



# Bullying Prevention in the Technology Age

## Summary

Bullying is one of the most common and damaging forms of aggression among children in US schools. It can create a hostile school environment, lead to poor school outcomes, and have lifelong consequences for victims, perpetrators, bystanders, and society as a whole. Cyber bullying—bullying facilitated by technology—has emerged in recent years as a new trend that may have more widespread effects than traditional bullying alone. Technology now allows bullying to be perpetrated anonymously; reach into the home, a previously safe space; occur 24 hours a day, 7 days a week; spread among large numbers of people; and generally occur outside the scope of adult oversight.

For a person who bullies, technology and online platforms provide unfettered contact and power. For parents, teachers, administrators, and policy makers, cyber bullying is particularly difficult to track, respond to, and combat. It is thus important to develop prevention programs that will reduce cyber bullying incidents and address specific issues of bias, ethnicity, culture, and equity. Certain policy, practice, and legislative changes can begin to address the prevention of both traditional and cyber bullying and the many negative outcomes associated with both. As technology and its use by

**Definition:** “Bullying is unwanted, aggressive behavior among school aged children that involves a real or perceived power imbalance. The behavior is repeated, or has the potential to be repeated, over time.”<sup>1</sup>

“Cyberbullying is bullying that takes place using electronic technology.”<sup>2</sup>

The person who bullies or cyber bullies purposely inflicts, or intends to inflict, harm on the bullying victim.

adolescents evolve, we need to anticipate our children’s needs and be ready to protect them.

## The Impact of Bullying

Children who are bullied feel unsafe and fearful. Victims of bullying are likely to have higher rates of absenteeism and resulting academic underperformance, anxiety, and eating disorders.<sup>3</sup> Bullying also increases children’s risk for negative psychological and social outcomes.<sup>4</sup> Children who experience bullying are more likely to exhibit self-destructive behaviors, have suicidal thoughts, and develop mental health problems like anxiety disorders, panic disorders, and agoraphobia.<sup>5</sup> Although suicide among bullying victims is relatively rare, a number of

recent high-profile incidents and suicide pacts have turned a national spotlight on the issue.

In addition to the negative effects experienced by victims of bullying, there are also negative outcomes for children who bully. Children who bully are more likely to underachieve in school and the workplace, experience substance abuse later in life,<sup>5</sup> and become parents of children who bully.<sup>3</sup> They are more likely to be convicted of a criminal offense and have psychiatric problems as adults.<sup>6</sup> Children who bully do not necessarily lack social skills or friend networks.<sup>7</sup> They are often socially competent, and they may even be popular in middle and high school. However, there is evidence that both children who bully and those who are bullied lack problem-solving skills.<sup>6</sup>

Bystanders who are involved in or witness a bullying incident can also experience negative outcomes. Bystanders are more likely to use tobacco, alcohol, or other drugs; have mental health problems, including depression and anxiety; and miss days of school. In addition, they may experience a sense of guilt, even more than the perpetrator or victim, because they did not take action.<sup>8,9</sup>

Bullying can also have high economic and social costs to the wider community. When children who are bullied stay home from school, their individual learning trajectories, as well as their lifetime achievement and earnings, suffer. Meanwhile, in states where funding allocations are based on average daily attendance rates, schools can lose tens of millions of dollars due to bullying-related student absences. Such absences have been estimated to cost California public schools \$276 million in revenue every year.<sup>10</sup>

Data from the US Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics shows that overall bullying prevalence among students ages 12 to 18 declined between 2005, when data was first collected, and 2013, which is the most recent data available. In 2005, 28% of students reported being bullied, compared to 22% in 2013.<sup>11</sup> However, these statistics mask an increase in bullying of certain categories of students and bullying in schools where violence and drugs are prevalent.<sup>12</sup>

The US Department of Education data come mainly from surveys in which youth self-report incidents of bullying. Although adults may be able to spot physical bullying easily, they have a harder time recognizing and reporting verbal or relational bullying—particularly shaming, exclusion, and cyber bullying—which may not be as overtly visible. And many students do not report bullying

to any adult: research has shown that 50% or more of children who are bullied do not report the incident.<sup>13</sup> They may fear retaliation, that adults will not take them seriously, or that adults will overreact, making the bullying worse. Students are even less inclined to report cyber bullying than traditional bullying.<sup>13</sup>

Despite the demonstrated downward trend in the prevalence of bullying earlier in the decade,<sup>11</sup> an online survey of more than 50,000 young people ages 13 to 18 conducted from December 19, 2016, to January 10, 2017, found that student reports of incidents of bullying and harassment had increased. Seventy percent of the survey respondents reported having witnessed incidents of bullying, hate messages, or harassment in the months since the 2016 presidential election. Of these respondents, 70% said they witnessed incidents involving race and ethnicity; 63%, incidents involving sexual orientation; 59%, immigration status; and 55%, gender.<sup>14</sup> A survey of teachers who use the Teaching Tolerance anti-bullying program from the Southern Poverty Law Center corroborated these trends: more than two-thirds of the teachers surveyed reported that students—primarily those who identified as immigrants, children of immigrants, or Muslim—were concerned about what might happen to them and their families after the election, and more than one-third of the teachers had personally witnessed an increase in anti-Muslim sentiment.<sup>15</sup>

## The Impact of Cyber Bullying

Cyber bullying is the use of technology to harass, insult, threaten, and/or intimidate another person.<sup>16</sup> Children and adolescents today have easier access than ever to technology and online communications and engage with this technology on a daily basis.

Data on the prevalence of cyber bullying varies greatly, but research tends to show that girls report being victims of cyber bullying more often than boys. According to the National Center for Education Services, in 2013, 9% of girls and 5% of boys reported being cyber bullied.<sup>11</sup> In self-report data from 16,000 students in Boston high schools from 2006 to 2012, 26% of girls and 15% of boys reported being cyber bullied.<sup>13</sup> According to a 2008 survey of more than 20,000 high school students, 60% of those who are bullied online are also bullied at school, and 36% of those who were bullied at school also reported experiencing cyber bullying.<sup>17</sup> This data suggests cyber bullying does not happen in isolation.

Cyber bullying has been linked to depression, social anxiety, reduced self-esteem, substance abuse, and poor academic performance.<sup>18</sup> Cyber bullying may be a

greater threat to children’s social-emotional health and well-being than traditional bullying alone, depending on the age group. Among high school students, those who experienced cyber bullying reported higher levels of distress than those experiencing traditional bullying alone.<sup>17</sup> However, in a recent study of young people ages 10 to 20, the emotional impact of online-only harassment was lower than that of harassment that occurred only in person.<sup>19</sup> Rates of depression and attempted suicide are highest in young people who experience both traditional and cyber bullying; the next highest rates are found among those who experience cyber bullying only.<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, a study of depression and internet use among young people ages 10 to 17 found that boys who reported symptoms of depression were three times as likely to say they had been victims of cyber bullying, and that when looking at all respondents together, those who reported having been bullied online were also more likely to report depressive symptoms than those who had never been targeted.<sup>20</sup>

Cyber bullying differs from traditional bullying in several important ways. Those who bully are physically removed from their victims and from the direct impact of their actions. There may also be a greater power imbalance between perpetrator and victim in cyber bullying, as perpetrators can anonymously spread messages to large audiences very quickly, and victims may never know who is responsible. Finally, cyber bullying is not limited to school hours but can take place 24 hours a day and in completely unsupervised settings.<sup>16,21</sup> Today’s youth culture is largely focused on social media and digital interactions, and children may find it extremely difficult to disengage from technology even when it is the source of bullying.<sup>22</sup>

## Risk Factors

Every child is potentially susceptible to bullying, but some children are at greater risk. Those who are disproportionately bullied include youth who identify as LGBTQ, youth with disabilities, and youth perceived as immigrants or refugees. In addition, youth who lack friends or who are otherwise socially isolated, excluded, or disconnected are more susceptible to bullying. Understanding these risk factors can help policy makers and school leaders address equity issues as well as aid perpetrators and victims.

### Risk to LGBTQ Youth

In a study of over 20,000 high school students in Massachusetts, sexual minorities were nearly twice as likely as heterosexual students to experience school bullying and

cyber bullying.<sup>17</sup> And according to the GLSEN 2015 National School Climate Survey, the LGBTQ students who were more frequently bullied for their sexual orientation or gender expression were more than three times as likely to miss school or have a lower GPA, and twice as likely to report that they did not plan to pursue secondary education, compared to students who experienced lower levels of victimization.<sup>23</sup> More than half (57.6%) of the LGBTQ students who were harassed or assaulted at school did not report the incident to school staff because they doubted intervention would occur or feared the situation might get worse. Of those who did report a bullying incident, 63.5% said staff did not take appropriate action. In addition, 56.2% of LGBTQ students who participated in the GLSEN survey reported hearing their teachers or other staff make homophobic remarks.<sup>23</sup> These trends were substantiated by a separate survey conducted across 20 high schools in the US Midwest.<sup>24</sup>

### Risk to Youth with Disabilities

Children with disabilities are two to three times more likely to be bullied, and to be bullied more often, than children without disabilities.<sup>25</sup> According to one study, 60% of students with disabilities report regular harassment, compared to 25% of all students.<sup>26</sup> Children with autism spectrum disorder and children with nonverbal learning disorders are particularly susceptible to bullying; in one survey, 94% of mothers of children with Asperger’s syndrome or nonverbal learning disorders reported that their children had been bullied.<sup>27</sup> Students with learning disabilities also report higher rates of victimization: in one study, 55% of students with mild learning disabilities and 78% of those with moderate learning disabilities reported experiencing bullying.<sup>28</sup>

### Risk to Youth Perceived as Immigrants, Refugees, or Otherwise Not of US Origin

According to data from the US Justice and Education Departments, Asian youth are targeted for bullying more often than youth of other racial or ethnic groups. Fifty-four percent of Asian students ages 12 to 18 reported experiencing in-person bullying at school, and 62% reported cyber bullying.<sup>29</sup> In a 2017 poll by the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, 42% of Muslims with children in grades K through 12 said their children had been bullied in the last year due to their faith.<sup>30</sup> In March of 2017, University of Southern California professor Ron Avi Astor, who studies violence, said that “there’s been a two-year spike in school bullying and harassment, and right now there is a generalized climate of permission to say hateful things to other groups that are deemed as ‘different.’”<sup>31</sup>

## The Need for Action

Research has shown that there are both immediate and lifelong effects of bullying, and federal and state policy makers, nonprofits, school personnel, parents, and concerned citizens have worked together to create definitions, laws, and policies to address bullying. In addition, US federal civil rights statutes protect citizens against harassment based on race, color, national origin, gender, and disability.

Three of the things known to help decrease bullying are strong anti-bullying laws and policies, supportive school climates, and school-based interventions.<sup>32,33</sup> After the 1999 Columbine High School shooting, many states passed bullying legislation, and all states now have legislation or policies directing schools to address bullying.<sup>34</sup> However, there is currently no national mandate for elementary or secondary schools to track bullying incidents. The data being used to plan, develop policies, and make changes to bullying prevention programs is thus incomplete.

Bullying remains a large and underestimated problem. It is universal: most students report some involvement in bullying, whether as a perpetrator, victim, or bystander.<sup>34</sup> And it can spread: for example, some bystanders bully as directed by the primary perpetrator.<sup>35</sup> Bullying increases in middle school and following the transition to high school.<sup>34</sup> Meanwhile, use of bullying language and tactics on the national stage has increased,<sup>15</sup> as has the targeting of vulnerable subgroups.<sup>34</sup> Addressing bullying now can lead to healthier school climates, better student outcomes, and more civil and respectful discourse.

## Takeaways from Bullying Prevention Research

Bullying prevention efforts are codified through federal, state, and local laws and administrative codes; anti-bullying and school climate policies; and policies, standards, and practices set by school districts, classrooms, and out-of-school settings. Individuals play an important role in supporting these efforts by being positive role models, maintaining open communication, and refusing to be silent bystanders.

### Federal and State Policies and Legislation

As of 2012, nearly half of US states had implemented school climate policies intended to create safe and supportive school environments that foster positive relationships and respect among both students and teachers.<sup>36</sup> Assessments of school climate help identify problem areas, including bullying and harassment, and

provide data that can be used to develop strategies and processes that improve school climate.

The US Department of Education has developed a framework that identifies components of state anti-bullying legislation. These components address four broad categories: (1) defining the purpose of the law, (2) specifying the process by which the school district will develop and review new policies, (3) describing actual components of school district policy, and (4) other types of components, such as describing how policies will be communicated. The Department of Education has made recommendations for state anti-bullying statutes based on this framework.<sup>32,37</sup>

In 2015, a study that compared bullying prevention legislation from 25 states and data from the 2011 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System study found that states whose anti-bullying policies included at least one of the Department of Education's recommended legislative components had better results than states with none of the recommended components: students in states with recommended components were less likely to report both bullying (by 24%) and cyber bullying (by 20%).<sup>32</sup> In addition, three of the Department of Education's anti-bullying legislative components have been reliably associated with decreased incidence of bullying and cyber bullying:

1. A statement of scope that describes where legislation applies and the circumstances in which schools can take action,
2. A description of prohibited behaviors, and
3. Requirements for developing and implementing policies in school districts

The study concluded that anti-bullying laws can be effective interventions for reducing students' risk of being bullied or cyber bullied in school.<sup>32</sup>

### Zero-Tolerance Policies in Schools and School Districts

Zero-tolerance policies that result in exclusionary discipline, such as students being suspended or expelled for behaviors that include bullying and harassment, have been shown to have a negative effect on school climate and academic achievement. Such policies are moderately associated with higher rates of dropping out and failing to graduate on time for the students who are expelled or suspended.<sup>38</sup> Over time, higher levels of this type of exclusionary discipline can also negatively affect the academic achievement of students who are not suspended.<sup>39</sup> In addition, exclusionary-discipline policies affect certain students inequitably: students of color and students with disabilities, in particular, are more likely to

be suspended and expelled than their peers who are white or nondisabled.<sup>38</sup>

### Anti-Bullying Programs and Curricula

Research and best practices show that the best way to address bullying is through a combination of evidence-based (i.e., research-based) programs in social-emotional learning and bullying prevention.<sup>40,41</sup> Because of the inherent power imbalance in bullying, the approaches that are typically used to intervene in other types of school conflicts—such as peer-to-peer mediation—may be inappropriate for bullying prevention.

There are a number of evidence-based programs available to address traditional bullying, but more research is needed to determine (1) whether their effectiveness depends on who delivers the curricula and (2) whether they are as effective at preventing cyber bullying. Studies have shown only limited effectiveness for prevention programs meant to curb cyber bullying. The effectiveness of bullying prevention programs in general depends on implementation fidelity, sustainability of effort, and universality of approach (for example, whether the program is implemented with the support of school leadership and educators).<sup>22</sup>

In 2011 a cross-national meta-analysis found that on average, school-based bullying prevention programs reduce bullying by 20 to 23% and victimization by 17 to 20%.<sup>33</sup> Many factors have been found to increase the efficacy of bullying prevention programs, including program intensity and duration, teacher and parent training, parent meetings, discipline methods, classroom management, and improved playground supervision.<sup>33</sup> Specifically, there is evidence that bullying prevention programs may be more effective when they incorporate teacher training that focuses on educators' attitudes around practices and responses to bullying that could exacerbate bullying.<sup>42</sup>

When schools implement bullying prevention programs, it helps to take into account the developmental implications of bullying. Physical aggression and bullying tend to decline with age, while verbal and relational bullying tend to increase from childhood to adolescence.<sup>43</sup> And children who bully may appear to be rejected by their peers through childhood only to become more accepted and popular during adolescence.<sup>6</sup>

Whether in school or in out-of-school settings, targeted curricula can increase social-emotional competencies—such as empathy, communication, and emotion management—that have been shown to decrease

bullying.<sup>44</sup> One study found that students in schools that implemented a bullying prevention program focused specifically on improving social-emotional skills were 42% less likely to self-report incidents of physical aggression.<sup>45</sup>

### Technology in Bullying Prevention

Technology is an efficient and effective medium for perpetrating bullying; therefore, it should also be a focus of bullying prevention efforts. One study suggests that adolescents could limit bullying by learning to safeguard their mobile phone numbers, which would limit their exposure to potential bullies.<sup>16</sup> In addition, bullying victims and their families can request that internet providers remove harassing or bullying messaging from the internet, or get help doing this from groups such as iCanHelpline.org.

### Policy Recommendations

We urge those implementing bullying prevention measures to engage youth in identifying problems and solutions whenever possible and combine their voices with those of bullying researchers and experts in educational practices. We also recommend that any changes to policy emphasize the importance of national reporting and state and local implementation, while taking into account regional differences in culture, school district, and classroom curricula.

### Recommendations for Legislation

- In each state, pass legislation that clearly defines bullying, prohibited behaviors, and consequences; institutes prevention measures; and makes the connection between bullying prevention programs and school climate standards and guidelines.
- Under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act Title I, Title II (Part A), and Title IV (Parts A and B), fund social-emotional learning curricula, bullying prevention programs, and cultural awareness and harassment sensitivity training.
- Better enforce laws prohibiting discrimination against students and harassment of protected classes.

### Recommendations for Reporting

- Develop standardized definitions for bullying and institute a national requirement for elementary and secondary schools to track bullying and bullying prevention efforts.
- Create a universal method for reporting incidents of cyber bullying and harassment to internet providers and having the perpetrator's content removed from the internet.

## Recommendations for School Policies and Standards

- In school districts, schools, and classrooms, have clear policies and guidelines outlining expected behaviors and consequences for bullying. Monitor and address bullying by teachers and students. Make anti-bullying programs a part of school culture and foster a culture of respecting diversity.
- Eliminate zero-tolerance policies that exclude students from school for bullying. Instead of punitive practices, implement restorative practice programs.
- Have school districts use school climate inventories to measure, evaluate, and improve school practices.

## Recommendations for Training and Technical Assistance

- Implement professional development for school faculty and staff that addresses school climate and bias-related bullying and harassment.
- Conduct adult skills training for educators, administrators, and community leaders so they know how to respond appropriately to bullying.
- Train adolescents and adults in appropriate use of technology. Teach adolescents and youth to protect their phone numbers and access to their computers.
- Have state education departments provide technical assistance to schools in the form of model policies or resources for curriculum implementation and professional development.

## Recommendations for Anti-Bullying Programs

- Have federal and state departments of education clarify which bullying prevention programs are evidence-based. Encourage school districts to use these programs and practices.
- Implement evidence-based social-emotional learning and bullying prevention programs that reduce bullying and help foster positive school climates. Specifically, target middle school students and transitioning students (from elementary to middle school and from middle school to high school) about responsible internet use, civil discourse, and expected and prohibited behaviors and punishments.

### WHO WE ARE

**Committee for Children** is a global nonprofit dedicated to fostering the safety and well-being of children through social-emotional learning and development. Committee for Children is the world's largest provider of research-based educational programs that promote social-emotional skills and prevent bullying and sexual abuse.

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