

Bullying: Helping Handout for School

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INTRODUCTION

Bullying consists of unwanted acts of aggression that are intended to harm the victim. The acts can be physical (e.g., hitting, shoving, stealing, or damaging property); verbal (e.g., hurtful comments or threats); or social-relational (e.g., excluding the victim or spreading rumors). When it occurs via digital devices or social media, it is called cyberbullying. To constitute bullying, the acts must be repeated over time; there is also an imbalance of power, and the bully is in a position of strength relative to the victim. For instance, the bully may be physically larger than the victim or have more social clout, such as popularity or access to embarrassing information. Because studies use different definitions, measurement techniques, and student populations, statistics on the frequency of bullying can vary greatly (Bear, Mantz, Glutting, Yang, & Boyer, 2015). However, national studies suggest that approximately 20% of students ages 12 to 18 have been bullied (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2017).

Bullying has become a greater national concern because of its negative outcomes, particularly for victims. For example, victims are at increased risk for low self-esteem; depression and anxiety (and potentially self-harm or suicide); social isolation and withdrawal; poorer academic achievement and school engagement; and “acting out” behaviors (Rueger & Jenkins, 2013). The susceptibility of bullies to negative outcomes—especially when their behavior does not coexist with other significant concerns regarding their social-emotional development—is more controversial (Rodkin, Espelage, & Hanish, 2015). Bullying can also affect those less directly involved, such as classmates, teachers, and parents, because it can create an overall negative school climate that interferes with learning, teaching, and social relationships.

WHAT TO CONSIDER WHEN SELECTING INTERVENTIONS AND SUPPORTS

A range of factors influence bullying: classroom, school, home, community, and societal. Individual characteristics of the victim, bully, or bystanders can uniquely influence each situation as well. Some factors, such as gender, sexual orientation, or disability, are unalterable; thus, they are not targets for change. Other factors, such as models of bullying in the home, community, or media, are extremely difficult for schools to alter. Although it is important to understand how these factors affect students, the following section provides recommendations to help teachers and other staff recognize what they *can* change to prevent or address bullying. When selecting interventions and supports, there are two areas of focus: (a) student characteristics and (b) classroom and school characteristics.

Student Characteristics

Whereas no one can predict with certainty who will become a victim, research has identified characteristics that increase a student's risk of being targeted. In general, the primary risk factor is a perception that the student is different, or deviates, from the peer group. For example, students are at greater risk if they have a disability, especially one characterized by observable physical features or behaviors, such as impaired social skills (Bear et al., 2015). Students who are substantially smaller or heavier than their peers face increased risk, as do students with a nonnormative sexual orientation or gender identity (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009). Further, students are greater targets when they exhibit behaviors associated with poor social acceptance or peer rejection (e.g., annoying or bothering others or acting impulsively). They may have trouble defending themselves or advocating for their needs and may possess poorer coping skills.

Less is understood about the characteristics of bullies, though there seem to be some features they share. For instance, they tend to value aggression and power and lack empathy or guilt (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006). They often desire to fit in by impressing peers, especially those peers who encourage or reinforce their behaviors. In addition, these students may have experienced parental abuse or neglect, or other life stressors that interfere with social-emotional development. Whereas some bullies are well accepted by the peer group, others are rejected. Some bullies lack social skills, but others don't (Gini, 2006). As with victims, no characteristic is a telltale, and it can be difficult to discern which students will bully others. In addition, it's important to remember that *a bully can also be a victim*, and thus have attributes of both.

Classroom and School Characteristics

Classroom and school characteristics greatly influence the prevalence of bullying. In brief, less bullying occurs in classrooms and schools in which teacher-student and student-student relationships are characterized by mutual respect and support (including support from bystanders). The school's social values and accepted norms also promote positive climates. Further, classrooms and schools that employ an authoritative approach to management and school discipline experience less bullying (Cornell, Shukla, & Konold, 2015). This approach balances *social support* (including an emphasis on building and maintaining positive relationships) with *structure* (e.g., clear behavioral expectations, close monitoring of behavior, and rules and consequences that are clear and fair). See *Engagement and Motivation: Helping Handout for School*; *Improving Teacher-Student Relationships: Helping Handout for School*; and *Peer Relationships: Helping Handout for School* for specific recommendations consistent with the authoritative approach.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following supports and interventions are arranged in two general categories: (a) preventing bullying and (b) responding to bullying.

Preventing Bullying

The following prevention strategies apply to all students, including victims and bullies. The strategies can be used at the individual, classroom, and, when appropriate, school-wide levels. For example, a school might design an assembly to highlight prosocial

behaviors; a teacher might lead a complementary lesson in his or her classroom; and a school psychologist or school counselor might work in a targeted manner with individuals who need specific skill building.

1. **Teach and encourage prosocial behaviors.** Positive classroom and school climates are critical for preventing bullying—and how students relate to each other is critical for developing healthy climates. Thus, students need to learn and understand the importance of social-emotional skills that help develop strong peer relationships, such as cooperation, respect, empathy, caring, kindness, and responsibility. Such skills should be highlighted in the regular curriculum, such as in literacy and social studies, and also communicated, modeled, and reinforced in classroom meetings, announcements, assemblies or pep rallies, service learning times, and media.
2. **Help students understand what bullying is and the impact it has.** Explain what bullying is and why it is harmful. Teach students about different types of bullying, highlighting the effect on individuals as well as on classroom and school communities. Use a variety of teaching methods, including videos, discussions, and role-playing, to engage students and help them practice their skills. It also is important to teach students that *not all acts of aggression, fighting, exclusion, or teasing constitute bullying*. For instance, two close friends have a disagreement and call each other names, or even fight physically. Although those behaviors are certainly undesirable—and hurtful—it is unlikely that they constitute bullying. This is especially true if both engage in the same behaviors and if there is no imbalance of power. Using the word *bullying* too liberally can lead to unfair accusations and labeling, affect students' self-perceptions (whether they are seen as victims or bullies), and desensitize students and staff to true incidents of bullying.
3. **Teach students how to respond to bullying.** Victims are unlikely to stop bullying solely with their actions. Regardless, there are strategies victims or bystanders can employ:
 - Be assertive and tell the bully to stop in a firm and calm voice.
 - Act as if the bully is joking and try to laugh it off.
 - Inform a teacher, parent, or other adult who may be able to help.

- Try to avoid encounters with the bully, especially when alone. If the bully is nearby, try to stay around adults and friends.

Students should learn that these strategies may not always work, as their effectiveness depends on a host of factors (e.g., how the strategy is used, the characteristics of the bully, or the type of bullying). Students should also recognize when a certain strategy should *not* be used, such as making light of serious or violent threats.

4. ***Make sure that expectations, rules, and consequences pertaining to bullying are clear.***

This should be done using multiple methods, including presentations to students and parents, printed materials, websites, and signed contracts. The school's authority may also extend beyond its grounds, such as at the bus stop, or even to digital devices and online activity. When off-campus behavior (e.g., cyberbullying) substantially disrupts the learning environment, federal law allows schools to discipline students for these actions (see <https://cyberbullying.org/bullying-laws>). Purposefully relay this information to ensure that students and parents are aware.

5. ***Recognize signs of bullying.*** Many students are reluctant to report bullying. Victims might feel ashamed or embarrassed, and both victims and witnesses might fear retaliation. Thus, it is important that teachers, other staff, and parents watch for signs that a student is a victim or an aggressor. The federal website stopbullying.gov gives the following warning signs.

Signs that a child is being bullied:

- Has unexplainable injuries or destroyed or “lost” clothing, electronics, books, and so on
- Feels sick or fakes illness (e.g., frequent headaches or stomachaches)
- Exhibits changes in eating habits (e.g., skipping meals at school or home, binge eating)
- Has frequent nightmares or trouble sleeping
- Loses interest in school or schoolwork or has declining grades
- Avoids social situations or has a sudden loss of friends
- Displays feelings of helplessness or decreased self-esteem
- Exhibits self-destructive (e.g., running away) or self-harm or suicidal behaviors

Signs that a child is bullying others:

- Is increasingly aggressive and gets into verbal or physical fights
 - Receives frequent punitive consequences at school (e.g., detention, office visits)
 - Has extra money or new belongings without explanation
 - Blames others for his or her problems and doesn't accept responsibility for his or her actions
 - Is competitive and worries about reputation or popularity
 - Has friends who bully others
6. ***Develop a process by which students can report bullying anonymously.*** Some students might not report bullying if they fear possible retribution. Therefore, students should be able to share information without having to reveal themselves. Submissions can include the name of the bully, the victim, or both. All students, school staff, and parents should be familiar with the reporting process (e.g., a box or website), and students should be taught to use it honestly and responsibly.
7. ***Set up the physical environment purposefully with increased supervision, as appropriate.*** Arrange seats and work groups in a manner that separates students who have been—or who are likely to be—involved in a bullying situation. Separation and close monitoring is particularly important at times or locations more prone to bullying, such as during unstructured learning activities, at recess, in the hallways and cafeteria, and on the bus.
8. ***Build and maintain positive teacher–student relationships.*** Strong relationships between students and teachers are related to less bullying in the classroom. Moreover, victims are more likely to report bullying to adults with whom they have good relationships (Cortes & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2014).
9. ***Reflect upon your own behavior.*** Teachers and staff should ensure that they themselves exhibit prosocial behaviors. Take time to recognize your own attitudes toward bullying and how your actions may model undesirable behaviors for your students. This would include sarcastic, humiliating, or otherwise hurtful comments, as well as the use of corporal punishment (as allowed by law in some states).
10. ***Educate families about bullying.*** Parents play an important role in preventing and responding to

bullying. Help parents understand what constitutes bullying (e.g., the school's definition), what rules and consequences apply, and what services and supports the school provides for preventing and responding to bullying. Use a variety of methods to disseminate information, such as printed materials, websites, open-house presentations, and conferences. Also tell parents what they can do at home to support their children.

11. **Consider adopting an evidence-based, school-wide prevention program.** While there are many packaged programs, not all are supported by research, especially beyond elementary school. However, research-backed programs typically have the following features (Tofi & Farrington, 2011):
 - Whole-school, multidisciplinary approach with high intensity (i.e., several components implemented regularly over a long period of time)
 - Authoritative approach to classroom management and school discipline
 - Adequate teacher training
 - Informational sessions or materials for parents
 - Use of videos in lessons
 - Increased playground supervision
 - Counseling for students who bully

Responding to Bullying

The following interventions and supports help teachers and other adults respond appropriately when someone reports or observes potential bullying. *Remember that the behavior may or may not constitute bullying.* For example, it may be unclear, or unknown, if the behavior has continued over time. Regardless, reports of bullying should be investigated further, especially when behavior is unwanted and emotionally or physically harmful for students. A school's response, however, depends on a number of circumstances, such as the severity or longevity of the behavior, the ages of the students, and the relationships between those involved. Schools should also consider whether one or more students has a disability, as this can trigger designated action steps and protective rights—for both victims and bullies—under special education law.

It is important to note that a classroom teacher is unlikely to be responsible for implementing all of the following interventions. Many schools have a clear process for reporting and investigating bullying, and the policies and procedures of a school or district often dictate how and by whom reports are handled.

12. **Respond right away.** Don't overreact but don't ignore the behavior. Address students in a calm, caring—yet firm—manner. *Always communicate that you are taking the situation seriously* and that the behavior will not be tolerated.
13. **Attend to any immediate needs.** Assess the safety of those involved and the extent of any injuries. Decide if prompt medical attention (e.g., a student complains of pain or has visible injuries) or mental health support (e.g., a student is too upset to remain with the class) is necessary.
14. **Try to address the behavior privately.** It is typically best to address the behavior as privately as possible, especially when there is a documented history of bullying. Trying to settle the problem in front of peers can be humiliating to one or both students and could make the situation worse (e.g., the victim is embarrassed and withdraws socially or the bully seeks revenge).
15. **Try to determine what has happened.** Listen to both the victim and the aggressor. Speak to each individually and seek information from others, especially witnesses (either students or adults). Talking to peers is particularly important in cases of social-relational aggression. To understand the circumstances involved, try to answer questions such as: “What *exactly* happened? What triggered or contributed to it? What are the perspectives of those involved?” It can take a while to sort out all the facts and information—act in a timely and efficient manner but do not rush the process.
16. **Decide whether or not the behavior constitutes bullying and identify the appropriate response.** The people or team investigating the incident needs to determine if the behavior qualifies as bullying. The school's response, including disciplinary action, is likely to differ depending on whether or not the behavior constitutes bullying. In addition, if the situation involves certain populations (e.g., a student with a disability), more formalized measures may be necessary. For example, disciplinary provisions governing special education law might apply. When formulating its response, the school should also weigh factors such as student age, the seriousness of the behavior, and so on.

Bullying investigations can take time. However, even during an investigation, a school can begin to implement a response plan designed to support the students, both the victim and the aggressor. Further, regardless of the school's

formal determination, students' needs should be considered when bullying behaviors arise.

17. **Communicate that you will work to stop the behavior and make a plan.** Neither the victim nor the bully should be solely responsible for ending the behavior. Teachers, other staff, and parents should share responsibility. Make this clear in what you say *and* do—students are more likely to continue to report bullying when they feel teachers or others will actively intervene (Cortes & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2014). Provide the victim with advice and guidance, but also ask him or her what could help, and incorporate those ideas when feasible. Work with the victim and the parents and agree to a plan that includes actions for both students and adults. Formulate a similar plan for the bully.
18. **Avoid certain messages and advice that can make the situation worse.** For instance:
 - *Don't blame the victim.* Instead, reassure the victim that the bullying is not his or her fault.
 - *Don't tell the victim to simply ignore the bullying.* In some situations, it may be appropriate for a student to ignore verbal aggression (e.g., walking away)—but only when used in combination with other strategies. In addition, a student should never be told to ignore serious threats or physical aggression.
 - *Don't encourage the victim to “work it out” with the bully.* Peer mediation often helps when there is conflict between two equals (e.g., friends) but not when there is an imbalance of power (i.e., a victim and a bully).
 - *Don't encourage the victim to retaliate.* Do not advocate behavior that could aggravate the bully or result in disciplinary action for the victim.
19. **Don't label the bully as a bad student.** When responding to the bully, clearly communicate that you disapprove of his or her actions and that they will not be tolerated. However, emphasize that it is the behavior—not the student—that you strongly dislike. A student can change his or her behavior, but being labeled a bad person is suggestive of a fixed personality characteristic. Therefore, focus on behaviors the bully needs to change and express optimism that he or she will do so. Also point out positive qualities, or strengths, of the student.
20. **Emphasize the negative impact of the bully's behavior on the victim.** Encourage the bully to assume the perspective of the victim, especially how the victim could or did feel. Use role-playing in which the roles are reversed (i.e., the bully is a victim). This helps foster perspective taking, empathy, and a sense of responsibility for one's own actions.
21. **Invoke punitive consequences, when appropriate.** These consequences should depend on the severity of the behavior and circumstances involved. Responses are typically guided by the school's code of conduct, with suspension (in or out of school) as a frequent consequence for bullying. However, the limitations of suspension and other forms of harsh punishment are clear—primarily, they do little to teach replacement behaviors or repair the problem. Therefore, punitive techniques should always be used in combination with educational, reparative, and positive consequences.
22. **Include educational consequences.** Include tasks that help educate the student about bullying and how it affects others. For example, require the student to read a book or watch a video on bullying, write an essay or research report, mentor (with adult guidance) a younger student, or lead a discussion about bullying and the importance of not harming others.
23. **Consider reparative consequences.** Challenge and help the bully to repair harm done to the victim or others. This might include apologizing to the victim (preferably in writing), replacing a broken or stolen item, or doing an act of kindness for the victim or others.
24. **Plan for positive consequences.** Be sure to praise—and provide recognitions or rewards, as necessary—to teach and reinforce student behaviors that help prevent bullying. Do this for the victim and the bully. For example, praise the victim for assertiveness, or praise the bully for prosocial behaviors.
25. **Identify skill deficits in both the victim and the bully.** For instance, if the victim is missing communication or problem-solving skills, determine how (i.e., where, when, and by whom) those skills could be taught. Make a similar plan for a bully who lacks, for example, social-emotional skills like empathy or anger regulation.
26. **Identify students' strengths and use them in interventions.** Capitalizing on strengths in both the victim and the bully enhances intervention effectiveness. It also helps avoid the message that the bully is a “bad” person. For example, if

the victim has a friendship network, use it to help build a peer support system that could buffer the effects of bullying. If the bully values power or social capital, identify appropriate leadership opportunities (e.g., in sports) and emphasize the prosocial behaviors associated with leadership (e.g., sportsmanship).

27. **Consider the need for more significant interventions and supports.** This is most important when the victim or the bully exhibits internalizing behaviors (e.g., depression)—or when the bully's externalizing behaviors (e.g., physical aggression) do not cease when the recommendations above are implemented. Further supports are also appropriate when the victim or the bully substantially lacks social or emotional competencies (e.g., trouble with making or keeping friends). These interventions would include many of those previously mentioned, but they would be delivered with more intensity (e.g., frequent monitoring, additional social skills lessons). They should also be individualized—guided by an assessment of the student's needs—and implemented by a mental health specialist who works closely with the student, teachers, and family.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Programs

These school-wide bullying prevention programs are among the few that have multiple empirical studies supporting their effectiveness (also see CASEL.org for reviews of other programs).

- Olweus Bullying Prevention Program—<http://www.violencepreventionworks.org>
- Second Step—<http://www.secondstep.org/>
- KiVa Bullying Prevention Program—<http://www.kivaprogram.net/program>

Websites

<https://www.stopbullying.gov>

This website, managed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, is a gold mine of resources for educators. It offers substantial guidance and recommendations on what schools, parents, and students can do to prevent bullying. It also provides information on research, training, and state laws.

<https://cyberbullying.org/bullying-laws>

This website for the Cyberbullying Research Center is maintained by two professors and researchers of cyberbullying. It offers a wealth of information and resources for educators and parents on cyberbullying.

Books

Swearer, S. M., Espelage, D. L., & Napolitano, S. A. (2009). *Bullying prevention and intervention: Realistic strategies for schools*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

This book provides educators with practical strategies and materials, based on research, for preventing and responding to bullying, including cyberbullying.

Related Helping Handouts for Victims of Bullying

Anxiety: Helping Handout for School and Home

Depression: Helping Handout for School

Engagement and Motivation: Helping Handout for School

Friendships—Lacking a Friend and Feeling Lonely:

Helping Handout for School and Home

Happiness and Self-Esteem: Helping Handout for School and Home

Peer Relationships: Helping Handout for School

Social and Emotional Learning: Helping Handout for School

Teasing: Helping Handout for School and Home

Trauma: Helping Handout for School

Related Helping Handouts for Perpetrators of Bullying

Anger and Aggression: Helping Handout for School

Oppositional Defiant Disorder: Helping Handout for School

Self-Management: Helping Handout for School and Home

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