

Bullying

Bullying is hurtful, aggressive and repeated behaviour that aims to embarrass, threaten or intimidate another person.

What is bullying?

Bullying is an ongoing and deliberate misuse of power in relationships. It occurs through repeated verbal, physical, online and/or social behaviour that intends to cause harm.

Bullying can be carried out by an individual or group towards one or more people and is a complex social problem.

What bullying isn't

Behaviours that aren't considered bullying include:

- mutual arguments and disagreements (where there's no power imbalance)
- not liking someone or a single act of social rejection
- one-off acts of meanness or nastiness
- isolated incidents of aggression, intimidation or violence.

To effectively respond to bullying at a whole learning community level, it's important that staff have an agreed definition that's understood and applied consistently.

Types of bullying behaviour

There are several different types of bullying behaviours:

Face-to-face (verbal/physical)

Face-to-face (or direct) bullying may include damaging a person's belongings, kicking, hitting and punching, or verbal actions such as making threats, name-calling and insults. Face-to-face bullying is usually more easily witnessed and can take place in social environments.

Social

Social bullying involves behaviours that aim to harm someone's reputation or relationships. It can include excluding someone from a group, spreading rumours, sharing private information, or encouraging others to reject or ignore a person. Social bullying can occur face-to-face or online and is often harder to identify, especially when it's subtle or disguised as jokes or peer group dynamics.

Covert

Covert bullying is more subtle – it's typically non-physical and occurs out of sight of others. Covert bullying can include hand gestures, threatening looks, whispering, excluding, blackmailing, spreading rumours, threatening and/or trying to socially isolate someone. Other covert bullying behaviours may include trying to damage social relationships, playing nasty practical jokes, telling others' private information, criticising clothes and personalities, sending mocking or abusive notes, or intentional ignoring.

Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying, or online bullying, occurs via technologies such as email, social media, text messages, or instant messaging. Cyberbullying differs from offline bullying in that the perpetrators can more easily remain anonymous, the nasty content can reach a larger audience, and material can be difficult to remove.

As it's online, cyberbullying can also be harder to avoid—it can happen anytime, making it more persistent than face-to-face bullying. These different types of bullying can occur in combination and cause children and young people to feel they have no safe space.

Bystanders

A bystander is someone who knows about or witnesses bullying. Their actions—whether they ignore it, support it, or challenge it—can be part of the bullying issue, or part of the solution to stop it. However, a bystander's response to the situation can be complex, influenced by factors such as their confidence, social standing, safety, and concern for the other person.

Bullying can have serious consequences

There can be serious short-term and long-term psychological and social consequences of bullying for the children and young people being bullied as well as those who bully them and those that witness this.

These consequences can include:

- feeling unsafe in the learning community
- increased likelihood of depression and suicidal thoughts (especially young people who are bullied)
- decreased self-esteem
- lower levels of academic achievement
- negative attitudes towards the learning community
- high levels of absenteeism
- alcohol and substance abuse
- poor mental health in adulthood.

Those who witness bullying of their peers might experience similar emotional effects to the person being bullied. Children and young people may feel distressed because they feel powerless to stop what's happening to someone else as well as fearing that they too may be unsafe or targeted.

Bullying is common

While anyone can be bullied, it's more commonly experienced by those who:

- are from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds

- identify as LGBTIQ+
- have a disability.

Why do people bully?

There's no simple explanation for bullying. It can emerge from a complex interaction of social, personal and psychological circumstances. Sometimes people who bully have been bullied themselves or have experienced trauma or violence. They may struggle with managing their emotions or building positive relationships.

Children and young people who engage in bullying behaviour may have difficulty understanding the consequences of their behaviour, feel strong and in control when bullying others, and/or believe that bullying others will help make them popular. Bullying behaviour can also occur because of distrust, fear, misunderstandings and lack of knowledge or jealousy.

Understanding what bullying is - and isn't - helps educators respond effectively. Recognising different types of bullying, the role of bystanders and the possible serious impacts involved can help inform whole-school approaches that prioritise wellbeing.

Be You Resources

Learn more about [Recognising bullying behaviour](#).

Learn more about [What schools can do about bullying](#).

External links

[Bullying. No Way!](#)

headspace resources [For young people](#) and [For families](#)

The Office of the eSafety Commissioner - [Cyberbullying](#)

Bibliography

Visit [Bullying](#) to get a list of references for this Fact Sheet.

