

Research snapshot from a literature review

by Australia's Safe and Supportive School Communities Working Group



Who is involved in bullying?

- Bullying is highly dynamic, and can vary according to the interactions involved, and across social and physical contexts.
- Individuals can play various roles in bullying, including the individuals being bullied, those bullying others, and bystanders who may be assistants, reinforcers, outsiders or defenders. One individual can play one role, e.g. assistant, in one context while taking a different role, e.g. the person being bullied, in another.
- It is more useful for understanding the bullying dynamic in a group of students to focus on the roles played by everyone within the peer group context, and the often varying roles within and immediately around this group, rather than focusing on one individual.
- In school environments, the labels 'bully', 'bully-victim' and 'victim' can lead to rigid or essentialist thinking (i.e. the 'problem' is permanent and existing within an individual), and to blaming and punitive approaches.
- Recent research has looked at the social purposes of bullying within students' interpersonal and social development. This work provides insights into the reasons some students are more likely to be involved in any of the roles.
- While research over many years has suggested that the characteristics of certain students makes them more likely to be bullied, the overall picture is that any 'non-normative' characteristic that sets a child apart from the group places them at greater risk of being bullied.
- Standing out in any way increases the risk of being bullied. This suggests that the social function of bullying for students is often to 'enforce' the accepted social norms within the peer group. The social norms of a student group are drawn from what they observe in the wider community, e.g. norms about gender-appropriate behaviour, ability, appearance.
- Understanding the motivations, values and beliefs of all students in all roles involved in bullying provides a basis for prevention and responses in schools that acknowledge bullying as having a social purpose for the students involved.

- Understanding how children and young people make sense of bullying within their peer social cultures is central to understanding their actions, and to developing appropriate anti-bullying approaches with them.
- Young people commonly identify enhancing social status as a key motivator for bullying.
- Disengagement and emotional distancing are often exhibited by students who engage in bullying, and those who witness bullying without intervening.
- Although most incidents of bullying are witnessed by peers, most will not intervene to stop it, thus providing tacit approval for the behaviour.
- Students commonly express a belief that bullying is wrong, but may experience concern about losing social status themselves through intervening.
- Bystanders consider a number of factors in making a decision to act, including their relationship to those involved, the apparent seriousness and emotional impact, the social hierarchy, the perceived 'contributing' role of the student being bullied, and the social roles and responsibilities of everyone present.
- The role and motivations of bystanders to intervene have been a key focus in recent bullying research. It has been proposed that bystanders are the key to stopping bullying.
- The research suggests that working with bystanders to provide skills and support to safely intervene may be more successful than working only with those students directly bullying or being bullied.

Implications for schools

- The pejorative labels of 'bully' and 'victim' are not helpful for finding positive solutions; a more useful approach is to describe the roles of students involved in bullying.
- Schools should examine whether they are promoting thinking about bullying in a way that only considers the attributes of those targeted. This can potentially lead to blaming the 'victims' for their fate by allowing others to distance themselves from the harm or hurt caused.
- Given that any non-normative behaviours or physical characteristics that make students stand out increase the likelihood of them being bullied, it is important for schools to overtly and directly promote the value of diversity and inclusion.

- Schools can bring students' attention to how 'norms' in the wider community that restrict or marginalise some people's behaviour and appearance may be 're-created' at the school level.
- As bullying is a social and group process, intervention is more successful when targeted at the peer-group social level, rather than only at the individual level.
- As young people commonly identify enhancing social status as the key motivator for bullying, effective school policy and practice addresses social hierarchy and competition in schools.
- School can enhance students' awareness of the roles they play in the bullying interaction, as well as increasing their empathetic understanding of the experience of the person being bullied, in order to reduce bullying.
- Schools can teach all students appropriate and safe bystander strategies and encourage students to intervene in ways that do not compromise their own safety — this encompasses physical safety and social status.
- The assessment made by students regarding their own safety and wellbeing when they decide whether or not to intervene in bullying should be respected by the school.
- Schools may positively influence bystanders by respecting and addressing the range of complex factors which drive their behaviour choices; schools can support students to be active and safe bystanders through support, information and skilling.
- Understanding the motivations, values and beliefs of all students in all roles involved in bullying provides a basis for intervention programs, and helps to enable schools' responses to appropriately reflect bullying as a social dynamic.
- Despite whole-school approaches, some students will continue to persistently bully others and some students may continue to be more frequently bullied. These students do not necessarily respond to processes and strategies that work for most students, and require more intensive and focused intervention or case management.
- Because disengagement and emotional distancing are often exhibited by students who engage in bullying and those who witness bullying without intervening, schools can counter bullying by focusing on student engagement and on social-emotional development.

Want to know more?

This research snapshot is based on *A review of literature (2010–2014) on student bullying by Australia's Safe and Supportive School Communities Working Group. (2015).*

Other research snapshots on student bullying are available at [Bullying. No Way!](#)

Further information on bullying and on student safety and wellbeing can be found at: www.bullyingnoway.gov.au and www.safeschoolshub.edu.au