

Create a bully-free environment at your school

One out of five youth identifies as a bullying victim, according to a recent federal study. These results mirror a similar survey published two years earlier. Bullying is a pervasive problem and cyberbullying, especially among female victims, is on the rise, according to the survey.¹

A rise in cyberbullying amid a steady rate of bullying means school leaders must recognize the factors contributing to bullying behavior. Only then can a bully-free school be cultivated. This research brief prepares school leaders to eradicate this bullying epidemic by answering some pressing questions about this topic: What makes a bully? What are the long-term effects of bullying? What are best practices in K-12 school bullying prevention?



What Makes a Bully?

A **U.K.** study examined reasons why teenagers bullied others. The results showed that many picked on others because of their identity or how they measure up against their school's values. For example, if a school emphasizes STEM, a bully may pick on students who do not meet benchmark expectations in STEM courses.

Research also shows **family dynamics** can foster bullying. Parental discipline such as shaming and yelling, lack of parental empathy, parental discord and child abuse may be contributing factors. Bullies, compared to their peers, often did not live with both parents and were more susceptible to mental health issues such as anxiety.

Recent research on rural middle school students also points to a relationship between not **belonging** and bullying. Kids who feel connected at home often feel connected at school. Feeling connected is associated

with less bullying, says the research. Strong school-family partnerships can promote connectedness among students, families and schools.

Increasing rates of female cyberbullying victims may be related to **relational aggression**, which is the damage bullying creates to one's relationships or social status. Girls are often taught to follow society's norms to keep friendships and/or relationships. Girls who bully by engaging in relational aggression target what's most vulnerable to victims – relationships. For example, rather than openly expressing unpopular opinions or feelings such as anger, girls often redirect their anger through gossip.

Bias may also contribute to bullying behavior. For example, bullies may target aspects of a classmate's identity like "race, religion, disability, immigration status, sexual orientation, gender identity, physical appearance, etc.," notes **Edutopia**. This is often most detrimental since it targets a person's essence.

► What makes a bully?

There are many reasons why kids become bullies. Some factors may include family dynamics, biases, social status and lack of belonging.

► What are the effects of bullying?

Bullying victims may experience depression, PTSD, low self-esteem and mistrust. Bully-victims often have more health and mental health struggles through adulthood than their peers who are not bullied.

► What can schools do?

- Incorporate anti-bias education into the curriculum.
- Focus on literature, drama and the arts, which help students gain perspective-taking skills.
- Prioritize teacher professional development to clarify what bullying is and how to deal with it.
- View bullying behavior through a lens of possible student trauma.

¹ Ho, Sally. Girls report three times more online harassment than boys amid rise in cyberbullying. Time. July 26, 2019.



Bullying in middle school may serve a **social purpose**. A study found that middle school students equated coolness with bullying behaviors like fighting. This social status factor gels well with **new research** that says bullies often have either intact or high self-esteem. High self-esteem and school bullying tends to occur when there are **school climate** problems.

respect, care and safety as well as schools that value social-emotional competencies have less occurrences of bullying.

Prioritizing professional development for teachers regarding bullying and establishing bullying prevention oversight committees can help cultivate bully-free schools, according to Dr. Jaana Juvonen, a UCLA developmental psychologist.

Providing alternative ways for bullies to gain **social dominance** can also help. Educators can recognize talents in bullies and cultivate their skills in a given subject or activity. This gives bullies an opportunity to pursue acclaim elsewhere rather than intimidate others.

Supporting victims

The **pervasive** nature of bullying can undermine efforts to help true bullying victims by spreading support thin. Moreover, crying bully in instances that do not warrant it can often preclude students from cultivating conflict resolution skills.

Curricula and communication strategies can also promote positive school environments. Addressing the multitude of ways humans are **different and unique** through literature is one way to create a safe classroom. In addition to literature, drama and **the arts** help kids learn to take someone else's perspective. Incorporating "**community check-ins**" with students' families, at all levels, but especially elementary grades, ensures open lines of communication and a shared school philosophy.

Lastly, it is important to note that what looks like bullying may actually be behavior due to trauma, says Douglas W. Huntley, Ed.D., superintendent of schools at Queensbury Union Free School District. In this district, school administrators, faculty and staff are trained in Adverse Childhood Experiences (**ACES**), which identifies trauma and abuse experiences in youth. This tool has proven to be helpful for understanding that student misbehavior can often be due to student trauma. The district uses restorative justice practices, **Boys Town** and **TCIS Training**, and houses an onsite mental health clinic.

Understanding what makes a bully, the effects bullies have on victims and what schools can do to eradicate bullying empowers school boards to make effective local decisions regarding professional development, communication strategies, curriculum development and resource allocation.

Defining bullying

Confusion surrounding the **definition** of bullying may hinder prevention. Bullying is often operationalized in an academic way: "... something that is reportedly done to be intentionally cruel and by a kid who is more powerful than the victim." But experts ask, what is a cruel intention?

What are the effects of bullying?

The effects of bullying on victims are multi-fold. Low self-esteem, health problems and mistrust are common among victims. Bullied kids may become depressed, which may contribute to suicidal thoughts. Many victims suffer from **post-traumatic stress disorder** (PTSD). As adults, situations can trigger flashbacks to traumatic bullying events that occurred during childhood.

In adulthood, those bullied and victimized tend to have less education and finances than their peers. One study shows bullies and kids who were both bullied and victimized (**bully-victims**) partake in riskier behaviors such as using drugs. The longitudinal study tracked more than 1,400 kids and teenagers through early adulthood. Findings show bully-victims had the most health and mental health struggles including anxiety and depression compared to bullies or their peers.

What can schools do?

Many scholars say **school boards** have not done enough to stem bullying because they often prioritize parental fear and, therefore, often punishment, over research. Scholars note that anti-bullying programs, in general, do not show much overall effectiveness. However, schools with higher ratings of

Understanding which strategies discourage aggressive behavior is helpful to developing a bully-free environment. **Punishment** as the main deterrent to bullying does not work. Suspensions convey that bullying behavior is not acceptable, but suspensions do not encourage appropriate ways of interacting nor do suspensions address possible emotional issues bullies may have. Punishment may actually foster **aggression** because it models for youth that those in power can determine the fate of those not in power. Moreover, bullying can be embedded in institutional policies, procedures and organizational norms. An example of this is when school policies dictate that student punishment includes no recess.

A viable alternative is **Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports** (PBIS). A proven **multi-tiered intervention model**, PBIS addresses multiple levels of support within a school from the whole school support to one-to-one interventions.

Anti-bias education can also help reduce bullying. Culturally responsive teaching and educating students about identity and the nature of bias will help foster bias-free school environments. Kids model what they see, so school administrators and teachers need to be bully-free in their interactions.