

Bullying

The problem of bullying has become a topic of national conversation over the past decades. To address this problem, numerous anti-bullying interventions have been developed and implemented, and advocates have worked to pass state and local laws and policies on bullying. A critical accompaniment to these efforts has been the growing field of research on bullying, which strives to understand the causes of bullying, its predictors, its effects, and ways of effectively intervening and preventing it.

What is bullying? While multiple definitions of bullying are used (Smith et al. 2002; Polanin 2012), bullying at root is one form of youth violence and aggressive behavior. The following three aspects are often used to distinguish bullying from other types of aggression or violence:

- The behavior stems from an intent to cause fear, distress, or harm
- The behavior is repeated over time
- There is a real or perceived imbalance of power between the bully and victim (Ferguson et al. 2007; Merrell et al. 2008; Nansel 2001)
- Bullying can be physical (e.g., hitting, punching), verbal (e.g., name-calling, teasing), or psychological/relational (e.g., rumors, social exclusion). Typically, individuals involved with bullying are classified as bullies, bully-victims, victims, or bystanders.

Developments in electronics and social media have made cyberbullying an increasing problem and concern. Types of cyberbullying include posting hurtful information on the Internet; unwanted contact via email, instant messaging, or text messaging; and purposeful exclusion from an online community.

Scope of the Problem

Bullying is a significant problem both nationally and internationally. The most recent data in the U.S. covers the 2010–2011 school year during which 27.8 percent of students ages 12–18 reported having been bullied at school. Of these youth:

- Almost 18 percent reported having been made fun of, called names, or insulted;
- About 18 percent reported being the subject of rumors;
- 8 percent reported being pushed, shoved, tripped, or spit on;
- Over 5 percent reported being excluded from activities;
- 5 percent reported being threatened with harm;
- Over 3 percent reported being forced to do things they didn't want to do;
- Almost 3 percent had property destroyed; and

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- Nine percent of students reported being cyberbullied.

The rates of bullying have remained relatively constant in this dataset since 2005 (“Indicators”), but rates vary across different studies depending on how bullying is measured and at what level it occurs (that is, classroom or school). Thus, across studies, the rates of students involved with bullying range from 10 to 50 percent of children and youth (Cook et al. 2010; Atria et al 2007) and rates of students involved in cyberbullying range up to 30 percent (Mishna et al. 2012). Moreover, accurate measurement of bullying can be challenging since victims may be reluctant to report bullying (Goodwin 2011) and self-report may underestimate the prevalence of bullying (Branson and Cornell 2009).

Bullying occurs at all ages but tends to peak in the middle school years. In 2010–2011, 6th graders reported being bullied at a rate of 37 percent, 8th graders at a rate of almost 31 percent, 10th graders at a rate of 28 percent, and 12th graders at a rate of 22 percent. Interestingly, this overall trend is not mirrored in cyberbullying, which tends to peak in the high school years. Sixth graders reported being cyberbullied at a rate of almost 7 percent, 8th graders at a rate approaching 9 percent, 10th graders at a rate of almost 12 percent, and 12th graders at a rate under 8 percent (“Indicators”).

The form and extent of bullying experienced can vary by gender as well. Girls overall reported higher rates of bullying than boys (31.4 percent for girls compared to 24.5 percent for boys). Girls and boys reported similar rates of bullying for being threatened with harm and forced to do things they did not want to. Boys reported higher rates for damage to property and being pushed, shoved, tripped, or spit on. Girls reported higher rates of being made fun of, being the subject of rumors, and being excluded from activities on purpose (“Indicators”).

There is also evidence that bullying is affected by socioeconomic status (SES). Due et al. (2009) conducted a study on bullying in 28 countries and found that socioeconomically disadvantaged adolescents are at higher risk of victimization compared to those from more affluent families. The study also found that students who attend school or live in a country with larger socioeconomic differences have a higher risk of being bullied. Von Rueden et al. (2006) similarly found that adolescents from families with higher parental educational status and familial wealth—two measures of SES—were at lower risk of bullying compared to those from families with a lower SES.

Other factors that affect levels of bullying include obesity (Janssen et al 2004) and student disability (Rose, Monda–Amaya, and Espelage 2011).

Impacts and Predictors of Bullying

Research has documented multiple negative outcomes associated with being a bully, being bullied, and being a bystander. A recent meta-analysis looked at the association between bullying and psychosomatic problems and found that victimized children, bully-victims, and bullies were at increased risk of suffering psychosomatic problems compared to uninvolved peers (OR=2.0, 2.22, and 1.65 respectively; Gini and Pozzoli 2008).

The types of symptoms experienced by bullied youth and bystanders include physical symptoms (such as headache, stomachache, backache, dizziness) and psychological symptoms (such as bad temper, feeling nervous, feeling low, difficulties in getting to sleep, morning tiredness, feeling left out, loneliness, and helplessness) (Due et al. 2005; Salmon et al. 1998; Williams et al. 1996). Bullied youth and bystanders are also more likely to have negative perceptions of school, behavior problems, trouble focusing on schoolwork, and lower grades; to avoid activities; and to suffer nightmares (Ferguson et al. 2007; Polanin 2012). Victimization also can negatively affect school engagement, which can lead to a

victim skipping school and performing poorly (Seeley et al. 2011; Limber 2003). Being bullied also raises the risk of being violent later in life by about one-third (Ttofi, Farrington, and Lösel 2012).

While bullies tend to experience fewer mental health and social problems than those who are bullied (Ferguson et al. 2007; Salmon, James and Smith 1998), research suggests that being a bully increases the risk of later violence in life by about two-thirds (Ttofi, Farrington and Lösel 2012). Being a bully also significantly raises the likelihood of being convicted of a criminal offense as an adult, of drug use, and of low job status compared to noninvolved peers (Farrington and Ttofi 2011; Olweus 1997; Sourander et al. 2006; Ttofi et al. 2011). Bullies also tend to be at higher risk for difficulties in romantic relationships and substance abuse problems (Cook et al. 2010).

Bullying in childhood and adolescence can have negative consequences for individuals that follow them into adulthood. A recent study, for instance, found that, as adults, victims had a higher prevalence of agoraphobia, generalized anxiety, and panic disorder compared to those who had not been victims, and that bully/victims had an increased risk of young adult depression, panic disorder, agoraphobia, and suicidality. Bullies were at increased risk for antisocial personality disorder (Copeland et al. 2013). Victims who are bullied during school have a higher risk of being bullied in the workplace (Schafer et al. 2004). Cook and colleagues (2010) drawing on a number of studies note that the risk of adversity is highest for bully-victims, who are at increased risk for carrying weapons, incarceration, and continued hostility and violence towards others.

Numerous studies have looked at predictors of bullying and victimization. A recent meta-analysis has synthesized the findings of that research (Cook et al 2010). The researchers looked at both individual-level and contextual-level predictors since, as they note, “bullying occurs in a social context where individuals are engaged in ongoing relationships” (66).

- For *victims*, the strongest predictors of victimization included peer status and social competence, both of which were negatively correlated (that is, as status and competence increased, the likelihood of being a victim decreased). Weak predictors—suggesting little to no influence—included age, other-related cognitions (defined as thoughts, beliefs, or attitudes about others, including normative beliefs about others, empathy and perspective taking), and academic performance. Contextual predictors of victimization included positive school climate and community factors, both of which were negatively correlated with victimization. Peer influence and family/home environment were weak as predictors.
- For *bullies*, the strongest predictors included externalizing behavior, which was positively correlated with bullying, and other-related cognitions, which were negatively related to bullying. Other predictors with weak correlations, suggesting weaker influence, included self-related cognitions, age, and internalizing behavior. Contextual factors with the largest effect on bullying included community factors and peer influence, both negatively correlated.
- For *bully-victims*, the strongest individual-level predictors included self-related cognitions and social competence, both negatively correlated with bully-victim status. Three other factors that moderately predicted victim status included externalizing behavior, internalizing behavior, and other-related cognitions. The weakest predictors, suggesting only very limited influence, included family environment and peer status. Contextual predictors included peer influence, family/home environment, and school climate, all negatively associated with the status of bully-victim.

Laws Against Bullying

In addition to the many interventions that have been developed to address bullying at schools, efforts across the nation have led to the passage of laws related to bullying and cyberbullying. Model policies have also been developed to provide guidance to districts and schools in addressing this problem. Since no federal law addresses bullying specifically, each state has its own code to do so. Stopbullying.gov provides current information on the laws and policies that are in operation in the states, commonwealths, and territories

Additionally, the Department of Education has identified 11 key components that characterize many of the state laws.

Theoretical Foundation

While numerous anti-bullying programs have been developed, most “seem to be based on common sense ideas about what works in preventing bullying rather than on specific theories of bullying” (Ttofi and Farrington 2009, 21). Ttofi and Farrington argue that more work needs to be done to develop and test theories of how anti-bullying programs can work.

That being said, a review of childhood bullying literature by Liu and Graves (2011) resulted in the identification of four major frameworks for understanding bullying and its predictors. While other categorizations can be made (e.g., Mishna, 2012, identifies six frameworks [ecological systems, social learning, cognitive behavioral, attribution, lifestyles exposure, and resilience]), these four give a general sense of the landscape of the literature.

- ***Ethological perspective:*** This framework considers the advantages stemming from bullying and sees it as a “tool for achieving social dominance – particularly in adolescence” (560).
- ***Ecological and socioecological theories:*** This framework focuses on the interactions between an individual and his or her social environment and considers how the closer and broader environments affect individual behavior. This framework attends to factors such as school policies, societal attitudes, and social norms.
- ***Cognitive and social-cognitive theories:*** This framework is influenced by theories of cognition and neurobiology. This framework considers individual characteristics, such as emotional dysregulation, impulsivity, antisocial disorders, and such. These factors can affect the ways in which individuals process information.
- ***Genetic and other biologic theories:*** This framework considers how biology (such as autonomic tone) and genetics (such as levels of hormones) influence aggression and violence.

Types of Bullying Programs

Most anti-bullying programs are school-based. Some typical types of interventions include the following (Limber 2003):

- ***Awareness-raising efforts:*** Efforts can consist of assemblies for students, parent meetings, or in-service training for teachers to make participants aware of the problem of bullying. While raising awareness is important, such efforts are insufficient to change cultural norms and bullying behaviors (Limber 2003, “Misdirections”).

- **School exclusion:** These efforts include “zero tolerance” or “three strikes and you’re out” type policies. When schools identify a student as a bully, that student is excluded from school. Research suggests that school exclusion interventions do not work: they can decrease the reporting of incidents because the sanctions are so severe, and they negatively affect through suspension or expulsion the students who are most in need of prosocial involvement at school (Limber 2003, “Misdirection”).
- **Therapeutic treatment for bullies:** This approach might include classes in anger management or efforts to boost self-esteem and empathy. Again, these types of programs are unlikely to effectively address the problem of bullying because they are based on faulty assumptions about the motivating factors for most bullies (Limber 2003). Moreover, if bullies are grouped for treatment, behavior may further suffer as students reinforce antisocial and bullying behavior (“Misdirections”).
- **Mediation and conflict resolution:** These programs are often used to help school staff address aggressive and violent behavior between students. However, these types of programs can backfire when used to resolve bullying situations because they imply that both parties (bully and victim) are to blame. Furthermore, these interactions may further victimize the target (Limber 2003, “Misdirections”).
- **Curricular approaches:** Numerous curricula have been developed for use in schools. In general, these programs try to explain bullying and its effects, teach strategies to avoid bullying or for intervening, and build social cohesion among students. Many of these programs have been evaluated, and some have been found to be effective in improving desired outcomes.

One example of a curricular approach program is the KiVa Antibullying Program, a school-based program delivered to all students in grades 1, 4, and 7. Its goal is to reduce school bullying and victimization. The central aims of the program are to:

- Raise awareness of the role that a group plays in maintaining bullying
- Increase empathy toward victims
- Promote strategies to support the victim and to support children’s self-efficacy to use those strategies
- Increase children’s skills in coping when they are victimized

Other programs that address bullying, victimization, or risk factors for bullying/victimization and have been rated as promising or effective can be found below.

- **Comprehensive approaches:** These approaches include but are not limited to classroom-based programs. They target the larger school community in an effort to change school climate and norms. They acknowledge the need for a long-term commitment to addressing bullying specifically, but they often do so as part of a larger violence prevention effort (Limber 2003). These approaches need to be developed to address the needs of a particular school or community; simply dropping prefabricated programs into place rarely works (Seeley et al. 2011; “Misdirections”).

Outcome Evidence

A number of meta-analyses have looked at the impact of anti-bullying programs. While there are some mixed findings, the preponderance of analyses concludes that programs have a positive impact in

reducing bullying and victimization.

Some meta-analyses suggest that the effect of anti-bullying programs is limited. Ferguson and colleagues (2007) looked at 42 studies and concluded that anti-bullying programs had a statistically significant positive effect, but that the effect was small enough that it lacked practical significance. Smith and colleagues (2004) concluded similarly that the majority of programs had a negligible impact on bullying behavior. Merrell and colleagues (2008) looked at 16 studies and found that intervention produces meaningful and clinically important effects, but only for approximately one-third of the factors they assessed; the majority of outcomes showed no change at all, and some small number showed negative impacts.

Other meta-analyses suggest that anti-bullying programs do have a positive impact. Ttofi and colleagues (2008) looked at 59 studies covering 30 evaluations and found that anti-bullying programs led to a 17–23 percent reduction in bullying and victimization; they found that programs appeared to be more effective with older children and that programs were somewhat less effective in U.S. than in Europe. Polanin and colleagues (2012) assessed 12 school-based programs addressing bystanders and found that programs overall were successful, but that program effects were largest for high school samples, which concurs with the findings of Ttofi and colleagues (2008). However, in contrast to Ttofi and colleagues, they found programs in U.S. and other countries equally effective. An additional review by Ttofi and Farrington (2011) looked at 89 studies covering 53 evaluations and found that programs decreased bullying by 20–23 percent and victimization by 17–20 percent.

Ttofi and Farrington (2009) conducted a systematic review to assess what elements of anti-bullying programs were associated with decreases in bullying. They found that the most important elements included parent training, improved playground supervision, disciplinary methods, school conferences, information for parents, classroom rules and classroom management. Those elements associated with decreases in victimization included use of videos, disciplinary methods, work with peers, parent training, duration, and cooperative group work.

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