



## BULLYING: A BIG PROBLEM WITH BIG CONSEQUENCES

# Research Overview for Facilitators

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### BACKGROUND ON BULLYING

Bullying is defined as, “harmful behavior (physical, verbal, or indirect) by a person or group that occurs repeatedly over time with a less powerful person as a target or victim” (Nansel et al., 2001; see also Olweus & Limber, 2010). Bullying is not a fight between two individuals of relatively equal strength who are mad at each other, and bullying is not friendly teasing that can occur between friends. Bullying can occur in a virtual space, such as the Internet or text message, or in-person (Kowalski, Limber, & Agatston, 2012). Bullying is intentional; adolescents who bully use aggressive behavior in a calculated way (Pelligrini & Long, 2004).

### CYBERBULLYING

When bullying occurs online, it's called "cyberbullying." Cyberbullying encompasses all forms of online social cruelty, including bullying through email, instant messaging, social networking sites or other websites, text messages, or images on cell phones (Kowalski et al., 2012). Unique characteristics of cyberbullying include the speed, the spread, and the anonymity of this mode of bullying (Juvonen & Graham, 2014).

Because adolescents are "digital natives" who have never known a world without the Internet while their parents remember a world before the Internet, a generational gap exists between adolescents' and parents' perception of the uses and online risks of the Internet. Parents tend to see online tools as helpful for homework, while teens tend to view online tools as critical to their social life (Kowalski & Fedina, 2011). Teens experience 70% of cyberbullying while they are at home (Kowalski et al., 2012). However, teens are less likely to communicate their experiences being bullied online than their experiences with in-person bullying (Dooley, Pyzalski, & Cross, 2009). As a result, parents should be extra attentive to whether their teen is upset after being online or texting (Kowalski et al., 2012).

To encourage teens to share experiences, it is important for parents to stay calm when teens report cyberbullying. Parents should thank the teen for sharing the situation and not take away Internet privileges from victims (Kowalski et al., 2012). Parents might also let their teens know they will occasionally monitor their Facebook page or other social network site use. It's important to balance communicating a respect for privacy and teens' independence with selective monitoring of online activities, especially as teens reach older adolescence.



## **FREQUENCY**

The majority of young people — 74% of 8-11 year-olds and 86% of 12-15 year-olds — say that kids at their school are teased or bullied (Nickelodeon, Kaiser Family Foundation, and Children Now, 2001). In 2011, 28% of U.S. teens reported being bullied at school; 9% reported being cyber-bullied during the school year (Robers, Kemp, & Truman, 2013). Approximately 11 million students in the United States are regularly involved in bullying behavior (Olweus & Limber, 2010). In a national survey of 6th-10th graders, 13% reported bullying others, and 11% reported being the target of bullying behavior (Nansel et al., 2001). In the iSafe national database of 63,000 youth in 5th through 8th grade, 30% reported being mean to others online, while 37% reported others had been mean or hurtful to them online (Kowalski et al., 2012).

Other research has reported that every 7 minutes a child is bullied. Unfortunately, no one intervenes in 85% of these situations. In addition, only about 60% of middle school students tell an adult about a bullying incident, and it is less likely that older teens or males will report bullying than younger teens or females (Williams & Cornell, 2008). While rates of youth bullying are high, rates do vary slightly depending on the source of the data.

## **GENDER DIFFERENCES**

It is important to consider gender differences when dealing with bullying behavior. A meta-analysis found that boys are more likely to be involved in bullying than girls (Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim, & Sadek, 2010); however, the difference was small and other research has not found gender differences (Olweus & Limber, 2010). Boys engage in more overt or direct aggression like physical fighting or name-calling, whereas girls may engage in more relational or indirect aggression, like excluding someone from a group or spreading rumors (Nansel et al., 2001; Olweus & Limber, 2010). Relational aggression is aimed at hurting others through damaging their peer relationships, and by middle adolescence both genders engage in this form of bullying (Juvonen & Graham, 2014). Although girls typically do not regard excluding someone from the group as bullying (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995), they are more likely to say that this behavior is morally wrong than boys (Horn, 2003).

## **RACIAL AND ETHNIC DIFFERENCES**

There is limited research on racial differences in the prevalence of bullying. African American students have reported being bullied or being a bully-victim (bullies who also get bullied) significantly more than white or Hispanic students (Goldweber, Waasdorp, & Bradshaw, 2013; Nansel et al., 2001). However, the relationship between race and bullying is complex and may be impacted greatly by individual differences, the racial and ethnic composition of a school or neighborhood, and socioeconomic conditions (Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Larochette, Murphy, & Craig, 2010; Peskin, Tortolero, & Markham, 2006).

For example, one study found that “urbanicity,” or the impact of living in an urban area at a particular time, partially explained the racial differences in bullying, and the authors urged professionals to consider both race and urbanicity in order to create culturally sensitive programming (Goldweber et al., 2013). Youth who are exposed to violence in their communities may be more likely to approach conflict resolution with violence.



## **DEVELOPMENTAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Bullying has been found to reach its peak in early adolescence and then decrease into high school (Nansel et al., 2001). Early adolescence is a time when significant differences in physical development contribute to an environment of insecurity and bullying. Girls who mature early or boys who mature late may be more at risk than others. In addition, differences in social skills and self-control among early adolescents might account for the intensity of these problems during this period. More 8-to-15-year-olds identify teasing and bullying as big problems than identify drugs, alcohol, sex, or racism as big problems.

National research also shows that a power hierarchy exists among those bullied and those who bully: younger adolescents are more likely to identify recent experiences of being bullied while older adolescents are more likely to have bullied others (Dinkes, Kemp, & Baum, 2009; Olweus & Limber, 2010).

During adolescence, youth are seeking to define their identity; they may critique peers who do not fit in with their “crowd” to help themselves fit in. Although teens are developing the ability to understand individual differences, they may put aside these emerging cognitive skills and join with bullying friends rather than stand out by choosing to defend someone being bullied (Steinberg, 2007). In other words, they may not fully think through the dangers and implications of bullying actions when they are with a group of peers.

## **CHARACTERISTICS OF BULLIES, BULLIED, AND BYSTANDERS**

Bullying behavior impacts most young people, whether directly or indirectly, as a bully, victim, or bystander. Contrary to stereotypes that adolescents who bully have limited social skills, evidence suggests students who bully are often perceived as the most popular with their peers (Faris & Femlee, 2011). However, over time, evidence has suggested that bullying as a strategy to maintain popularity does not work and is likely to be associated with peer rejection (Sentse, Kretschmer, & Salmivalli, 2015). In comparison to their peers, students who bully are also more aggressive, hostile, and domineering (Nansel et al., 2001); in addition, they report more externalizing behavior problems (behavior directed outward, such as aggression, delinquency, and hyperactivity; (Cook et al., 2010) and are more likely to be impulsive and easily frustrated (Olweus, 1993).

Adolescents who bully are more likely to have experienced physical discipline from their parents than teens who do not bully. Unsupervised time, negative peer influence, and feeling unsafe in one’s surroundings have been found to be associated with bullying behavior (Espelage, Bosworth, & Simon, 2000).

Youth who bully are at an increased risk of becoming involved in delinquency, crime, and alcohol abuse. In fact, bullies identified by 8 years of age are six times more likely to be convicted of crimes as young adults, and are five times more likely to have a serious criminal record by the age of 30 than non-bullies (Olweus, 1993; see also Tofti et al., 2012). Approximately 60% of boys in 6th – 9th grade who were classified as bullies were convicted of at least one crime by age 24, and 40% had three or more convictions. Those who are bullies, victims or both in childhood are also more likely to experience psychiatric disorders in young adulthood (Sourander et al., 2007). About 3-4% of youth who have bullied are also victims of bullying (Kowalski et al., 2012).



Adolescents who are victims of bullies tend to be more anxious, insecure, cautious, sensitive, and quiet than other students (Cook et al., 2010; Olweus, 1993). They are often loners and may feel abandoned (Olweus, 1992). Anxiety and a lack of self-esteem may signal to others that these youth may be easy targets for bullying. Longitudinal evidence suggests that bullying may cause these adolescents continued social difficulties over time (Sentse et al., 2015). Teens who have disabilities, are overweight, or who are homosexual are more at risk for being bullied (Kowalski et al., 2012). Up to 94% of children who have disabilities and 85% of those who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender report being bullied or harassed (Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt, & Hymel, 2010).

The majority of youth are bystanders at one time or another. Studies report that between 68% and 88% of middle school and high school youth report having observed bullying (Hoover, Oliver, & Hazer, 1992; Trach, Hymel, Waterhouse, & Neale, 2010). Bystanders may not be directly involved in the bullying behavior, but by observing without intervening either directly or via an adult, they are supporting the behavior. Bullying behavior has far-reaching effects that go well beyond those directly involved.

## **FAMILY ENVIRONMENT**

Research suggests that bullying behavior at school may be linked to parenting and family characteristics (Flouri & Buchanan, 2003). Specifically, bullying behavior has been found to be related to three parent characteristics (Flouri & Buchanan, 2003; Swearer et al., 2010):

- A negative emotional attitude such as lack of warmth and involvement;
- Permissiveness toward aggressive childhood behavior; and
- The use of "power-assertive" parenting methods, such as physical punishment.

Parents who use inconsistent, highly negative discipline techniques and physical punishment have been found to be more likely to have an aggressive child (Cook et al., 2010). Low father involvement and low mother involvement have also been found to contribute to bullying behavior in teens. In addition, compared with youth who do not show bullying behavior, youth who bully report more troubled relationships with their parents, and perceive that their parents monitor their behavior less, are less warm, and are either over-protective or neglectful (Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005; Swearer et al., 2010).

In contrast, parents consistent, democratic discipline, appropriate monitoring of their children's behavior and activities, and show of warmth and support has been associated with more optimal teen outcomes (Steinberg, 2006). Parents can support their teens in implementing important strategies to help avoid becoming victims of bullying. Strategies include encouraging their teens to talk to a parent or other trusted adult (such as a teacher, coach, or adult leader) about bullying incidents and to make new friends (Smith, Schneider, Smith, & Ananiadou, 2004).

Although family environment is a significant predictor of bullying behavior, it is still a relatively weak predictor of bullying when compared to peer influences discussed throughout this research background (Cook et al., 2010).



## **SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT**

Social support is associated with many positive outcomes for students and is critical for all students whether they bully others, are victims, or are bystanders (Demaray & Malecki, 2003). Students who report lower levels of support from best friends and classmates are more likely to be bullied (Cook et al., 2010). Monitoring by adults in schools is important for preventing bullying (Swearer et al., 2010; Ttofi et al., 2012). Schools that are well organized with an explicit emphasis on learning tend to have fewer problems with bullying than unorganized schools with high levels of conflict (Swearer, 2010).

Characteristics of the school environment thought to be important to reduce bullying include (Olweus, 1992; Swearer et al., 2010):

- Warmth, positive interest, and involvement from adults;
- Firm limits to unacceptable behavior;
- Monitoring of students; and
- Non-hostile, non-physical consequences for unacceptable behavior.

In fact, Olweus et al. (1999) argued that raising awareness about bullying, increasing supervision, and intervention by students as well as by teachers and all adults at school; forming strong social norms against bullying; and supporting and protecting all students can reduce bullying by up to 50%. Efforts such as this that include parents and peers in a school-wide approach tend to have more positive results than those that do not (Swearer et al., 2010). A school-wide commitment to end bullying that focuses on changing the school climate is more effective in reducing bullying than individual classroom approaches (Swearer et al., 2010).

## **MINNESOTA LAWS AND POLICIES**

In response to criticism for weak anti-bullying laws (U.S. Department of Education, 2011), Minnesota passed a comprehensive bullying law in April 2014 for implementation in the state schools. The law includes a clear definition of bullying, protection for at-risk students, training for teachers and staff, and procedures to follow. To learn more about the Minnesota law, visit [http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/rulesforengagement/2014/04/new\\_minnesota\\_anti\\_bullying\\_law\\_follows\\_years\\_of\\_debate\\_controversy.html](http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/rulesforengagement/2014/04/new_minnesota_anti_bullying_law_follows_years_of_debate_controversy.html). To learn more about the laws and policies in states across the nation, visit <http://www.stopbullying.gov/laws>.



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