



Fast Facts: Bullying in Schools

What is bullying?

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Bullying is an ongoing misuse of power in relationships through repeated verbal, physical and/or social behaviour that causes physical and/or psychological harm. It can involve an individual or a group misusing their power over one or more persons. Bullying can happen in person or online, and it can be obvious (overt) or hidden (covert). Online bullying refers to bullying through information and communication technologies, e.g. the internet or mobile devices. Bullying of any form or for any reason can have long-term effects on those involved, including bystanders.

Single incidents and conflicts or fights between equals, whether in person or online, are not defined as bullying.

In short, bullying is an ongoing misuse of power involving a pattern of harmful verbal, physical or social behaviour.

Is every conflict between students bullying?

Not all aggressive or harmful behaviour between people is bullying. While conflicts and aggressive behaviour need to be addressed, it is important to be clear when these behaviours are not actually bullying.

The definition of bullying has three critical aspects - a repeated pattern, the misuse of power within relationships, and behaviour which causes harm; all three aspects need to be present in order for behaviour to be called bullying.

What does the 'misuse of power' mean?

In a situation where there is a power imbalance, one person or group has a significant advantage over another, and if this power is misused, this enables them to coerce or mistreat another for their own ends. In a bullying situation this power imbalance may arise from the context (e.g. having others to back you up), from assets (e.g. access to a weapon) or from personal characteristics (e.g. being stronger, more articulate or more able to socially manipulate others).

Why is the definition of bullying important?

A clear, comprehensive and shared definition is essential to enable schools to identify bullying, and distinguish it from other types of conflicts or violence, so that appropriate strategies and interventions can be used.

How is bullying different from violence, harassment and discrimination?

The critical feature that distinguishes violence, harassment and discrimination from bullying is that bullying happens within social relationships, featuring repeated and harmful behaviours that stem from a misuse of power. Violence, harassment and discrimination can occur as part of bullying, but also can occur in one-off conflicts or between strangers.

It is important to know the difference as the effect on the individual or group may be different and the responses to each may need to be different. Intervening in less serious bullying early can often prevent harassment, discrimination and more serious negative behaviours from becoming part of the bullying pattern.



Fast Facts: Bullying in Schools

The types of bullying

What are the different types of bullying?

The types of bullying behaviours are physical, verbal or social. Bullying can be obvious (overt) or hidden (covert). Bullying can take place in person or online. Bullying – verbal or social – that happens online or via a mobile phone is referred to as online bullying or cyberbullying. Research indicates that the majority of young people who bully online also bully others in person.

What is covert bullying?

Covert bullying includes social exclusion and intimidation. The term ‘covert’ highlights the fact that not all bullying is physical or obvious in nature. Covert bullying can have the same harmful impacts as more obvious bullying, as it can be more isolating, can go on for longer before other people become aware of it, and can be more easily denied by the other person.

Covert bullying is a subtle type of non-physical bullying which usually isn’t easily seen by others and is conducted out of sight of, and often unacknowledged by adults. Covert bullying behaviours mostly inflict harm by damaging another’s social reputation, peer relationships and self-esteem. Covert bullying can be carried out in a range of ways (e.g. spreading rumours, conducting a malicious social exclusion campaign and/or through the use of internet or mobile phone technologies).

What is online bullying?

Online bullying (or cyberbullying) is bullying that is carried out through information and communication technology, including the internet (e.g. on social media sites) and mobile devices. Technology can expand the opportunities for people to bully others.

Communication technologies allow for different ways to bully others, but do not change the fact that the bullying behaviour (and not the technology itself) is the main issue. Technology does create new challenges for dealing with bullying.

How does online safety relate to online bullying?

Online safety (or cybersafety) refers to a broad range of safe, respectful and responsible behaviours as well as ways to guard security and privacy online. Online safety is one way to reduce the risk of bullying, identity theft or predatory behaviour by others online.

Students need to be taught safe and appropriate online behaviour, which includes recognising when someone’s online behaviour is bullying, how to avoid engaging in or supporting online bullying, and being aware of the sort of support that bystanders can provide online.

How is online bullying different from trolling?

Trolling is intensive verbal abuse of an individual online done anonymously and by strangers. The difference between trolling and online bullying is that online bullying occurs within the context of an existing social relationship.



Fast Facts: Bullying in Schools

Why does bullying happen?

Why do people bully others?

People who bully others are often motivated by the status and social power they can achieve through bullying. Some may bully others to compensate for what is happening to them and their own feelings of powerlessness. Bullying behaviours can also be copied by others.

Who bullies others?

All individuals have the potential to bully others or to be bullied.

Why is it sometimes hard to identify bullying?

Bullying can be done through a number of different actions and behaviours, it can be overt or covert, and can occur in both individual and group situations. Some bullying can be quite subtle or involve words known only by the students, making it difficult for adults to recognise. These complexities can make it difficult to identify if a person or group is being bullied.

Prevalence of bullying

How common is bullying amongst students in schools?

Australian research suggests that up to one in four students have experienced some level of bullying. Researchers have made different findings about how common bullying is, largely due to differences in how they define 'bullying'. However, we do know that most young people do not engage in bullying behaviour.

Is there a pattern to bullying?

Australian research has revealed that bullying behaviour peaks in the middle primary school years and the first year of high school. This appears to be related to the rapid changes in the social skills and social demands for students at these times.

Some other general patterns of bullying have been identified. Younger children are more likely to bully others physically or verbally, and then as they get older social bullying behaviours increase (including exclusion and manipulation). Online bullying (cyberbullying) increases when students begin to have greater access to online communication and mobile phones.

Is bullying increasing?

The fact that we are hearing a lot about bullying these days may well be a positive sign that we are taking it seriously and exploring ways to reduce it. Australian researchers have suggested we are more aware of the potential impact of ignoring bullying, and willing to take the necessary positive action, rather than the bullying problem actually increasing.

Why is it hard to know exactly how common bullying is?

Children and young people often don't tell adults about bullying. Sometimes children and young people don't want their parents or teachers to become involved as they are afraid of what might happen if the person who is doing the bullying finds out they have told. Sometimes, students simply don't think to ask for adult help or they don't think anyone will believe them or could help even if they told.



Fast Facts: Bullying in Schools

Impact of bullying

Is bullying really something to be worried about?

Bullying affects everyone involved, including people who witness it. It can have serious and long-term emotional or psychological consequences in addition to the immediate harmful effects.

Communities that condone or ignore bullying may create an environment where more serious anti-social behaviour is condoned.

Bullying undermines key values that schools aim to promote in students – respect, trust and honesty.

Isn't bullying just a normal part of growing up?

Bullying is not a normal stage that all children and young people pass through, and it is not just something to put up with as 'part of life'. Behaviour that is intended to harm can impede healthy development.

Ignoring bullying or thinking that it is just something that children and young people do or that it will be 'character building' can give silent approval for bullying to continue and further traumatise those who are bullied.

What are the impacts of bullying on those people who are bullied?

Being bullied can result in a person feeling miserable and powerless, so the response of those around that person is important in making a change.

Research shows that bullying can have a negative impact on students' academic performance, self-esteem, coping skills, and can increase anxiety and unhappiness. It is important that students, staff and parents get involved to make a positive change.

Bullying can negatively affect how children and young people see themselves and how they feel about themselves.

What are the impacts on those who bully others?

The outcomes for people who bully others are also not good in the long-term. Children and young people who bully others may come to see bullying as a normal and acceptable way to behave. Those who bully others need support to learn more appropriate ways of behaving and of resolving conflict to prepare them for adulthood and to reduce the likelihood of developing even more serious anti-social behaviours.

Is there an impact on bystanders to bullying?

Bystanders are present in many bullying incidents. Research indicates that bystanders can be negatively impacted by witnessing bullying.

Ways to counter bullying

Why is the way we talk about bullying important?

Aggressive language, like 'Stamp out bullying' or language which labels students, like 'Get tough on bullies' can actually become part of a bullying problem. More positive language, like 'We stand together' refers to ways to build the capacity of students to take actions to reduce bullying.



Fast Facts: Bullying in Schools

What can schools do if bullying is happening?

In creating and maintaining a safe and supportive school environment, strategies to address bullying include:

- preventing bullying through promoting a positive whole-school culture based on values agreed to by the whole school community
- intervening early in suspected or identified bullying issues and communicating clearly with all involved
- responding to bullying incidents with approaches which have been shown to be effective.

These elements need to be outlined in the school's policy and plan. The Bullying. No Way! website provides advice, strategies and other information for teachers, parents and young people on how they can help reduce bullying.

Not all hurtful behaviours are bullying, but schools address inappropriate behaviour whether or not it meets the definition of bullying.

Bullying that appears to involve criminal behaviour such as violence, threats, intimidation, inciting violence, etc., should be reported to the police (in line with school guidelines) and will require management by the school to ensure the risks to student safety are reduced.

What approaches to bullying are effective?

Schools that are responsive to students' needs and have a whole-school approach to optimising student wellbeing experience lower levels of bullying. This includes the explicit teaching and modelling of positive values and wellbeing through Social and Emotional Learning curriculum and pastoral care.

Effective school responses to bullying incidents are:

- solution-focused
- relationship-based
- at the school level, the class level, the student level, and
- based on strong links between parents and schools.

Students who bully others need to understand that their behaviour is not acceptable and to learn more appropriate ways to behave and to solve conflicts. School staff may also need to address the underlying causes for the bullying. Staff and other students need to be taught what to do if they witness bullying happening.

Effective approaches to student bullying include restorative practices, conflict management, equalising power imbalances amongst students, and social skills development.

More than one method of addressing bullying may be needed as no single approach is appropriate or effective in all circumstances or for all people.



Fast Facts: Bullying in Schools

Dealing with bullying can be complex and challenging. Both short and long-term approaches need to be adopted, including regular reviews of policy and procedures and monitoring of progress using the school's data.

Anti-bullying campaigns and programs are just one aspect of the work that schools need to do to counter bullying. The long-term aim is to foster a school culture based on positive values and supportive relationships which feature respect, inclusion, belonging and cooperation.

Why are other people (bystanders) important in dealing with school bullying?

Everyone plays a part in ensuring the safety and wellbeing of others – parents, staff, students and community members. It is essential that these members of the school community know how to deal with incidents of bullying effectively and safely. It is important to note, however, that the majority of people are not involved in bullying.

Those who bully others often aim to impress or intimidate bystanders. The reaction of bystanders can either support or discourage bullying from happening. If bystanders do nothing, this can be seen as a form of silent approval.

Supportive bystander behaviours are actions and/or words that are intended to support someone who is being bullied. The actions of a supportive bystander can stop or diminish a specific bullying incident or help the bullied student to recover from it.

The attitude and reaction of bystanders can affect the culture of the school. Social disapproval of bullying behaviour can prevent bullying from occurring and help to stop it when it is happening.

Training in how to intervene safely assists in effective bystander behaviour. The majority of students do not want bullying to occur, but often don't know how to stop it. Schools can help students learn what to do when bullying occurs.

What doesn't work when dealing with bullying

Short-term 'solutions' alone, like punishing the student doing the bullying, do not improve the relationships and social factors which allow the bullying to happen. Although the bullying may stop in the short-term, unless these factors are addressed, it is very likely to reoccur or become covert (hidden).

Punishment as the only intervention is not effective in preventing bullying. Interventions need to be matched to the particular circumstance of the bullying. No single approach to bullying is appropriate or effective in all circumstances or for all people.

If the school's response to bullying further dis-empowers students who have been bullied or fosters a negative school culture, this can make the situation worse.



Fast Facts: Bullying in Schools

Why don't simple solutions work to reduce bullying in the long-term?

Bullying is complex. Approaches to bullying need to include relationship and social solutions at the whole-school, class and student level, and on occasion, at the family and community level. Although bullying may stop in the short-term after a 'get tough on bullying' approach, unless the relationship and social factors are addressed, it is very likely to reoccur, take another form, or just become hidden (or covert).

What can parents do if bullying happens?

What can parents do if their child tells them they are being bullied?

There are five key steps for parents if their child tells them they have been bullied:

1. **listen** carefully to what your child wants to say
2. **reassure** your child that they are not to blame and ask open and empathetic questions to find out more details
3. **ask** your child what they want to do and what they want you to do
4. **discuss** with your child some sensible strategies to handle the bullying – starting a fight is not sensible
5. **contact** the school

What strategies can parents suggest to their child who is being physically bullied?

The Bullying. No Way! website provides information about various strategies. These can be tried to avoid physical bullying situations:

1. **avoid areas** which allow the bullying students to avoid detection by teachers
2. stay with **other students**
3. **talk** to a trusted adult at school or home

What strategies can parents suggest to their child who is being verbally or socially bullied?

The Bullying. No Way! website provides information about various strategies. These can be tried if the child feels safe:

1. **walk away**
2. try to **act unaffected** or unimpressed
3. try to **deflect** the bullying behaviour (e.g. pretending to agree in an offhand way 'okay, yeah, maybe')
4. **say 'No!'** or 'Stop it!' firmly
5. **talk** to a trusted adult at the school or at home

What should parents avoid telling their children to do?

Strategies not recommended for dealing with bullying include:

- fighting back
- bullying the person who has bullied them
- remaining silent about the problem.

What can parents do if they are told or suspect that their child is bullying others?

The Bullying. No Way! website provides information about things to do. If a parent suspects their child has been bullying others, they can talk to their child about:

- why they have been behaving this way
- taking responsibility for their behaviour



Fast Facts: Bullying in Schools

- how to sort out differences and resolve conflicts
- how to treat others with respect
- the effect of bullying behaviour on others
- the need to repair harm they have caused to others
- the need to restore relationships.

Parents may also like to talk to their child's school to come up with a plan to help their child learn more appropriate ways to behave.

What can parents expect from their child's school

Most schools have a written policy about how they manage student behaviour, including bullying. Schools will consider your child's circumstances and will develop the most appropriate strategies for them. These strategies could include:

- teaching and learning programs to develop students' communication, social, assertiveness and coping skills
- changes to the school environment such as redesigning the playground
- increasing teachers' supervision of students at particular times or places
- support from a school counsellor, psychologist or guidance officer
- mediation for the students involved with a trained teacher to resolve their problem
- changes to technology access at school
- timetable or class changes (that may be temporary or permanent) to decrease the contact the students have with each other
- disciplinary action for students who continue to bully others despite the efforts of the school to promote appropriate behaviour.

The school may develop an action plan for your child and any other children involved. Strategies you could use at home may also be included in this plan.

What can students do if bullying happens?

What can I do if I am being bullied in person?

If you are being bullied, and you feel safe to do so:

- **say 'No!'** or 'Stop it!' firmly
- **walk away**
- try to **act unaffected** or ignore the person
- **talk** to a trusted adult at the school or at home
- **ask friends, parents or teachers for their help** to deal with the issue safely.

Having the courage to talk to someone is important if you are being bullied. Sometimes, just telling the bully to stop can be effective. If that doesn't work ask friends, parents or teachers for their help to deal with the issue safely.



Fast Facts: Bullying in Schools

What can I do if I am being bullied online?

If you are being bullied online (cyberbullied), and you feel safe to do so:

- **don't respond** to the message or image
- **save the evidence** as a screenshot if you wish to use it as part of dealing with the bullying
- **block** the sender and delete the message
- **report** the situation to the website or Internet Service Provider
- **talk** to trusted people—friends, adults, teachers, parents and police if necessary.

What can I do if I see someone else being bullied?

The Bullying. No Way! website provides information about things to do. If you see someone else being bullied, and feel safe to do so, you can:

- refuse to join in
- not watch
- tell the person doing the bullying to stop
- tell the person doing the bullying that you will talk to a teacher
- say something supportive to the person who is being bullied or invite them to join your group
- say to the person being bullied that the other person's behaviour is not okay.

Who to talk to

Who can parents or students talk to for help?

To talk to someone go to:

Kids' Helpline 1800 55 1800 or www.kidshelp.com.au

Parents' Helplines (each state has a helpline)

To report online bullying (cyberbullying) go to:

Cybersmart – Online help and reporting www.cybersmart.gov.au/report.aspx

To report bullying that may constitute a crime go to:

Australian Federal Police www.afp.gov.au

For more information and support go to:

Reach Out www.reachout.com.au

Beyondblue www.beyondblue.org.au

Headspace www.headspace.org.au

Australian Psychological Society www.psychology.org.au

Australian Guidance and Counselling Association www.agca.com.au

For more information related to bullying go to:

Bullying. No Way! www.bullyingnoway.gov.au