

What Is Bullying?

[I]f it involves repeated, malicious attempts to humiliate a helpless victim, if the victim is fearful, does not know how to make it stop, then it's bullying.¹

—Kim Zarzour

Kim Zarzour, an education journalist, points to the two key characteristics—repeated harmful acts and an imbalance of power—that most experts agree separate bullying from other conflicts that arise among young people.

Bullying involves an individual or a group repeatedly harming another person—physically (e.g., punching, pushing, tripping, or destruction of property), verbally (e.g., teasing, name-calling, or intimidating), or socially (e.g., ostracizing or spreading hurtful rumors).² Sometimes these harmful actions are plainly visible, but other times, such as when gossip and rumors are used to isolate the target, the actions are covert. With the advent of the Internet, bullies are able to maintain a more persistent presence in the lives of their victims through cyberbullying. Researchers define cyberbullying as “willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices.”³

Researchers note that bullying often does not happen in an isolated context with a single tormentor and victim. There may be multiple bullies or multiple victims, and there are almost always peers, adults, and other community members who know about the bullying. Often, the victims of bullying are socially vulnerable because they have some characteristic that makes them different from the majority. A person might be singled out because of his or her race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or religious affiliation. Young people who have physical or learning disabilities are also targeted more frequently, as well as students who are on the autism spectrum.⁴ Other times, there are no apparent characteristics that cause the target of bullying to be singled out by the tormentor. Regardless, the person being bullied does not know how, or does not have the power, to make it stop.

While bullying occurs across all grade levels, researchers point out that it is most prevalent in middle school and remains common throughout high school.

- In 2011, two-thirds of middle school faculty and staff reported that they witnessed bullying frequently in their schools.⁵
- A few years earlier, 89% of middle school students interviewed had witnessed an act of bullying and 49% said they had been a victim of a bully.⁶
- In 2009, 20% of high school students reported being bullied at school during the previous twelve months.⁷
- The National Association of School Psychologists estimates that over 160,000 students miss school each day because they fear being bullied.⁸

With increasing frequency, bullying is making the headlines due to stories about its severe effects on children and families. The recent stream of news stories about the victims of bullying committing suicide

Classroom Suggestions

Teachers may decide to use this reading as background information for themselves and, instead of reading it in class, ask their students to construct their own definitions of bullying.

Once students have created their definitions, they can share and discuss them using the *Think, Pair, Share* strategy (page 52). By the end of the discussion, the teacher should emphasize the two key characteristics of bullying: repeated harmful acts and an imbalance of power.

underscores the serious potential consequences that arise from this behavior. Psychologists observe that sometimes the targets of bullying turn inward in response to their torment and sometimes they channel their pain and frustration outward toward others.

The effects of turning inward, what psychologists call an *internalized response*, include depression and anxiety. Studies link those who are bullied to above average levels of depression and anxiety as well as diminished performance in school.⁹ Research also suggests that young people who are bullied are significantly more likely than others to have suicidal thoughts. It is important to note that those who bully are also more likely to suffer from depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts than those uninvolved in bullying.¹⁰

The effects of turning outward, what psychologists call an *externalized response*, include various forms of aggressive behavior. Sometimes those who are bullied respond by threatening, intimidating, or bullying others. This is common enough that many researchers refer to *bullies*, *victims*, and a third category, *bully-victims*. Those who bully others are also, themselves, at increased risk for substance abuse, academic problems, and violence later in adolescence and adulthood.¹¹

Connections

1. Researchers measure and define bullying in different ways. How do you define bullying? Is the description of bullying in this reading adequate? At what point does conflict between students become bullying? At what point do you think the adults in a school community should take particular conflicts between students more seriously? As you watch and think about the film, you may choose to modify your definition of bullying.
2. How do the statistics included here help define the scope of the bullying problem? Which statistics do you find most striking? What questions do they raise?

3. In one recent study, 20% of respondents aged 11–18 said they had been a victim of cyberbullying at some point in their life.¹² In what ways is cyberbullying similar to other forms of bullying? In what ways is it different? How does cyberbullying present new challenges for students and for schools? To what extent do you think that schools have a responsibility to deal with cyberbullies?
4. Research shows that many of the victims of bullying are singled out because of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, or physical or learning disabilities. What are some reasons people might respond to such differences so hurtfully? Why do some differences lead to ridicule more than others?

Notes

- 1 Kim Zarzour, *Facing the Schoolyard Bully: How to Raise an Assertive Child in an Aggressive World* (Buffalo, New York: Firefly Books, 2000), 24.
- 2 Jing Wang, Ronald J. Iannotti, and Tonja R. Nansel, "School Bullying Among Adolescents in the United States: Physical, Verbal, Relational, and Cyber," *Journal of Adolescent Health* 45, no. 4 (October 2009): 368–69, accessed October 20, 2011, doi:10.1016/j.jadohealth.2009.03.021.
- 3 Sameer Hinduja and Justin W. Patchin, "Overview of Cyberbullying," in *White House Conference on Bullying Prevention*, 21, accessed October 18, 2011, http://www.stopbullying.gov/references/white_house_conference/index.html.
- 4 Susan M. Swearer, "Risk Factors for and Outcomes of Bullying and Victimization," in *White House Conference on Bullying Prevention*, 3–5, accessed October 18, 2011, http://www.stopbullying.gov/references/white_house_conference/index.html.
- 5 Michaela Gulemetova, Darrel Drury, and Catherine P. Bradshaw, "Findings From the National Education Association's Nationwide Study of Bullying: Teachers' and Education Support Professionals' Perspectives," in *White House Conference on Bullying Prevention*, 12, accessed October 18, 2011, http://www.stopbullying.gov/references/white_house_conference/index.html.
- 6 F. Pergolizzi et al., "Bullying in middle school: Results from a 2008 survey," Abstract, *International Journal of Adolescent Medicine and Health* (2011), accessed October 20, 2011, <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/21721358>.
- 7 Understanding Bullying: Fact Sheet 2011 (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control: Division of Violence Prevention, 2011), accessed October 19, 2011, http://www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/pdf/Bullying_Factsheet-a.pdf.
- 8 Swearer, "Risk Factors," 7.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 "Bullying–Suicide Link Explored in New Study by Researchers at Yale," *YaleNews*, July 16, 2008, accessed October 19, 2011, <http://news.yale.edu/2008/07/16/bullying-suicide-link-explored-new-study-researchers-yale>.
- 11 Swearer, "Risk Factors," 4–7.
- 12 Hinduja and Patchin, "Overview," 21.