

"Stop picking on me!"

What you need to know about bullying

"Hi, guys," says Robert, the after-school program specialist, greeting his first graders. "Anybody hungry?"

The children take off their backpacks and help themselves to granola bars, apples, and milk. Willie, the smallest boy, gets pushed aside by bigger boys but manages to grab a granola bar before they're all gone.

"Willie is a weenie. Willie is a weenie," chants Jake, a large blond youngster with red cheeks. Two boys behind him chuckle, and most of the other children settle down into eating their snack.

Willie, his chin quivering, turns to Robert in a silent plea for help. Jake sees the gesture and smirks, "Willie is a tattletale."

If you were Robert, what would you do in this situation?

- Ignore the teasing. After all, "Kids will be kids."
- Say to Jake: "Cut it out. Words can hurt, and we don't allow teasing."
- Take Willie aside. "Hey, if someone is bothering you, you need to learn to stand up for yourself." Brainstorm ways to respond to future taunts.
- Plan a learning activity on how to stop hurtful behavior. As a group, read and discuss books on teasing and bullying. Empower all children to speak out against hurtful behavior when they see it happen.

Many of us can remember being in situations like the one above when we were children. Or perhaps we ourselves were the target of such behavior. Experts say teasing and bullying are commonplace in schools, not just in the United States but around the world.

Bullying in particular has gained increased attention in recent years. Hundreds of books and research articles have been published on the subject, and at least 30 states have passed anti-bullying legislation (National Conference of School Legislatures 2008).

Why the attention? Research in the aftermath of school shootings, including Columbine High School in Colorado, has found that the shooters had been severely bullied by classmates. A study of school violence by the U.S. Secret Service and U.S. Department of Education found that "almost

Texas law requires bullying prevention in public schools

The Texas Legislature in 2005 passed a law that defines bullying and requires public schools to prevent bullying behavior.

School boards must adopt a student code of conduct prohibiting bullying and provide methods of preventing, educating, and intervening in student discipline problems. Public schools must provide education about unwanted physical or verbal aggression, sexual harassment, and other forms of bullying in school, on school grounds, and in school vehicles.

Education Code, Sections 25.0342, 37.001, and 37.083.

three-quarters of the attackers felt persecuted, bullied, threatened, attacked or injured by others prior to the incident” (2002).

Research indicates that boys do most of the bullying, and they target girls as well as other boys. Among girls, bullying is more likely to take the form of emotional hurt, such as spreading hurtful rumors about another girl or excluding her from a group.

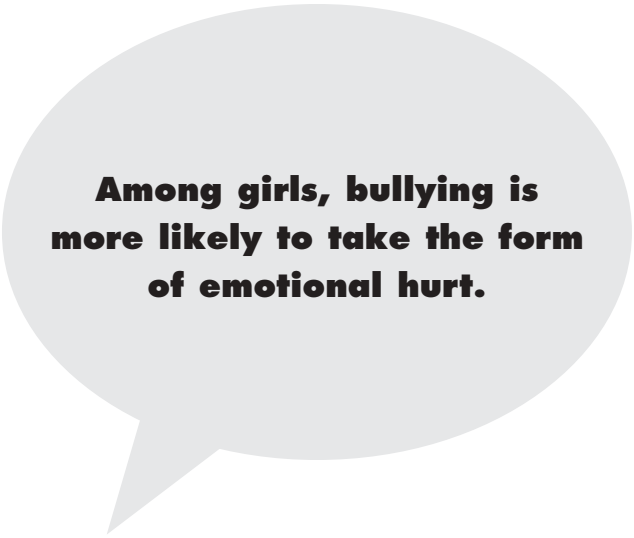
Most bullying takes place at school, typically in places with little or no adult supervision, such as the playground, cafeteria, and restroom. According to research, when teachers and other adults see or hear about bullying, they generally do nothing to stop it.

Teasing and bullying begin in the early grades and peak in middle school. The timing is linked to development. By fourth grade, children are comparing themselves to each other and become self-conscious, especially about appearance and ability. Consequently, a perceived difference is sometimes—not always—a trigger for teasing and bullying behavior.

Research findings like these have spurred the call for improved disciplinary policies and prevention efforts in schools as well as after-school programs, youth clubs, and summer camps. The fact that teasing and bullying can show up in the primary grades suggests that the precursors of this behavior may be found in early childhood and that parents and child care professionals also play a role in prevention.

A continuum of hurtful behavior

According to Barri Rosenbluth, director of school-based services at SafePlace, a domestic violence and sexual assault center in Austin, teasing and bullying can be viewed as part of a continuum of intentionally hurtful behavior. At one end of the continuum is hurtful teasing, which can include making fun of someone, name-calling, put-downs, insults, and negative gestures. At the other end is abuse and assault, which can include the use of weapons.



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Teasing becomes bullying when it is repeated over time. Like teasing, bullying can take many forms—name-calling, threats, hitting—but it usually involves an imbalance of power. The bully is often bigger, older, smarter, or more popular than the targeted child.

Sexual harassment may seem out of place in a discussion of preschool and primary school behavior, but all educators need to be aware of it. According to a study by the American Association of University Women Educational Foundation, one-third of students who experienced sexual harassment said it first occurred in sixth grade or earlier (2001).

Sexual harassment is teasing or bullying of a sexual nature using words, gestures, pictures, or actions. Boys as well as girls can be the targets, and the harassment can be about the body, boy-girl friendships, or speculation about homosexuality. Sexual harassment may occur once or many times.

In the public schools, sexual harassment is serious because it’s a form of sex discrimination prohibited by Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. Under this law, school officials must take reasonable steps to prevent and eliminate sexual harassment

Teasing

Bullying

Sexual harassment

Abuse

Assault and Violence

because it “can interfere with a student’s academic performance and emotional and physical well-being” (Office for Civil Rights 2001).

Tune in to teasing

Because intent plays a part in defining whether a behavior is hurtful, child development experts might argue that teasing and bullying don't occur until children can understand the feelings of others.


"Preschoolers say funny and absurd things that are not necessarily targeted at anyone," says Judy Freedman, an elementary school social worker, in her book *Easing the Teasing* (2002). "They are often experimenting with words they have recently learned."

Teasing becomes sharper as children expand their vocabulary and improve their verbal skills. "They think it's funny to rhyme a word with someone's name, as in the case of a second-grader who was called 'Fartin' Martin,'" says Freedman. But as children develop empathy, they are less likely to ridicule someone for a name or other qualities beyond a person's control.

Experienced teachers also recognize that much teasing is good-natured and friendly. Best friends may josh each other for fun, and children might tease another child as a sign of welcome into a group.

What's harder to discern is teasing that's iffy, as though the teaser is testing for a reaction. If the targeted child cringes or punches back, the teaser may continue, delighted at finding a hot button. But if the targeted child tosses it off, the two may continue joking around, or the teaser may look for another target.

Experts say teasing becomes hurtful if the teaser intends to be cruel or if the targeted child feels upset, angry, or afraid as a result, regardless of the intent.



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Bullying online

With the proliferation of communication gadgets, bullying has leaped from the playground to cyberspace. Children and youth can cyberbully each other online through e-mails, instant messaging, blogs, and chat rooms as well as text messages on cell phones.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration. "Cyberbullying." Stop Bullying Now campaign. www.stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov/adult/indexAdult.asp?Area=cyberbullying

How's a teacher to know? "Talk to the targeted child privately," advises Rosenbluth. "Don't just assume the child will come to you." Ask: "What did you feel after Marianne's comment about your freckles?" or "How did you feel when Aaron shoved you?"

Why it matters

For children targeted by teasers and bullies, school is miserable and frightening. They may experience headaches, stomachaches, bedwetting, and restless sleep. They can feel depressed, inadequate, and lonely. Other children may avoid them, fearing they may also become targets, leaving the targeted child with no friends.

Targeted children may resist going to school out of fear for their safety. They may develop a dislike for school and fall behind their peers in learning. In extreme cases, if the bullying continues into the teen years, students can react by harming themselves or seeking revenge.

Children who do the teasing and bullying are usually popular and confident. But experts say they lack empathy and believe that such behavior is OK, even desirable. They need positive role models and help in learning social skills. Without that, they become at risk for other problem behaviors.

Bullying also affects bystanders. Non-targeted children can feel afraid and vulnerable at school. Their learning may falter as well.

Why it happens

Many authorities say teasing and bullying are part of the larger issue of aggressive behavior in much of modern life. Studies attribute aggression to media violence, poverty, poor child-rearing practices, abusive home environments, and other factors.

Researchers Pamela Orpinas and Arthur Horne (2006) say the roots of hurtful behavior are better described as *risk factors*, not *causes*. Risk factors refer to personal or environmental characteristics that indicate a greater likelihood of behaving a certain way. For example, harsh parental punishment by itself does not make a child tease and bully others. But several risk factors taken together may indicate a greater tendency to hurt other children.

Orpinas and Horne argue that in addition to risk factors, educators must also consider protective factors—that is, characteristics that help diminish the likelihood of teasing and bullying. See the table below for an abbreviated list of both factors.

Teachers and caregivers can do a great deal to prevent hurtful behavior, but no one can do it alone. The most effective prevention, says Rosenbluth, is a “caring community.”

Assess the environment

Survey teachers and parents about their perceptions of the climate in your program. Do children enjoy being there? Have they bonded with staff? Do they have friends? Are teasing and bullying an issue? Invite an expert on the subject to speak at a parents meeting and distribute handouts to provide more information. (For free, downloadable tip sheets, see <http://stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov/index.asp>.)

Talk with officials in public and private schools in your neighborhood. What are they doing about bullying prevention? Consult with leaders of nearby libraries, parks, and youth clubs about the programs they offer. Look for ways to collaborate in prevention efforts.

Risk and protective factors for aggressive behavior

RISK FACTORS

The child:

- lacks problem-solving skills.
- holds beliefs that support violence.
- expects success when using aggression as well as a lack of negative consequences.

The child's parents:

- have a negative relationship with the child.
- do not set limits and consequences for the child's negative behavior.
- display aggression, including abuse of a partner or children.

The school:

- has a negative climate.
- does not encourage positive relationships between teachers and students.
- lacks supervision.
- has no policies against bullying.
- has a punitive discipline system.

The community:

- has high levels of violence.
- supports portrayal of violence in the media.

PROTECTIVE FACTORS

The child:

- uses problem-solving skills and makes friends.
- displays positive values such as honesty and respect.
- has high self-esteem.

The child's parents:

- are loving and caring.
- provide active supervision.
- are involved in the child's school and activities.

The school:

- has a positive climate.
- encourages positive relationships between teachers and students.
- provides high levels of supervision.
- has clear policies against bullying.
- fosters excellence in teaching.
- provides children opportunities for meaningful participation in school activities.
- provides extra academic help for students who need it.
- has high expectations for all students.

The community:

- values young people and education.
- provides supervised activities for children and youth.
- supports educational media.
- celebrates diversity.

Adapted from Orpinas, Pamela, and Arthur Horne. 2006. *Bullying Prevention: Creating a Positive School Climate and Developing Social Competence*. Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, pages 38-39.

Examine your policies that deal with child guidance and supervision, particularly in your after-school program. According to the authors of *Quit it!* (1998), a teacher's guide for teasing and bullying prevention, a clearly stated, consistent school-wide policy is "an effective tool in combating teasing and bullying."

Rosenbluth, who has trained public school administrators and teachers in bullying prevention, says the ideal school policy specifically prohibits hurtful teasing and bullying. The policy also provides a way to document students' and parents' complaints, outlines an investigation process, and provides a stay-away agreement to separate the bully and the targeted child.

As you review policies, inform everyone in your school community—board members, teachers, staff, volunteers, and parents. Provide training so teachers and staff recognize and respond appropriately to hurtful behavior. Offer a workshop for parents to help them talk with their children about the subject.

Set clear rules and consequences

As children learn social skills, they are influenced by many factors. Perhaps the most powerful is the behavior they see in adults and other children. If they see adults and playmates acting with kindness and respect, children are likely to develop kind and respectful behavior.

Another powerful influence is culture. Children learn how they are expected to behave from home

Teacher training resource

School-based Services, SafePlace, Austin
www.safeplace.org
Contact: Barri Rosenbluth
Phone 512-356-1628
E-mail brosenbluth@safeplace.org

life, their racial or ethnic group, church, and community life. They get messages from stories, television, toys, games, sports, clothing, advertising, and store displays. Research has shown that boys are often encouraged to take risks, seek adventure, and be aggressive. Girls, on the other hand, are encouraged to be nurturing, show their emotions, and seek protection.

When boys ridicule or shove someone and get away with it, children learn that boys are behaving in a normal and accepted way. The same is true when girls whisper hurtful things about another girl and exclude her from their play.

Counteract these influences by modeling desired behavior and challenging gender stereotypes. Address gender put-downs just as you would address racial or ethnic slurs. Encourage boys to express their feelings and be nurturing, and urge girls to take reasonable risks and stand up for themselves.

Rethink areas or times when supervision may be lacking, such as nap time and outdoor play. Train staff to improve the way they monitor areas, and



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consider involving other staff or volunteers as extra eyes and ears.

Review with children the rules for appropriate behavior and the consequences for breaking rules. Younger children often need reminders. About age 4 or 5, you can engage children in discussing the reasons behind rules and get their input on setting rules for the classroom.

An emphasis on rules may bring an increase in tattling. Experienced teachers know that some children use tattling to get attention or get another child in trouble. They handle it by having children write their complaints and drop them in a tattle box, which the teacher later reads. It may also help to consider the tattle-versus-tell guideline: Is the child trying to get someone in trouble (tattling) or get someone out of trouble (telling)?

Tattling may also be a way for children to test what a rule is and how you will enforce it. You can confirm (or deny) the rule and assure the child that you will handle it. If the information indicates a child is at risk of physical or emotional harm, you need to deal with the situation immediately.

Teach positive social skills

Review your curriculum unit on friends. Help children learn effective ways of joining a play group, making conversation, and sharing interests. When children squabble, teach problem-solving techniques.

Offer cooperative games and learning opportunities. Call attention to children's positive behaviors such as sharing, listening, and helping when you see them happening.

Encourage teachers and after-school caregivers to learn about each child in the group as an individual. Knowing every child's personality, friendships, and behavior patterns will help you distinguish between friendly and hurtful teasing, and between rough play and bullying.

In group time, read books on teasing and bullying. Engage children in discussion: How did the targeted child feel? How did the bully feel? How did the bystanders feel? What happened to stop the hurtful behavior? What might you do if you saw the same thing happen to a classmate?

Brainstorm with children about what they might do to help someone being teased or bullied. If they feel safe, they might tell the bully to stop or invite the targeted child to play with them. If they don't feel safe, they might tell an adult.

Emphasize that they should not just stand and watch. Explain that speaking up takes courage and that telling an adult about hurtful behavior is not tattling. Children can ask a friend to help befriend the targeted child or go with them to tell an adult. Explain that the adult will listen and do something.

Intervene in hurtful behavior

When hurtful teasing and bullying occur, adults have a responsibility to stop it. Ignoring hurtful behavior can inadvertently promote it and all its negative effects. Some tips:

- Stand between the teasers or bullies and the targeted child. Do not send any participants or bystanders away. Using a moderate tone of voice, state what you heard or saw happening. State that teasing and bullying are against school rules.
- Reassure the targeted child. Don't force the child to answer questions in front of the other children. If the child is upset, talk in private. Increase supervision of the child to make sure bullying does not happen again. Give the child time to express anger or sadness. Help the child find classmates who can offer support.
- Speak to the bystanders. If they did nothing, say, "Maybe you didn't know what to do." Explain that teasing and bullying are "not cool." Suggest that next time they could tell the bully to stop, involve the targeted child in play, or go to an adult for help. If they acted appropriately, acknowledge the behavior without lavish, public praise.

- Impose consequences on the teasers or bullies, as outlined in your policy. Make sure the consequences are reasonable and related to the behavior.

Be prepared to hear defenses such as, “I didn’t mean to hurt him,” or “I just called him a name.” Respond by restating what happened: “It did hurt” or “Name-calling is hurtful.”
- Allow children time to cool off. Don’t force an apology. Watch the children closely for possible future hurtful behavior. Help them learn to take responsibility for their actions and offer activities to help them develop empathy.
- If appropriate, notify parents of children who are involved. Set up a parent-teacher conference and discuss social skills. For the targeted child: “How can we help Willie make friends and develop

more self-confidence?” For the teaser: “How can we help Jake understand that name-calling is hurtful?”

It’s not a one-shot solution

It should be clear that in the opening example about Willie and Jake, ignoring hurtful behavior is not the answer. It should also be clear that stopping hurtful behavior is not a one-person, one-time fix.

Reducing aggressive behavior in school is everyone’s problem and requires a long-term solution. After-school caregivers can help children learn positive social skills and intervene in hurtful behaviors. Early childhood educators can work with parents to create a caring environment at home and at school that builds a foundation for learning.

Everyone agrees children should feel safe in school. They need to feel at ease and free to play and learn. They cannot learn if they feel threatened or afraid of their peers.

Books for children

Ludwig, Trudy. 2003. *My Secret Bully*. Ashland, Ore.: Riverbend Books.

Monica is having headaches and stomachaches. Under questioning from her mother, Monica starts crying and reveals that a longtime friend has been saying bad things about her to other girls. Mom teaches Monica how to stand up for herself.

McCain, Becky Ray. 2001. *Nobody Knew What To Do: A Story About Bullying*. Morton Grove, Ill.: Albert Whitman & Co.

Children observe bullying at recess. The next day when the targeted child doesn’t come to school, one boy reports the incident to his teacher. Both the teacher and the principal take action.

Romain, Trevor. 1997. *Bullies Are a Pain in the Brain*. Minneapolis, Minn.: Free Spirit Publishing.

This popular children’s book author explains in simple words and black-and-white cartoons what bullying is and how to avoid it. He addresses most of the book to targeted children but devotes a few pages to bullies and ends with a message to teachers and parents.

Thomas, Pat. 2000. *Stop Picking on Me: A First Look at Bullying*. Hauppauge, N.Y.: Barron’s Educational Series, Inc.

Using compassionate words and aided by vivid watercolor illustrations, author Pat Thomas explains what bullying is and how to stop it.

What NOT to do

- Many people believe the solution to bullying is to urge the targeted child to fight back. It’s not uncommon to hear stories about this method’s success: “I hit Joey in the mouth, and he never bothered me again.”

While fighting back may work on occasion, it has drawbacks. The targeted child may suffer injury, or the incident may set in motion a cycle of revenge attacks. Most important, urging children to fight back reinforces the message that some problems can best be solved with violence.
- Well-meaning adults may suggest having the bully and targeted child sit down together and work out their “conflict.” This suggestion is misguided for three reasons.

First, having the bully sit face-to-face with the targeted child may put the child at further risk of humiliation and harm.

Second, the behavior is not about conflict any more than child abuse is about disagreement. The teaser or bully intends to inflict harm. Calling it a conflict sends the message that both children are partly responsible.

Third, there is no evidence that conflict resolution or peer mediation is effective in stopping bullying.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration. Stop Bullying Now campaign. “Misdirections in Bullying Prevention and Intervention,” <http://stop-bullyingnow.hrsa.gov/index.asp>

Reducing aggressive behavior in school is everyone's problem and requires a long-term solution.

Books for teachers and parents

Bott, C.J. 2004. *The Bully in the Book and in the Classroom*. Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press.

This book contains annotated bibliographies in four sections: grades K-3, 4-6, 7-8 and 9-12. In addition, the author spotlights 8-10 books in each section with a brief summary and cover photo as well as discussion questions to use with children.

Froschl, Merle; Barbara Sprung, and Nancy Mullin-Rindler. 1998. *Quit it! A Teacher's Guide on Teasing and Bullying for Use with Students in Grades K-3*. A joint publication of Educational Equity Concepts Inc., New York; Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, Wellesley, Mass.; and the National Education Association, Washington, D.C.



Lee, Chris. 2004. *Preventing Bullying in Schools: A Guide for Teachers and Other Professionals*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Mullin, Nancy. 2003. *Selected Bibliography About Teasing and Bullying for Grades K-8: Revised and Expanded Edition*. Wellesley, Mass.: Wellesley College Center for Research on Women.

For more than three decades, the Wellesley Centers for Research on Women have studied issues such as gender equity in education, sexual harassment, and child care, resulting in changes in practices and policies. This bibliography can be ordered for \$15 at www.wcwonline.org.

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U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration. Stop Bullying Now campaign. <http://stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov/index.asp>.