusion, name-calling, and fighting. Make sure you emphasize intentionality and when a problem is being repeated. Read each scenario to the group and ask the children to vote on whether the problem described is bullying or harmless teasing. Encourage discussion of each scenario. Ask questions, such as:
  - How would that make David feel?
  - What should Sue do in that situation?
  - Do you think Raven made a mistake? Do you believe she did it on purpose?
  - How often does Deshawn do this?

This activity is a good place to begin. It will help teachers better recognize and understand their students’ perceptions of bullying, and it will help students begin to think critically about conflict, feelings, and bullying.

All-About-Me Books

Creating “All-About-Me Books” is a wonderful opportunity to build esteem in children and help them identify their strengths. It can also help students understand the importance of diversity and respecting differences. Distribute blank pages to each child. Instruct them to write the following titles on each page: "My Name Is," "I Live With," "My Favorite Color [food, sport, hobby, TV show, etc.] Is," "When I Grow up I Will," and so on. After each page has been titled, allow the children to answer the questions. Students can cut pictures from magazines, draw pictures, or write answers, depending on their grade level. After the books are complete, return to the group circle and allow each student to share his or her book with others. Do not force students to share. After a child has shared the book, allow others to ask questions about what was in it. Offer encouraging words. Point out students who have similar likes or goals, while also emphasizing the value in differences that exist.

Cooperative Learning Projects

Cooperative learning projects are a creative way to combine academic learning with socialization and group-building skills. Rather than allowing students to form their own groups, assign students to groups. For younger elementary-aged students, assign a project such as a group book report. Instruct children to create a diorama or a skit about the book. For upper elementary students, assign more involved projects. For example, allow children to plan an imaginary vacation. Outline the resources they have available to them, including a budget. Instruct children to choose a destination, plan meals, purchase supplies, and reserve a place to stay. A project such as this can enhance math, geography, planning, problem-solving, and life skills. Teachers can observe the groups, but they should not intervene unless substantial difficulties arise. This will teach students the value of working through their problems, learning to compromise, and even arguing effectively.

Rule-Based Strategies

One strategy to combat problems involving several types of bullying is the development of classroom rules against various forms of intolerant or negative peer behaviors. This approach requires identifying unacceptable behaviors that may be seen in a classroom, creating and using a monitoring system for rule infractions, and determining a set of consequences. Two techniques that might be helpful in implementing this sort of intervention are the problem-solving meeting (to elicit peer involvement in and support for the identification of rules and consequences) and the problem box (to provide a mechanism to monitor peer-problem behaviors; Greenberg and Kusche 1993).
Questions to ask yourself:
1. If you were to select this approach to classroom-level intervention to deal with physical or verbal bullying or ostracism, how would you develop and implement classroom rules and a monitoring system?
2. What goals could be met by pursuing this type of intervention strategy?
3. How do classroom rules alone limit the problem of bullying/exclusion?

Classroom-Level Interventions for Bully/Victim Problems

Insight-Oriented Strategies
Another strategy to combat problems involving bullying or ostracism is raising the consciousness of children in the classroom, which means encouraging children to consider the effects of bullying on the victims, emphasize the value of respecting individual differences, and reinforce the importance of standing up for what is right.

Questions to ask yourself:
1. How would you implement an insight-oriented approach to classroom-level intervention?
2. What goals could be met by pursuing this type of intervention strategy?
3. What limits might there be to insight-oriented strategies?

Grouping-Rearrangement Strategies
A third strategy to reduce bullying involves decreasing alliances among children that support bullying and exclusion (i.e., breaking down the unification of the bullying group or ostracizing clique) and increasing positive contact between the rejected child/children and potential friends.

Questions to ask yourself:
1. How would you use grouping strategies in the classroom to realign relationships among children, weakening some alliances while strengthening others?
2. What goals could be met by pursuing grouping rearrangement in the classroom?
3. What limits might there be to grouping-rearrangement strategies?

References


Resources

Children’s Books Related to Bullying
Below are a few websites that identify and describe books about bullying that have been recommended by teachers, youth organizations, and youth.

Brightly, “7 of the Best Books About Bullying, According to Kids”

A Mighty Girl, “The End of Bullying Begins with Me: 20 Bullying Prevention Books for Young Children”
https://www.amightygirl.com/blog?p=10255

We Are Teachers, “23 Must-Read Anti-Bullying Books for Kids”
https://www.weareteachers.com/14-must-read-anti-bullying-books-for-kids/

Other Resources

respectme
https://respectme.org.uk
Scotland’s anti-bullying service, respectme works with all adults involved in the lives of children and young people. The site provides practical skills and confidence to deal with children who are bullied and those who bully others.

StopBullying.gov
https://www.stopbullying.gov/
Federal government website managed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. It provides information from various government agencies on bullying and how to prevent it or effectively address it.


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