

Compilation of Bullying Research

By Kayla Taylor

Defining Bullying

Conversations around bullying can be difficult, especially since different people have different definitions of the phenomenon. How can we fix something when we can't even agree upon how to identify it? Fortunately, the experts who study bullying professionally can. Many agree that **bullying is the act of repeatedly and intentionally causing physical and/or emotional harm to another person with less power.**

This definition benefits from clarifications on some of the fundamental aspects:

- **Repetitiveness:** A one-off incident is not bullying. That said, even a lone act need not be dismissed. Any kind of cruelty represents an opportunity to teach kids how to be kinder.
- **Intentionality:** The concept of intentionality can be subjective, sometimes causing people to dismiss hurtful behavior altogether (e.g., “He was just teasing!” or “Oh, she didn’t mean anything by it.”). Scholars clarify that if children are told they hurt someone and continue with their behavior anyway, their actions qualify as intentional (unless the child has a brain-based social challenge, like ASD). Also, ignorance is not a justification for callousness. Just because we didn’t mean to hurt somebody doesn’t mean we didn’t. We are all responsible for trying to understand the consequences of our actions.
- **Physical AND Emotional Harm:** People often dismiss emotional abuse (social isolation, discrimination, verbal taunts, etc.), but emotional injuries can be every bit as traumatic as a black eye.

- **Power:** A person with less power (e.g., a young student versus a teacher) does not bully. The individual with lower status might be rude or aggressive, but this is not the same as bullying. If someone with less authority risks speaking up or acting out, it's worth wondering, "Why?"

Targets

The most common targets of bullying are racial minorities, people in the LGBTQIA+ communities, and individuals with disabilities or learning differences, although anyone deemed outside the norm is at risk. Like sharks circling prey, aggressors often choose targets who appear isolated, "awkward," or otherwise vulnerable.

Children Who Bully

Some scientists suggest that the children who bully suffer from low self-esteem. They might mistreat others in hopes of feeling better by comparison. They might also join cruel behavior to be accepted by the "in crowd," especially in cultures that value toughness and glamorize social status. Children might also misbehave when confused about constructive ways to get attention. And sadly, kids who are mistreated at home might mirror the behavior at school.

Other scientists, however, believe that children who bully often *aren't* exhibiting low self-esteem. Rather, aggressors can consider themselves superior to others, flaunt their social power, and even demonstrate intolerance of others. Instead of feeling guilty when they hurt people, they cite their targets' vulnerabilities as justifications. Savvy ringleaders are also known to recruit "henchmen" to do their dirty work, obscuring who instigated the mean behavior.

It's worth trying to determine the factors underlying the bullying behavior before taking action.

Rights and Justice

People often dismiss bullying as a normal part of life and even a rite of passage, but experts identify bullying as “a form of victimization.” Children deserve to learn in environments free of abuse, but they are often unable to reach their academic and social development potentials when bullying threatens their cognitive and emotional functioning. Brains become inhibited—they can literally feel frozen—when people feel attacked, making learning nearly impossible. Therefore, a school with safeguards that limit bullying is considered a “human right.”

Scholars also hold that bullying prevention is an issue of “social justice,” especially since, by definition, bullying entails an imbalance of power and regularly targets minorities or people considered “misfits.” In general, bullying dehumanizes people and perpetuates warped views of superiority. As a result, institutions that tolerate it send terrible messages contrary to civil rights principles and human decency.

Unhelpful Responses

Many schools present themselves as model communities where bullying is nonexistent, but scholars call this a red flag. In fact, some say they would be more concerned about a school that reports no bullying than one that documents many cases. Bullying occurs everywhere. Denial doesn't change a child's reality. It just turns adults into complicit bystanders and allows problems to fester.

Thirty percent of all children (and higher rates of marginalized groups) experience bullying, but few report it. Apparently, they don't trust adults to respond in helpful ways.

Sometimes, adults charge in with guns blazing, making children more vulnerable to “payback.”

Other times, adults assume that if the target and the aggressor could just spend more time together, they would “figure it out” and magically learn to make nice. But this tactic denies the gravity of victimization and subjects the target to more fear and trauma.

All too often, adults dismiss reports altogether. They tell kids to “stop tattling” and to “brush it off.” Comments like these leave kids dead in the water.

Adults also often negate bullying when only one kid complains. They assume if a sole child is speaking up, there can't *really* be a problem . . . or the problem is the single child. In reality, the lowest person on the social ladder is usually the one targeted, while others are spared. But, sadly, if that child flees, the one perched on the next lowest rung is at risk. Truly kind communities care for the most vulnerable, even when it's only one child.

Too often, people tell injured parties, especially those who are “quirky,” to be “less sensitive” and to alter their behavior to avoid ridicule. The assumption is that they need to learn to “live in the real world.” But this kind of advice is crushing, suggesting sensitivity and feelings are not okay. It also gaslights people into ignoring the very real harm that was done. The advice is also ineffective. Targets are chosen specifically because they have less power, so their ability to influence outcomes is minimal by design. Perhaps most important, when we tell targets to behave differently and assign them the onus of repair, we victim-shame them. We suggest they are at fault for their own abuse . . . that *they* are the ones who need to change, not the aggressors.

And if they don't alter their behavior, they are unworthy of civil treatment and perhaps even their own dignity going forward.

Instead of telling targeted children to change, we might consider fostering their interests and strengths—helping them be *more* of who they are, not less than—and helping peers see their value. Children can also benefit from engaging in supportive communities and validating activities outside of school so they can build confidence and believe they are worthy.

Bullying Outcomes

Bullied students suffer from higher rates of social isolation, low self-esteem, academic impairment, substance abuse, stress-related ailments (like headaches, stomachaches, and problems sleeping), and mental health issues (including anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation). An article in the *Harvard Review of Psychiatry* entitled “How Well Do We Understand the Long-Term Health Implications of Childhood Bullying?” reveals some scary statistics, like males who are bullied are eighteen times more likely to experience suicidality and female targets are almost twenty-seven times more likely to contend with panic disorders. The article also suggests the chronic stress of bullying can elevate body inflammation and lead to substantial long-term health risks like diabetes and heart disease.

Many people fail to realize that targets aren't the only ones affected. Onlookers, too, can experience many of the same troubling outcomes. Bystanders feel especially unsafe when they observe leaders' apathy or reluctance to uphold important social codes. And they can feel a sense of inadequacy and moral failure when they fail to intervene. But who can blame them for not wanting to risk becoming the next target of ridicule?

Ironically, aggressors endure many of the same negative consequences (like mental and physical health problems, truancy, and drug use) as their targets. *And* later in life, they are often even more prone to troubling outcomes like dating aggression, spousal and child abuse, difficulty holding jobs, and criminal activity. But, if we don't teach children prosocial behavior in elementary school, is it really that surprising to learn they might mistreat others later in life?

Researchers acknowledge that juveniles who target others are sometimes bullied themselves or they regularly witness loved ones being mistreated. Understandably, children who both dole out and suffer from aggression have the worst outcomes of all.

As a result, it's clear we fail *all* children when we don't respond to bullying compassionately and competently. So, what can we do?

Effective Prevention Tactics

Unfortunately, it's difficult to find effective comprehensive bullying prevention programs. One ambitious study reviewed the wide body of research to date but did not endorse any single program in its entirety, essentially summarizing, "More work needs to be done." But, the findings do reveal several effective *elements*.

A recurring theme is the importance of culture. The literature continually suggests that bullying decreases in caring environments that authentically value each individual and foster inclusion among all members. Abuse and discrimination are not tolerated, and members work to deconstruct power dynamics that treat some children (and families) as more worthy than others. These cultures most often are led by strong, thoughtful individuals who role model compassion rather than dictate from a pulpit. Teachers are treated with respect, and all children are

considered capable. In fact, they are regularly empowered to define their own classroom values, norms, and behavioral expectations, so they are invested.

Culture can be especially important because it often engenders one of the most effective deterrents to peer aggression: the caring bystander. But perhaps we need to be more thoughtful about the ways we cultivate them. Witnesses are often told to stand up to the bully. While this might work for those with social status, it can make others vulnerable to attack. Fortunately, research now shows another tactic is useful. Bullying can be mitigated when bystanders walk away unimpressed, even scoffing. Dwindling audiences can be less compelling to students seeking attention. Also, when bystanders reach out to targets directly, even after the fact, the traumatic *impact* of the assault can be reduced. Acts of compassion tell targets they are worthy of kindness and belonging—that peers don't believe they deserve mistreatment—and this can make a life-changing difference.

Sadly, a few tormentors can draw significant attention and, thus, cause students to falsely assume that aggression is widely tolerated. In reality, however, the majority crave safe, kind communities. To change perceptions, leaders can shine spotlights on kindness and thereby create new understandings of what is accepted, condoned, and valued.

Many effective educators also foster inclusion and decrease bullying by focusing on more than the academic subject matter. They note who isn't chosen as a lunch buddy or a project partner, for example, and then create opportunities for new connections. Talented educators also highlight the strengths and interests of undervalued children, thereby demonstrating that *all students* are worthy of respect.

It's important to note that bullying prevention does not rely on occasional, one-off assemblies or trite posters hung on walls. Instead, effective efforts are long-term, pervasive, and

involve all community members. For example, students aren't the only focus. Educators (including non-homeroom teachers), administrators, playground monitors, bus drivers, *and* parents are trained and empowered to be compassionate and respond effectively to cruelty. And all spaces—not just classrooms, but hallways, playgrounds, and buses, too—are encompassed, especially since most bullying occurs where adults aren't engaged.

Crucially, effective efforts must set aside public relations and image concerns in order to pursue truth, no matter how uncomfortable. To this end, several researchers promote tools like anonymous reporting systems and surveys that preserve the safety of people who speak up. These tools don't just identify incidents that have occurred; they often detect landmines before they explode.

When institutions neglect to offer opportunities for honest feedback, the subsequent opacity breeds mistrust. Unfortunately, at many institutions, if injured parties want to come forward, they are forced to expose themselves and increase their vulnerability. By contrast, obscurity is afforded to the offenders, whose transgressions are often managed behind closed doors, if at all. This provision of privacy and protections is backward if the goal is to create compassionate environments for everyone, especially those most in need.

Responding to Reports

Even with prevention strategies in place, it's impossible to abolish bullying completely. So, how should we respond when incidents are brought to our attention?

Too often, people dismiss, ridicule, or condemn the reporter as a tattle-tale, snitch, or overly sensitive fool. Instead, we must take each and every report seriously and treat the people

involved with credulity and empathy. We must also learn to value (and even celebrate!) the truth tellers. When we don't, we make the risks too high for sharing the truth.

Once wrongdoing is confirmed, StopBullying.gov says a victimized child must hear (ideally from someone in power), "No one deserves to be bullied, and we will do everything we can to stop it." And an aggressor must be told, "Your behavior is inappropriate, and you must stop it." Other research promotes the importance of documenting each incident and implementing plans with meaningful escalating responses. Kind communities also check in regularly with the targets to verify they feel safe and cared for.

Crucially, at no point should the well-being or social standing of the aggressor be prioritized over that of the target. Often, administrators focus on the privacy of and the risks to the aggressor at the expense of the psychological well-being of the target. This can cause the victimized family to feel as though their needs are irrelevant and, worse, that nobody cares about their well-being, dignity, or humanity. Thus, families of injured children should have a clear view into the plans for addressing the abuse. Also, administrators often assume they know what the injured parties need more than they do themselves. Instead, leaders should demonstrate humility and give the targeted individuals opportunities to state what they need to feel safe and respected going forward (and then attempt to honor those needs). In this way, children can believe their autonomy matters and learn to self-advocate.

Several researchers note that the language we use is pivotal. It's counter-productive to label children simply as "bullies" and "victims," especially since these terms can cement roles. Instead, we should identify bullying *behaviors* with an underlying belief that children essentially want to be good and worthy and need support to evolve into their best selves. Similarly, we should never flatten individuals to victimhood status. Children who are targeted should know

they are more than what other people have done to them. They are worthy of dignity and respect. This has been proven by many individuals who were bullied in their youths and are now admired, like Lady Gaga, Lin Manuel Miranda, Rihanna, Justin Timberlake, Simone Biles, Eminem, Michael Phelps, Selena Gomez, Drew Brees, Demi Lovato, Elon Musk, and Wayne Gretzky.

While parents of suffering children often demand immediate expulsion of the aggressor, scientists say zero-tolerance policies are frequently counterproductive. They undermine kind and compassionate cultures. While extreme measures might eventually be necessary, other methods should be considered first.

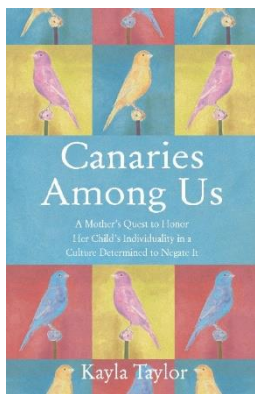
Restorative justice aims both to validate targeted children's inherent dignity and rightful places in the community *and* to encourage aggressors to be accountable for their actions, repair harm done, and recommit to certain moral codes. The goal is to help *all* children progress as worthy, constructive members of society. While it might be hard to extend compassion to someone who purposefully hurt another, restorative justice can be more effective in the long run. After all, if we give up on children who hurt others now, they're likely to do even more harm as adults.

Several recent studies suggest that restorative justice practices are ineffective in schools, but the fault might lie less with the underlying principles and more with program implementation. For example, many restorative justice efforts force mistreated children to sit in "circles" with the students who assaulted them, thereby decreasing their autonomy and sense of safety. The exercise seems to commit what StopBullying.gov refers to as "Misdirections in Bullying Prevention and Intervention," like a) treating bullying as a mere "conflict" rather than a form of victimization and b) employing "group treatment" to address one child's aggression.

Hopefully, schools can learn to implement justice in ways that help targeted children feel safe and aggressors learn to be responsible and kind.

The challenge is before all of us. May we rise to the occasion.

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*Identities have been altered to protect children's privacy, an important element of victim-centered approaches.

BULLYING PREVENTION RESOURCES

WEBSITES:

Centers for Disease Control: cdc.gov, especially “Fast Fact: Preventing Bullying” at www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/youthviolence/bullyingresearch/fastfact.html
StopBullying: StopBullying.gov, especially “Misdirections in Bullying Prevention and Intervention” at www.stopbullying.gov/sites/default/files/2017-10/misdirections-in-prevention.pdf

BOOKS:

Author note: It is difficult to find books that both center the victimized child’s needs and highlight the best peer-reviewed, researched-based solutions. Below are some options, with a few caveats:

End Peer Cruelty, Build Empathy by Michele Borba

(Caveats: While the tenets of restorative justice are important, the descriptions on pages 65-69 seem to commit some of the “misdirections” StopBullying warns against (see above) and fail to center victims’ needs. Also, several common targets are absent from page 185, like racial minorities, people with disabilities, students with learning differences, etc.)

Youth Voice Project by Stan Davis and Charisse L. Nixon

(Caveat: This research beautifully centers the needs of targets. However, pages 109 and 116-117 seem to contradict more recent research that finds students of color and people of lower socioeconomic status are targeted more than their peers.)

Bullied: What Every Parent, Teacher and Kid Needs to Know about Ending the Cycle of Fear by Carrie Goldman

(Caveat: The third section, especially chapters 16-23, is very useful. The first section could be demoralizing for readers whose children were not supported by a warm community after they were bullied. The second section neglects some common targets of bullying, like racial minorities.)

Bullying Today: Bullet Points and Best Practices by Justin W. Patchin and Sameer Hinduja
(focus: cyberbullying)

BLOG POST:

“Share This with All the Schools Please” by Glennon Doyle at <https://momastery.com/blog/2014/01/30/share-schools/>