

**In this document
you will learn:**

- the definition of bullying
- the different forms and possible types of bullying
- the prevalence of bullying problems in general, among boys and girls, and in different grades
- the characteristics of students who are bullied and students who bully others
- the roles students may take in a bullying situation
- the group mechanisms involved in bullying
- some common myths about bullying

Recognizing the Many Faces of Bullying

Although you are not expected to be an “expert” on the subject of bullying, it is very important that you, as a school staff member, have a basic understanding of what bullying is and how it affects students. This will help you more effectively implement the *Olweus Bullying Prevention Program*. This document provides this basic information.

Note: Throughout this document we have been careful to avoid using the terms “bully” and “victim” as much as possible when describing students who bully others or who are bullied by others. This is intentional, and we encourage you to avoid these labels as well, when talking with students. However, you may notice that such terms are often used in research literature as a convenient way to describe bullying situations. In this document (which shares current research on bullying), we will occasionally use these terms to facilitate the reading of the text.

Why Should You Address Bullying in Your School?

Some stories about bullying . . .

KELLY’S STORY

Kelly, age fourteen, was a new student at a middle school. Although she’d had quite a few good friends at her old school, she felt isolated and lonely among her new classmates. For reasons she didn’t understand, she was “on the outs” with several popular girls and boys in her classes. At school, they rolled their eyes and snickered whenever she tried to speak up in class, barred her from their lunch table, and taped lewd notes and drawings of her on her locker. For Kelly, the final straw came when a classmate took an unflattering picture of her on his cell phone and forwarded it to most of the students in their class with the subject heading “Ugliest girl in school!”

JOHN'S STORY

John was bullied by some of his peers over the course of six years beginning in the first grade. Classmates called him “queer” and “sissy,” threw paper at him, broke his pencils, ripped his school papers, knocked him down, and even punched him in the head in the presence of a teacher. John became so afraid that he refused to use the school bathroom. Teachers took little action against the students who bullied, and the principal suggested that John discourage the perpetrators by getting involved in sports. School officials monitored John for two weeks, but the behavior continued until his parents enrolled John in a private school.

A LETTER FROM A MOTHER OF A STUDENT WHO WAS BULLIED

It is agonizing to see your own child being bullied in school. My daughter, who is only nine years old, has already suffered terribly from bullying. Time after time, my daughter has come home from school feeling like an outcast. She says, “I hate school,” and begs me not to make her go back.

Just during the last year, she has reported that many of the girls in her class sneer at her, or worse, completely ignore her. Someone wrote nasty messages about her in the girl’s bathroom. And almost every other day someone puts taunting notes in her backpack that include calling her names like “stupid” or “ugly.”

When girls are bullied by other girls, it often isn’t easily visible from the outside, and it can be harder to recognize than physical bullying. While physical bullying can leave telltale signs like ripped clothing or bruises, relational or emotional bullying may leave no tangible signs. Bullying among girls often bypasses physical pain and goes directly to the soul. My daughter started school as a beautiful, happy, healthy girl who was eager to learn. These days she comes home from school feeling scared, insecure, and angry.

In desperation, I have talked to school staff and even parents of the students responsible for the bullying, but the bullying never stops. I feel powerless to help my daughter. If other parents and teachers would put themselves in my shoes and feel how serious bullying is when it’s *their* child, then maybe we could work together to make our school a safer place for all children.

— A DESPAIRING MOTHER

Behind every story about bullying there is a story of pain and fear. Bullying takes a tremendous toll on students who are bullied, emotionally and often also physically. The stories here show how merciless and cruel students can be.

As we define bullying and explore statistics on its nature and prevalence, it is very important to keep in mind that behind every fact there is a hurting student who may be impacted for life by the bullying. In addition, there are bystanders or witnesses to the bullying who may be negatively affected by what they see.

It is also important to realize that for every case of bullying reported to school officials, there are many more cases that are never reported. Many bullied students suffer in silence.

What Is the Definition of Bullying?

In order to address the issue of bullying, it is important to understand what bullying is. Here is a commonly used definition:

A person is bullied when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other persons, and he or she has difficulty defending himself or herself.¹

Expressed in more everyday language, one might say: Bullying is when someone repeatedly and on purpose says or does mean or hurtful things to another person who has a hard time defending himself or herself.

The definition of bullying has three major components: First, it is aggressive behavior that involves unwanted, negative actions. Second, bullying typically involves a pattern of behavior repeated over time. Finally, it involves an imbalance of power or strength. We will examine each of these components in more detail below.

Bullying Is an Intentional, Negative Act

It is a negative act when someone intentionally inflicts injury or discomfort upon another person. The student or students who bully mean to harm another student in some way. This could be through physical actions, through words, or indirectly, for example, by intentionally excluding the student from a group or activity.



Bullying is when someone says or does mean things to another person.

— KINDERGARTEN STUDENT

It is important to realize that a lot of bullying occurs without any apparent provocation on the part of the bullied student. Rather, students who bully usually take the initiative (use proactive aggression) and seek out students they perceive as weaker. A possible exception may be situations involving a “provocative victim” (discussed later in this document), where the students who are bullying may be reacting to disruptive behavior on the part of the targeted student.

Although students who bully others may vary in their awareness of how the targeted student perceives their actions, most or all of them likely realize that their behavior is at least somewhat painful or unpleasant.

Bullying Is Usually Repeated Behavior

Although bullying is defined as usually being carried out “repeatedly and over time,” it would be wrong to exclude from the definition serious hurtful behavior that happens only once. The intent in focusing on repeated acts is to exclude nonserious actions that are directed at a student one time.

However, while bullying typically is repeated behavior, it may be difficult for adults to recognize that a “one-time” incident is part of a pattern of repeated behavior. This may be due to a number of reasons, including the fact that students who bully tend to be good at concealing or covering their behavior. Students who are bullied may also be embarrassed to tell an adult, or they may feel they won’t get the help they need if they do report the bullying.

While it is essential to understand that bullying happens repeatedly over time, it is not wise (and may even be dangerous) to wait for a pattern to clearly emerge before intervening. You need to respond anytime you observe or become aware of bullying or other related negative behaviors.

Bullying Involves a Power Imbalance

In a bullying situation or relationship, the student who is exposed to the negative actions has difficulty defending himself or herself and is somewhat helpless against the student or students who are doing the bullying.

The actual or perceived imbalance in power or strength may come about in several different ways. The student who is being bullied may actually be physically weaker or may simply perceive himself or herself as physically or emotionally weaker than the students who are bullying. Or there may be a difference in numbers, with several students ganging up on a single student.

A somewhat different kind of imbalance may happen when the “source” of the negative actions is difficult to identify or confront, as in social exclusion from the group, hurtful gossip that happens behind the student’s back, or when a student is being sent anonymous mean notes.

There is also a difference between bullying and teasing. In the everyday social interactions among peers in school, there occurs a good deal of (often repeated) teasing of a playful and relatively friendly nature; in most cases this cannot be considered bullying.

It is not bullying if there is conflict or aggression between students who are of equal power, whether that be the same physical or mental strength, or social status.

On the other hand, when repeated teasing is degrading and offensive and continues in spite of clear signs from the targeted student that he or she would like it to stop, this certainly qualifies as bullying. It is helpful to keep in mind this difference between friendly, playful teasing and bullying, although the line between them may sometimes appear somewhat blurred. (We will discuss the distinction between bullying, rough-and-tumble play, and real fighting later in this document.)

What Are the Different Forms or Kinds of Bullying?

There are several different forms of bullying. In the Olweus Bullying Questionnaire that your school will administer to students, there are two general or global questions about being bullied and bullying others, and questions about the following nine specific forms of bullying:

- being verbally bullied
- being socially excluded or isolated
- being physically bullied
- being bullied through lies and false rumors
- having money or other things taken or damaged
- being threatened or forced to do things
- racial bullying
- sexual bullying
- cyber-bullying (via cell phone or the Internet)

The Olweus Bullying Questionnaire asks students whether they have been bullied in these nine ways and whether they have bullied other students in these ways.

Direct and Indirect Forms of Bullying

It is possible to divide the different types of bullying into direct and indirect forms. In direct forms, bullying involves relatively open attacks, usually in a face-to-face confrontation. Typical examples of direct bullying include verbal bullying with derogatory comments and nasty names, and physical bullying with hitting, kicking, shoving, and spitting.

In indirect bullying, the aggressive acts are more concealed and subtle, and it may be more difficult for the bullied student to know who is responsible for the bullying. Typical examples include social isolation—that is, intentionally excluding someone from a group or activity—and spreading lies and nasty rumors.

Several forms of cyber-bullying may also be considered indirect in the sense that nasty messages are delivered from a distance and not in a face-to-face way. And in some cases, it may be difficult or almost impossible to find out who originally sent the message.

Relational or Social Bullying

Other terms that have been used to describe bullying are the somewhat overlapping concepts of relational bullying and social bullying. These are behaviors that are intended to damage a student's reputation or social standing with peers, and/or use the threat of loss of the relationship to manipulate others. Included in these categories are usually aggressive behaviors that involve social exclusion or isolation, spreading of rumors, and manipulation of friendships.

**Bullying, Rough-and-Tumble Play, or Real Fighting—
What Is the Difference?**

Our discussion on the different forms of bullying and its definition would not be complete without briefly considering two other categories of behavior that are sometimes mistaken for bullying: rough-and-tumble play and real fighting.

The term “rough-and-tumble play” is normally used when two or more students hit, push, threaten, chase, or try to wrestle with each other in a friendly, nonhostile, playful manner. Research has shown that, even at an early age (about five years), students usually can differentiate between rough-and-tumble play and real fighting.² Students may say, “It’s fun,” “I like it,” “It makes me laugh,” as the most common reasons for participating in rough-and-tumble play. It is relatively rare for rough-and-tumble play to develop into real fighting.

Rough-and-tumble play differs from bullying and fighting with regard to the “relationship between the parties” and the “expression and atmosphere.” Those who participate in rough-and-tumble play are usually friends and like each other, and this is expressed in more positive attitudes, atmosphere, and the nature of the interaction.

The major difference between real fighting and bullying, which can also include a real, but usually uneven fight, concerns the repeated nature of the behavior and the balance of power. “Real” fighting is often a one-time event between two parties of reasonably equal strength or power.

It can be difficult to determine if a situation is rough-and-tumble play, real fighting, or bullying. For example, it is possible that a fight may actually be caused by bullying that has been going on for a long time, and the bullied student has suddenly struck back at his or her tormenters. Or, an episode that both parties claim is “fun” or “innocent play” may actually be bullying.

For these and other reasons, you may want to prohibit any of these behaviors in your school or on school grounds, whether they are actually rough-and-tumble play, fighting, or bullying. It is also very important that you and other staff intervene immediately to stop any inappropriate or suspicious behavior, even though it sometimes may not be aggressive in nature but rather a somewhat noisy but basically friendly interaction.

It is important to remember that, just like sexual, racial, or disability harassment, bullying that is not properly addressed can have legal implications. School districts and school personnel can be held legally liable for the consequences of bullying.

How Much Bullying Is There in Today's Schools?

The first data on the prevalence of bullying in schools was collected in Norway by Dr. Dan Olweus. This large-scale, nationally representative study of bullying was done in 1983 with more than 40,000 students age eight to sixteen. This study found that 15 percent of children and youth reported that they had been regularly involved in bullying problems.³ This represents one out of every seven students. Nine percent had been bullied, 7 percent had bullied other students, and less than 1.5 percent had been both bullied and bullied others.

A later (2001) large-scale Norwegian survey of 11,000 students from fifty-four elementary and junior high schools gave much the same picture as before but with two disturbing trends: (1) The percentage of bullied students had increased by approximately 50 percent from 1983 to 2001; and, (2) the percentage of students who were involved in the most

frequent (and serious) form of bullying had increased by 65 percent.⁴

OBPP researchers and others have also conducted studies to determine how prevalent bullying is in the United States. In a study of 6,500 students in grades 4–6 in rural South Carolina, *OBPP* researchers found that 23 percent had been bullied “several times” or more within a school term, and 20 percent had bullied others.⁵

In the first nationally representative U.S. study of bullying, comprising more than 15,000 students in grades 6–10, 17 percent of students reported having been bullied “sometimes” or more often during the school term, and 8 percent had been bullied at least once a week. Nineteen percent had bullied others “sometimes” or more often during the term, and 9 percent had bullied other students at least once a week.⁶

It should be emphasized that the data from these studies are average estimates that do not highlight the great variation between different schools. Within the same community/school district, one school may experience bullying problems at a level two or three times higher than that of another school.⁷

Although the levels of bullying problems are higher in the United States than in Norway, the general pattern is quite similar. And it should be emphasized that national differences in bullying levels must be interpreted cautiously, since students’ responses may be affected by cultural differences in their familiarity with the concept of bullying, the degree of public attention surrounding bullying, and legislation.

A general conclusion from the above studies is that bullying is a significant problem in both countries (actually in most countries studied so far) and a problem that affects very large numbers of students.

Bullying Problems by Grade and Gender

Most studies in Norway and the United States have found that the percentage of students who reported being bullied decreased with age/grade (see figure 1 on the next page). It is the younger and weaker students who are most often bullied. There is also a clear trend toward less use of physical forms of bullying in the higher grades. Although a majority of targeted students are bullied by students at the same grade level, a significant amount of bullying is carried out by older students. This was particularly true of students who are bullied in the lower grades.⁸

Although not all studies have shown the same trend, generally there is an increase in the number of students who bully others at higher grades, in particular for boys, as shown in figure 2 (shown on the next page).

Figure 1

Percentage of Students Who Reported Being Bullied at Least 2 or 3 Times a Month

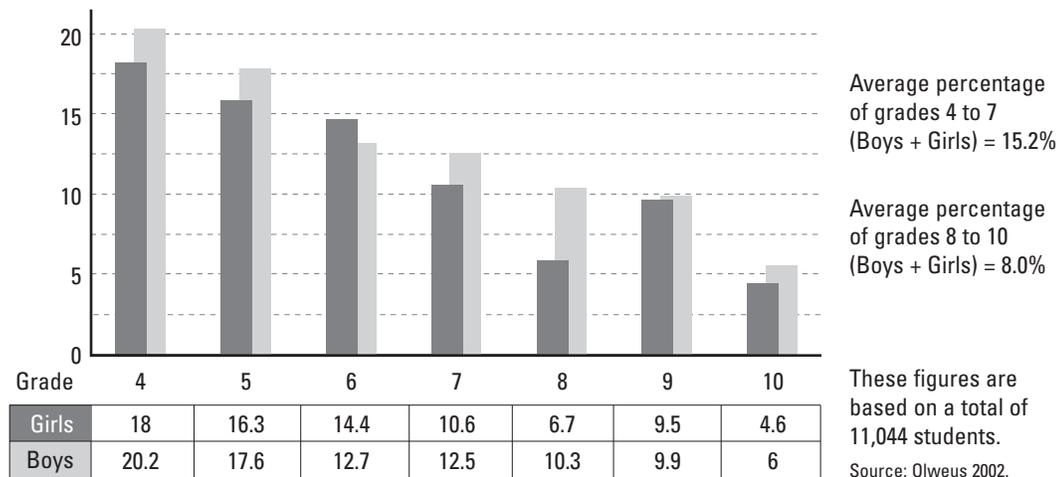
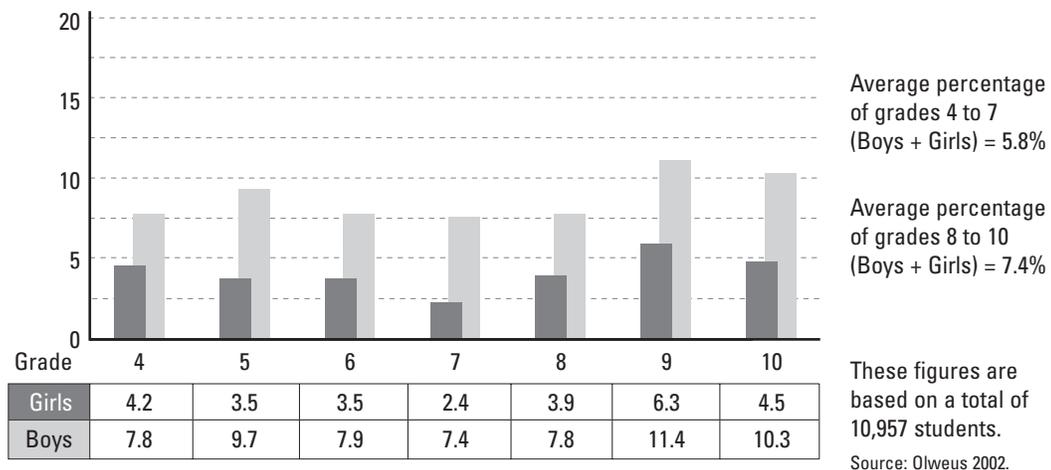


Figure 2

Percentage of Students Who Reported Bullying Others at Least 2 or 3 Times a Month



As evident from figure 1, studies have also shown a tendency for boys to be somewhat more likely to be bullied than girls. This tendency is particularly true in the higher grades.

Figure 2 shows the percentage of students who had regularly taken part in bullying other students. It is evident that a larger percentage of boys had participated in bullying other students. For the higher grades, it is a common result that two to four times as many boys as girls report having bullied other students.

Bullying by physical means is more common among boys. In contrast, girls often use more subtle and indirect forms of bullying, such as social exclusion, spreading rumors, and manipulation of friendships. Nonetheless, bullying with nonphysical means—by words, in particular—is usually the most common form of bullying among both boys and girls.

An additional finding is that boys carry out a large part of the bullying to which girls are subjected. In the Norwegian studies, more than 50 percent of bullied girls reported being bullied mainly by boys. Only 25 percent of the bullied girls were bullied by other girls. An additional 25 percent reported that they were bullied by both boys and girls. The great majority of boys, on the other hand—more than 80 percent—were bullied primarily by boys.

Another consistent and important finding has been that most of the bullying in school is carried out by a small group of two or three students, often with a negative leader. However, 25 to 35 percent of bullied students report that they are mainly bullied by a single student.

In summary, boys are somewhat more often targets and in particular perpetrators of bullying. This conclusion is consistent with research on gender differences in aggressive behavior. It is well documented that relations among boys are by and large harder, tougher, and more aggressive than among girls.⁹

The results presented here should by no means imply that we do not need to pay attention to bullying problems among girls. Bullying problems among girls must be acknowledged and counteracted, whether girls are the targets of bullying or they are bullying others. No doubt, being bullied in indirect and subtle ways (the more common types of bullying done by girls) can be equally hurtful and damaging as being bullied in more open and direct ways.

An Overview of the Causes of Bullying Problems

The extensive research evidence collected so far clearly suggests that personality characteristics or typical reaction patterns, in combination with physical strength or weakness in the case of boys, are important factors for the development of bullying problems in individual students. At the same time, environmental factors such as the attitudes, routines, and behavior of relevant adults—in particular teachers and principals—play a major role in determining the extent to which the problems will manifest themselves in a larger unit such as a classroom or a school. The attitudes and behavior of relevant peers as revealed in group processes and mechanisms are certainly also important. As a result, analyses of the causes of bullying problems must be pursued on several different levels.

What Are the Characteristics of Students Who Are Bullied?

When we talk about the characteristics of students who are involved in bullying problems, it is important to realize that we are focusing on main tendencies. Individual students may vary a lot. With regard to being bullied, almost any student can become a target under certain circumstances. An important general factor is, of course, whether there are aggressive peers in the classroom or group the student belongs to.¹⁰

There are two main types of bullied students. In the research literature, they have been called “submissive victims” or “passive victims” (victims only) and “provocative victims” or “bully-victims” (those who both are bullied and bully others).

Note: Although the research literature describes these students as “submissive,” “passive,” or “provocative,” these labels are not meant to be pejorative or in any way blame these students for the bullying they experience.

Submissive Victims

Submissive victims are students who are bullied, but do not bully others in return or do not provoke the bullying. However, using the term “submissive” or “passive” does not mean the student willingly accepts the bullying. Submissive victims are much more common than provocative victims who both bully others and are bullied.¹¹

Students in the submissive category usually have one or more of the following characteristics. They

- are cautious, sensitive, quiet, withdrawn, and shy
- are anxious, insecure, unhappy, and have low self-esteem
- are depressed and engage in suicidal ideation much more often than their peers
- often do not have a single good friend and relate better to adults than to peers
- are often physically weaker than their peers (if they are boys) and in particular, weaker than those who bully

It should be noted that such characteristics have been identified in research on children and youth who already have been bullied for some time. This means that the picture one gets of them is likely to be, at least in part, a result of the negative treatment to which they have been exposed. All things considered, it is reasonable to assume that some characteristics, such as cautiousness and sensitivity, may have contributed to their becoming targets of bullying. At the same time, it is obvious that the repeated harassment by peers must have considerably increased their anxiety, depression, insecurity, and generally negative evaluation of themselves. Some of the listed characteristics are thus likely to be both causes and consequences of bullying.¹²

Students who are bullied may develop physical symptoms such as headaches, stomach pains, or sleeping problems. They may be afraid to go to school, go to the bathroom, or ride the school bus. They may also lose interest in school, have trouble concentrating, and do poorly academically.

Bullied students typically lose confidence in themselves and start to think of themselves as stupid, a failure, or unattractive. They may even develop feelings of guilt for being bullied (“there must be something wrong with me since I am the one being bullied”). Although relatively rare, some students who have been bullied repeatedly attempt and actually commit suicide.¹³

The effects of being bullied typically do not end in childhood. *OBPP* research has shown that boys who were bullied during the junior high school years were likely to suffer from depression and low self-esteem seven to ten years after most of the bullying stopped. The results suggest that their problems in young adulthood were largely a consequence of the bullying they had experienced many years before.¹⁴

Provocative Victims or Bully-Victims

The other, smaller group, comprising only 10 to 20 percent of bullied students, is the “provocative victims,” also called “bully-victims.” These students both are bullied and bully others.

As with bullied students in the submissive victim category, these students may be depressed, socially anxious, lack positive self-esteem, and be socially isolated and feel disliked by peers. Also, as with submissive victims, the number of provocative victims decreases as students get older.

However, provocative victims also show similarities with students who bully others by displaying more dominant, aggressive, and antisocial behavior and having more problems with concentration, hyperactivity, and impulsivity (ADHD). They try to bully weaker students, although they may be less effective than “pure” bullies (who are not themselves bullied). There are more boys (in a ratio of two or three to one) in this category than girls, which is also true for students who bully others. In addition, these students may have reading and writing problems.¹⁵

Although these students are called provocative victims, there is nothing to indicate that they want to actively provoke others or to be bullied. Rather, they behave in ways that may cause tension, irritation, and negative reactions from their classmates and often also from their teacher.

How you deal with a problem involving a provocative victim in your school is likely different from how you handle a problem involving a submissive victim. For example, you may need to help a provocative victim learn better ways to interact with his or her peers, without implying that the bullying is his or her fault. No matter how students behave, other students should not feel justified in responding with bullying.

Remember that provocative victims represent a small percentage of students who are bullied, although they attract a good deal of negative attention through their behavior.

What Are the Characteristics of Students Who Bully Others?

Students who bully other students (pure bullies) are likely to have several of the following characteristics:¹⁶

- have a positive attitude toward violence and the use of violent means
- have strong needs to dominate and subdue other students and to get their own way
- are impulsive and easily angered
- show little empathy toward students who are bullied
- are defiant and aggressive toward adults, including teachers and parents
- are involved in other antisocial or rule-breaking activities such as vandalism, delinquency, and substance abuse
- if they are boys, they tend to be physically stronger than boys in general and particularly the students they bully
- are more likely to report owning a gun for risky reasons, such as to gain respect or to frighten others¹⁷

It is a common belief that students who bully others are tough on the outside and insecure and anxious on the inside. It is also believed that they have poor self-esteem and that this is the driving force behind their bullying. In line with this reasoning, if one only increases their self-esteem, they have no need to bully others and will stop such behavior.

However, these assumptions are not supported by evidence. *OBPP* research and other studies indicate that students who bully others tend to have little anxiety and uncertainty or are average in this respect. Their self-esteem is also about average or relatively positive.¹⁸

There is a wide range in the popularity of students who bully. Some are popular, others are not, and some are moderately popular. A student who takes the lead in bullying often has a group of two or three friends who support him or her and join in the bullying.

Bullying can also be viewed as part of an antisocial and rule-breaking behavior pattern. Students who bully others at school are more likely than other students to become involved in other problem behaviors such as criminality and substance abuse. One *OBPP* study found that by the age of twenty-four, boys who were identified as bullies in junior high school were four times more likely to have been convicted of three or more criminal acts than boys who did not bully others.¹⁹

Not all students who bully others have obvious behavior problems or are engaged in rule-breaking activities, however. Some of them are highly skilled socially and good at ingratiating themselves with their teacher and other adults. This is true of some boys who bully but is perhaps even more common among bullying girls. For this reason it is often difficult for adults to discover or even imagine that these students engage in bullying behavior.

Why Do Some Students Bully?

Research suggests at least three partly interrelated motives for bullying:

- Students who bully have strong needs for power and (negative) dominance; they seem to enjoy being “in control” and subduing others.
- Students who bully find satisfaction in causing injury and suffering to other students. This is at least partly due to the environment at home, which may have caused hostility within the student.
- Students who bully are often rewarded in some way for their behavior. This could be material or psychological rewards, such as forcing the student who is bullied to give them money or steal for them, or enjoying the attention, status, and prestige they are granted from other students because of their behavior.

As suggested above, students who bully others may have some common family characteristics, such as parents who are not very involved in their children’s lives, who lack warmth and positive involvement. In addition, these parents may not have set clear limits on their children’s aggressive behavior and have allowed them to act out aggressively toward their siblings and other children.

Parents of children who bully are also more likely to use physical punishments and

other “power-assertive” methods of child rearing. In summary, too little love and care and too much “freedom” in childhood are conditions that contribute to bullying behavior.²⁰

In addition, children who bully others are more likely to have witnessed or been involved in domestic violence.²¹ In all probability, they have also been exposed or exposed themselves to violence in the media and may have participated in “power sports” like boxing, kickboxing, and wrestling.²²

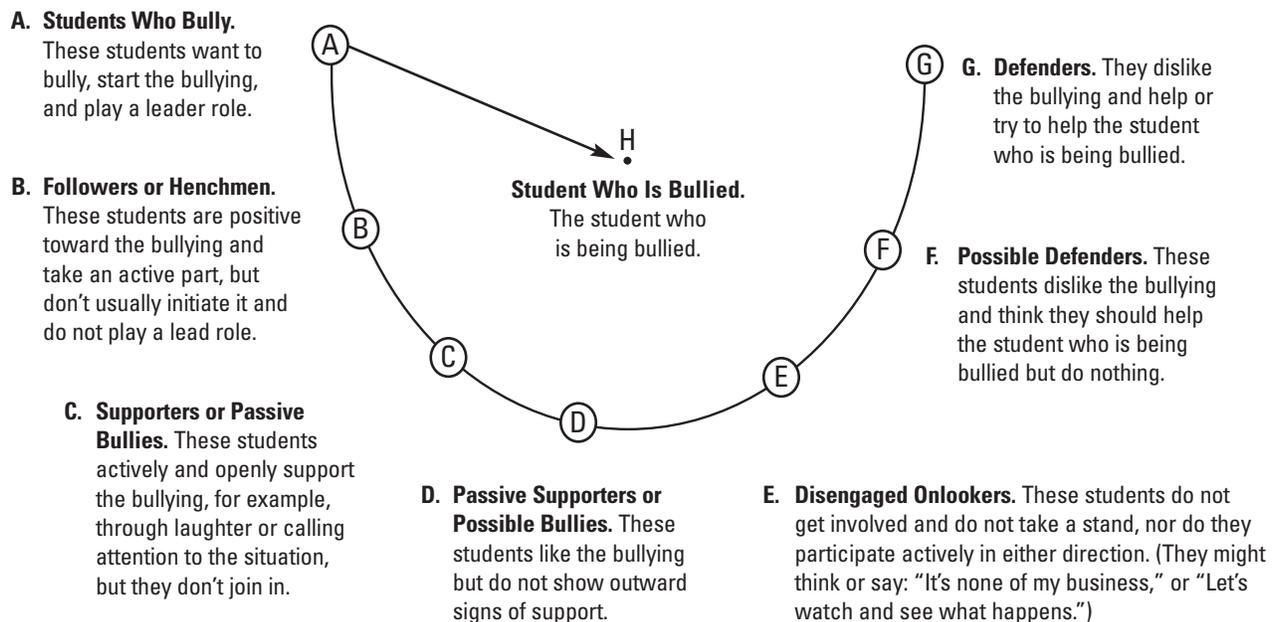
It is important to emphasize once more that we are talking about main trends. Not all children who come from families with these characteristics will bully others, and not all children who bully come from these family environments.

The peer group may also play an important role in motivating and encouraging bullying behavior in certain students. Peer roles and group mechanisms in bullying will be discussed below.

What Roles Do Students Play in Bullying Situations?

A bullying situation is not something that affects only the student who is bullied or the students who are doing the bullying. Nearly every student who is involved in or witnesses a bullying situation is affected.²³ In *OBPP*, students are seen as occupying various roles or positions in a conceptual scheme called the Bullying Circle.²⁴

Here is a description of each role in the Bullying Circle:



The various roles in the Bullying Circle reflect two basic dimensions: the students' attitudes toward the bullying (positive, neutral, or negative) and their possible actions or behaviors (action or nonaction) toward the bullied students.

Students in roles from C (Supporters or Passive Bullies) to G (Defenders) may be considered bystanders. As evident from the description of these roles, a group of bystanders may represent very different attitudes and typical behaviors.

Research shows that the roles of the Students Who Bully, Followers or Henchmen, and the Student Who Is Bullied remain fairly stable over time (although Followers may sometimes lead the bullying), unless some type of intervention is done. The other roles are more flexible and may change depending on the situation.

An important goal of *OBPP* is to create anti-bullying norms in the peer group that will help to move students toward the right-hand side of the Bullying Circle, particularly into the role of a Defender of the bullied student.²⁵

Group Mechanisms in Bullying

As indicated in the Bullying Circle, most students in a group are in some way affected by a bullying situation or problem. Sometimes almost all students in a class or group participate actively in the bullying of a particular student. This is most likely to occur when the targeted student is a provocative victim.

Bullying, therefore, is usually a group phenomenon even though some individuals play a much more active role than others. This explains why ordinarily positive/social and nonaggressive students now and then participate in bullying. Here are some of the group mechanisms at work.²⁶

Social Contagion

Some students may be influenced to participate in the bullying if the student or students who take the lead are popular and perhaps admired. The bullying behavior may be “contagious” and spread particularly to students who are somewhat insecure and want to assert themselves in the group.

Weakening the Normal Inhibitions against Aggression

If the bullying is not stopped, students who bully others become the “winners” in these situations. Other students who would normally view bullying as wrong might join in, since they are not getting the message from adults and other students that this is, indeed, unacceptable behavior.

A Decreased Sense of Individual Responsibility

Students tend to feel less responsible or guilty if there are several students participating in a negative activity such as bullying. Students who would not usually be mean or bully others might join in bullying with a group and feel little responsibility for what happens. This mechanism is called “diffusion of responsibility” in social psychology.

Gradual Changes in the View of the Victim

Through repeated open attacks and derogatory comments, the bullied student is gradually almost “dehumanized” and viewed by other students as a worthless person who “asks to be bullied.”

All of these group mechanisms work to reduce feelings of guilt and remorse in students who occasionally join in the bullying but who would otherwise not have taken an active part, as well as students who are more apt to be involved in bullying (roles A and B in the Bullying Circle).

It is an important goal of *OBPP* to counteract these group mechanisms and thereby increase all students’ feelings of individual responsibility for what may happen in their peer group.

What Are Some Common Myths about Bullying?

There are some common views of bullying that are incorrect or only partly true. Research provides many facts about bullying that strongly contradict these myths. Take a look at the following statements and the research that addresses them:

Myth: Very Few Students Are Bullied.

As mentioned earlier in this document (see page 8), a nationally representative U.S. study showed that 17 percent of all students reported having been bullied “sometimes” or more often within a school term. That is almost one in five students.²⁷

Myth: Most Bullying Is Physical in Nature.

Physical bullying is relatively common among boys in lower grades; however, other forms of bullying, particularly verbal bullying, are more common among both boys and girls and across all grades.²⁸ See pages 8–10 in this document.

Myth: Only Boys Bully.

Boys are more likely than girls to bully, but certainly this does not mean that girls don’t bully or that their bullying can’t be extremely harmful. Although boys bully both boys and girls, girls tend to bully other girls (unless they are in the company of boys, in

which case they may sometimes also bully boys). Girls typically use more indirect forms of bullying, such as intentional exclusion from a group and spreading rumors and gossiping.²⁹

Myth: Bullying Happens More Often Outside of School Than in School.

In a large-scale *OBPP* study in Norway and Sweden, almost twice as many students reported being bullied in school than on the way to and from school.³⁰ Similar results were obtained in U.S. studies.³¹ Common locations for bullying at school include the playground and/or athletic fields (especially among elementary school children), the classroom, the lunchroom, hallways, and bathrooms.

Myth: Students Who Bully Others Are Anxious and Insecure and Have Low Self-Esteem.

OBPP research and other studies indicate that students who bully others typically have little anxiety and uncertainty (or at least are average in this respect). Their self-esteem is also about average or relatively positive.³²

Myth: Bullying Is Mostly an Urban Problem.

Research with U.S. students has shown no marked differences in the levels of bullying problems in urban, suburban, town, and rural areas.³³ Similar results were obtained in the large-scale *OBPP* study with Norwegian students.³⁴

Myth: Bullying Happens More Often in Large Schools and Large Classes.

Results from several studies have been inconclusive, typically reporting only weak or no relationships between the size of the school or the size of the class, on the one hand, and the levels of bullying problems on the other. In addition, it must be pointed out that even if a clear positive or negative relationship were consistently found, this would not prove that the heightened or reduced levels of problems were an effect of the size of the school or the class. It could, for example, be a reflection of factors related to the recruitment area of the school: Large schools may be particularly common in residential areas with many social problems including bullying.³⁵

What Are Some Special Bullying Issues That You Should Be Aware Of?

Children with Behavior or Conduct Problems

A sizable number of students, and boys in particular, who frequently bully also have behavioral or conduct difficulties. However, it is important to note that students with behavior problems are not the only ones who bully.

School staff have been surprised to find that students who are successful at school, who come from homes with no apparent problems, and who have no obvious conduct problems may bully others and be negative leaders of gullible friends.

Children with Disabilities, Special Needs, and Health Problems

Children with disabilities, special needs, or health problems are at increased risk of being bullied by other students. This includes students with cognitive and learning/behavioral disabilities, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and Asperger's syndrome, medical conditions that affect their appearance, and other medical conditions, such as diabetes, obesity, and stuttering. Some students with attention and hyperactivity problems (ADHD) are likely to be regarded as provocative victims. However, it must also be recognized that a sizable proportion of these students actually fall in the category of students who bully others.³⁶

Bullying of students with disabilities and similar problems may be a civil-rights issue, and schools can be held legally responsible. For more information on federal disability harassment policies, visit www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/disabarassltr.html.

Cyber-Bullying

Methods of bullying have evolved with technology. A wide variety of cyber technologies have provided children and youth new venues for bullying each other. In the United States, the most common type of cyber-bullying seems to be through instant messaging, where students send email or text messages with only a screen name for identification. As students have more access to cell phones, text messaging and cameras on cell phones are also being used to bully other students. Inappropriate information about students is also being posted on Web pages (for example, in blogs), chat rooms, and social networking sites (such as Myspace or Facebook).

One study found that 18 percent of middle school students had been cyber-bullied at least once in the previous two months, and 6 percent of them had been cyber-bullied two to three times a month or more often. Girls were twice as likely to cyber-bully than boys. Often the identity of the perpetrator was unknown or hidden.³⁷

Since the phenomenon of cyber-bullying is quite new, it is difficult to know at this point to what extent research results on student behavior are dependent on relative access to and popularity of various technologies and on the cultural context. To illustrate this point, several (as yet unpublished) studies from England and Norway indicate that bullying via cell phones and over the Internet (in ways other than instant messaging) is

much more common in these countries than bullying through instant messaging. In these studies, there were also no marked gender differences.

It is important for schools to be aware of and monitor closely the development of cyber-bullying in their schools. They should also include it in their anti-bullying efforts.

Bullying Based on Sexual Orientation

GLBTQ (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or questioning) young people are often targets of bullying. A recent National Mental Health Association study found that 78 percent of gay (or believed to be gay) teens had been harassed in their school communities.³⁸ In a nationally representative sample of nearly 3,500 students in the United States ages thirteen through eighteen, one-third of the teens reported that students in their school were frequently harassed because of their perceived or actual sexual orientation.³⁹

Teachers Who Bully

Although *OBPP* is focused on peer bullying with students as perpetrators and targets, it is important to realize that adults bully too. In a study by Dr. Dan Olweus of 2,400 Norwegian students in grades 7–10, it was found that about forty students, or somewhat less than 2 percent, could be identified as having been regularly bullied by one or (in a minority of cases) several teachers in the reference period of five months. This study, which is considered to be the first of its kind in the world, was based on student reports. To reduce the influence of nonserious or erratic responses from the students, the study used rather strict criteria for identification of a bullying teacher—a teacher who repeatedly behaved in arrogant, derogatory, and humiliating ways toward particular students. Although the percentage of students being bullied by teachers may be considered relatively low in comparison with the prevalence figures for students being bullied by peers, it was clearly higher than expected.⁴⁰

In an anonymous survey of 116 elementary school teachers from seven schools in the United States, researchers found that one-third knew of one or more teachers who had bullied students in the past school year; 16 percent knew of two or more teachers who had done so. When asked if they could think of any times when they had themselves bullied a student, 40 percent indicated yes.⁴¹

These results show that the problem of teacher bullying of students deserves more attention. *OBPP* provides a common language about bullying that may help focus on possible problems with teachers bullying students and on bullying among adults in general. It is also important to realize that although these studies focused on teachers,

other school staff can be involved in student bullying as well. It is good for all school staff to evaluate their actions and responses to students to make sure they are not participating in bullying themselves.

When it comes to identifying school staff bullying of students, you may find it useful to ask yourself if you have ever

- picked on or embarrassed a particular student in front of other students
- used humor or sarcastic comments to ridicule or make fun of a student
- played favorites with some students while treating others more harshly
- inappropriately used your power as a disciplinarian with students

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Notes

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