

Bullying Prevention and Intervention Among School-Age Youth

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) supports equal access to education and mental health services for all youth within public, charter, and private schools. Aggression, harassment, and intimidation have a negative impact on academic achievement, and they violate the right of students to receive equal educational opportunities. Failure to address bullying in the school setting perpetuates an environment that is unsafe and detrimental to academic success, social–emotional development, and mental wellness. NASP believes that school psychologists are ethically obligated to develop and support schools that provide an equal opportunity for students to learn and develop in an environment free from discrimination, harassment, aggression, violence, and abuse.

The U.S. Department of Education has called for a united effort to address and prevent bullying (www.stopbullying.gov). It takes an entire school community to create a healthy school climate where all students feel that they belong and are safe. Working together, administrators, teachers, school staff, parents, and students can help stop bullying in schools.

DEFINITION OF BULLYING

Bullying behaviors may be persistently directed at the target based on a student’s actual or perceived race, color, weight, national origin, ethnic group, religion, religious practice, disability, sexual orientation, gender, physical appearance, sex, or other distinguishing characteristics.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention defines bullying behavior as:

any unwanted aggressive behavior(s) by another youth or group of youths, who are not siblings or current dating partners, involving an observed or perceived power imbalance. These behaviors are repeated multiple times or are highly likely to be repeated. Bullying may inflict harm or distress on the targeted youth including physical, psychological, social, or educational harm. (Gladden et al., 2014, p. 7)

The following types of bullying are most common among children and adolescents and typically co-occur (Wang et al., 2012):

- **Physical**—includes hitting, kicking, pinching, punching, scratching, spitting, other physical aggression, and damage to or theft of someone else’s belongings.
- **Verbal**—includes name-calling; insults; racist, sexist, or homophobic jokes, remarks, or teasing; use of sexually suggestive or abusive language; threats of violence; and offensive remarks.
- **Relational/social**—includes spreading untrue stories about someone, excluding someone from social groups (social isolation), and being made the subject of malicious rumors.
- **Cyberbullying**—covers any type of bullying that is carried out via an electronic medium such as text messaging, cell phone calls, pictures or video clips via mobile phone cameras, email, chat rooms, social networking sites and apps, and other websites.

Bullying is different than targeted violence. Targeted violence refers to violence that is goal-directed, predatory, and focused towards specific individuals (e.g., stalking, terrorism, sexual assault; Deisinger &

Scalora, 2016). The term *targeted violence* evolved from the Secret Service's 5- year study of the behavior of individuals who have carried out, or attempted, lethal attacks on public officials or prominent individuals (Fein et al., 1995).

CURRENT PREVALENCE OF BULLYING

Bullying has gained unprecedented national attention in recent years due to its prevalence and detrimental impact on students. In 2017, 19% of high school students reported being bullied on school property during the past year. The percentage of students who were bullied at school did not change significantly from 2009 through 2017 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2018). Bullying is not a new concern; various forms of bullying have been prevalent in schools for decades. Cyberbullying or electronic aggression is also a public health issue that is creating unique and difficult challenges for school personnel. The High School Youth Risk Behavior Survey also indicated that 14.9% of students reported being victims of some form of cyberbullying. The percentage of high school students who were electronically bullied did not change significantly from 2011 through 2017 (CDC, 2018). According to a study conducted by Hinduja and Patchin (2018), 33.8% of students reported being cyberbullied, while 11.5% admitted to cyberbullying others. Researchers have found that 27% of youth who were victims of cyberbullying have also carried a weapon to school (David-Ferdon & Hertz, 2007; Ybarra, Diener-West, & Leaf, 2007).

Bullying victimization is associated with increases in psychological distress, especially internalizing problems such as depression and anxiety (Espelage & Holt, 2013; Goldblum, Espelage, Chu, & Bongar, 2015; Wang, Nansel, & Iannotti, 2010) and a heightened risk for child and adolescent suicides (CDC, 2014). Bullying perpetration is also associated with high-risk behaviors such as weapon carrying (Dukes, Stein, & Zane, 2010) and substance use (Kim, Catalano, Haggerty, & Abbott, 2011). Youth who engage in bullying others are also more likely to have poor academic achievement and have more negative perceptions of the school climate (Glew et al., 2005; Nickerson, Singleton, Schnurr, & Collen, 2014). Students from marginalized populations are at a greater risk for being bullied, including those who identify as LGBTQI2-S (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, intersex, two-spirit; Berlan, Corliss, Field, Goodman, & Austin, 2010; Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2010) and students with disabilities (Rose, Espelage, & Monda-Amaya, 2009).

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

Although there is no federal law on bullying, state laws address bullying and cyberbullying (see <https://www.stopbullying.gov/laws/index.html> and <https://cyberbullying.org/cyberbullying-laws>). In addition, some bullying behaviors can constitute civil rights violations. Many children targeted for bullying behavior perceive their schools as being hostile environments, but civil rights protections against harassment apply only to children who fall into protected classes, such as racial and ethnic minorities, students with disabilities, and victims of gender harassment or religious discrimination (Cornell & Limber, 2015). The U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR) has recognized that some students' misconduct may trigger responsibilities under one or more federal antidiscrimination laws enforced by the OCR. Specifically, the relevant statutes include:

- Title IV of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Title IV), which prohibits discrimination based on race, color, or national origin;
- Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 (Title IX), which prohibits discrimination based on sex;

- Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, which both prohibit discrimination based on disability.

In October 2010, the OCR indicated that

School districts may violate these civil rights statutes and the Department’s implementing regulations when peer harassment based on race, color, national origin, sex, or disability is sufficiently serious that it creates a hostile environment and such harassment is encouraged, tolerated, not adequately addressed, or ignored by school employees (OCR, 2010, p. 1).

The harassment does not have to include intent to harm, be directed at a specific target, or involve repeated incidents. Thus, schools must do more than take steps to end the harassment; schools must also “eliminate any hostile environment and its effects, and prevent the harassment from occurring” (OCR, 2010, pp. 2–3). The U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) issued “Dear Colleague Letters” on Bullying of Students with Disabilities that provided additional guidance to schools that the bullying of a student with a disability on any basis can result in a denial of FAPE under IDEA which must be remedied (OSERS, 2013, 2014).

RECOMMENDED SCHOOL-BASED BULLYING PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION

There is a growing body of guidance on how to approach the problem of bullying comprehensively within a social–ecological framework. Special issues of *School Psychology Review* (Rose, Nickerson, & Stormont, 2015) and the *American Psychologist* (Hymel & Swearer, 2015) offer in-depth guidance about these issues. The following are recommendations for best practices in bullying prevention and intervention:

- **Teach social, emotional, and behavior competencies early and often** through systematic approaches such as school-wide positive behavioral intervention and support (PBIS; Waasdorp, Bradshaw, & Leaf, 2012) and social–emotional learning (SEL; Durlak et al., 2011).
- **Develop and implement antibullying policies.** Having comprehensive policies that define and prohibit bullying, delineate processes for handling bullying, and provide accountability for implementation and changing the behavior are important in creating a safe and respectful school climate (Cosgrove & Nickerson, 2017; Hatzenbuehler et al., 2015).
- **Understand the connection between bullying and mental health problems.** Research has consistently shown that bullies, targets, and bully-targets have poor mental health prognoses. Involvement in bullying has been linked to depression, anxiety, increased school drop-out rates, and increased suicide ideation, thus impacting academic achievement (Espelage & Holt, 2013; Goldblum, Espelage, Chu, & Bongar, 2015; Wang, Nansel, & Iannotti, 2010).
- **Teach the responsible use of technology.** Schools can offer programs and lessons to help students learn and use respectful communication in the cyberworld.
- **Pay special attention to the needs of marginalized youth (e.g., LGBTQI2-S, religious minorities, students with disabilities).** Young people who do not conform to traditional gender expectations, are members of a religious minority, have disabilities, or are otherwise socially different, are at increased risk for being bullied. Schools can address this by creating an environment that promotes respect for diversity through structures (e.g., Gay Straight Alliances, multicultural clubs) and supports (Poteat et al., 2013; Shriberg, Song, Miranda, & Radliff (2013).
- **Use a comprehensive approach.** Focus on mental health services for youth suffering from depression and anxiety, and also implement evidence-based interventions that improve the school environment and provide supports to bullies, targeted students, and families to reduce bullying. Structure supports within a multitiered system of support framework (Cowan, Vaillancourt, Rossen, & Pollitt, 2013).

- **Focus on bystanders.** Create a school culture in which students who witness bullying are empowered to stop harassment and intimidation. Teach all students the specific skills necessary to prevent and respond to bullying (Nickerson, Feeley, & Tsay-Vogel, 2017).
- **Collaborate with parents.** Parents are important components of comprehensive bullying prevention and intervention plans. Involving parents through “stakeholder” meetings to gather feedback and share information, communicating through newsletters and other district media sources related to prevention and intervention plans, and communicating individually when their child is either engaging in or targeted by bullying are critical to effective planning.

ROLE OF THE SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGIST

School psychologists are uniquely positioned to use their knowledge of psychology, education, and child development, and their consultation and advocacy skills, to affect policies and practices within schools. School psychologists can also advance new knowledge of best practices in bullying prevention and intervention through research and program evaluation. Because school psychologists work directly with students, as well as with staff, parents, and administrators, practitioners are encouraged to take a leadership role in developing comprehensive approaches to bullying prevention and school-wide climate improvement (Swearer, Espelage, & Napolitano, 2009). School psychologists can have a direct role in preventing bullying through direct and indirect services provided to children, families, and schools. These activities fit well in a multitiered systems of support (MTSS) framework to address a comprehensive bullying prevention and intervention approach.

Tier 1

- Develop school-wide prevention activities (e.g., PBIS framework, SEL initiatives).
- Train the entire school staff in developing and implementing positive behavioral interventions that prevent bullying, reduce bystander involvement, and promote students’ social–emotional development using discipline-related incidents as potential learning opportunities (i.e., teachable moments).
- Provide consultation to help schools form effective school safety and crisis response teams (e.g., NASP’s PREP₂RE curriculum).
- Reference federal and state policies to help educate district and school professionals on antibullying policies that can provide clear and consistent guidelines for bullying behaviors.
- Consult with school staff in implementing social skills programs and other programs that teach peaceful ways to resolve conflicts.
- Participate in and facilitate evidence-based procedures to respond to bullying behavior.
- Serve on district and school safety and crisis teams to help implement and evaluate comprehensive safety initiatives.
- Participate in conducting a needs assessment and program evaluation regarding aggression, violence, and crisis needs at the school and district levels.
- Systematically identify internalizing/externalizing behaviors (i.e., universal screening) to facilitate identify students in need of intervention.

Tier 2

- Offer targeted prevention activities to help students develop appropriate social skills.
- Provide consultation to the parents/guardians of bullies and targets to offer them effective resources, supportive interventions, and strategies for managing behavior.

Tier 3

- Provide individualized mental health intervention and supports as necessary, such as counseling. Bullying occurs along a continuum—victim, bully-victim, bully, and bystander.
- Conduct informative social–emotional assessments of student perpetrators of bullying behavior at school.
- Develop interventions to help eliminate bullying behaviors and replace these with positive, prosocial behaviors.

Additional resources can be found at Stopbullying.gov.

To ensure that school psychologists are well prepared to provide leadership in school climate and bullying prevention, NASP supports efforts to provide school psychologists with the requisite knowledge and skills to design and implement prevention and school climate programs that are supported by rigorous empirical research. These skills are specified in NASP’s *Model for Comprehensive and Integrated School Psychological Services*. NASP advocates for their inclusion in training and practice standards of all state credentialing bodies.

CONCLUSION

Unfortunately, bullying has become a common reality for many youth and affects the daily practices of school psychologists across educational settings. Research highlights the correlation between bullying and mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation. Federal and state lawmakers are requiring schools to detail their preventive and responsive efforts. Prevention strategies, multitiered positive behavioral supports, and school-wide policies that define bullying and outline interventions are a few examples of best practices. School psychologists are encouraged to take an active leadership role in both the student level and systems level service delivery of bullying prevention. Instances of bullying should be thoroughly investigated and, in extreme cases of violence and aggression, a threat assessment should be pursued to evaluate risk of harm posed to all participants, both to themselves and to others (Cornell & Sheras, 2005). In addition, ongoing research and program evaluation are critical elements of best practices in bullying prevention and intervention efforts.

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