

First Steps to Stop Bullying and Harassment: Adults helping youth aged 12 to 17

Introduction

Every young person has the right to feel safe at home, at school and in the community (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1990). Bullying is not a normal part of growing up. It doesn't usually go away on its own and often gets worse with time.

Bullying needs to be dealt with directly. To stop hurtful behaviour we all need to respond when it occurs and take steps to prevent it. The first step is recognizing when there is a problem.

Here is some information to help you figure out whether a teen you know has experienced, seen, heard or taken part in bullying. This information will also help you take steps to stop the bullying and help the teen who is being bullied.

What is bullying?

Bullying is a form of aggression that unfolds within a relationship. The teen who bullies uses aggression and control to maintain a position of power over the victimized teen. As bullying evolves over time, the power dynamics and inequality in the relationship become stronger. The victimized teen gets caught in an abusive relationship. This problem can also happen between groups of young people.

The basic elements of bullying are:

- **Unequal power:** One person has more power than the other person (or at least it seems that way to the people involved)
- **Hurtful actions:** Physically or psychologically harmful behaviour takes place (see table page 2)
- **Direct and indirect actions:** The behaviour may be face-to-face or behind one's back
- **Repetitive behaviour:** The hurtful actions keep happening so the person being hurt finds it more and more difficult to escape

Teasing, rough housing or even play fighting are not considered bullying when **both teens** are willing participants.

How does bullying change with age?

As children get older, the type and range of bullying behaviours increase. The nature of bullying often reflects important developmental changes and challenges. While physical, psychological and social bullying are present in children as young as four years old, other bullying behaviours emerge only as children move toward adolescence. For example, sexual harassment and dating aggression typically begin in middle school and increase in the high school years¹ when youth are experiencing physical changes and becoming interested in dating. Although individual patterns of aggression vary, the following table indicates general types of bullying behaviour for youth in middle school and high school.

Types of bullying by age ²

Type of Bullying	Middle School (Grades 6 – 8)	High School (Grades 9 – 12)
Physical	X	X
Psychological -- verbal	X	X
Psychological -- social	X	X
Sexual harassment	Emerging bullying behaviour	X
Dating aggression	Emerging bullying behaviour	X

What are some of the types of bullying? ³

Physical	Psychological	
	Verbal	Social
Hitting Kicking Punching Pushing/shoving Stealing Dating aggression*	Insults Name-calling Comments about how someone looks or talks Threats Sexual harassment** Ethnoculturally-based comments***	Gossiping Rumours Ignoring Not including someone in group activities

Results

Can hurt the young person's body, damage belongings or make the person feel badly about himself or herself.	Can make the young person feel badly about himself or herself.	Can make the young person feel alone and not part of the group.
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* **Dating aggression** -- physical or verbal actions including grabbing, pushing, punching, spreading rumours and name-calling

** **Sexual harassment** -- occurs when a person or group hurts another person by taunting or discussing sensitive sexual issues, creating sexual rumours or messages, making homophobic comments, rating sexual body parts or name-calling, telling sexual jokes, and initiating unwanted sexual touching

*** **Ethnoculturally-based bullying** -- any physical or verbal behaviour used to hurt another person because of his or her ethnicity (culture, colour or religion)

Cyberbullying: Cyberbullying refers to the use of communication technologies (e-mail, cell phones, pager text messages, Internet sites and instant messaging) to physically threaten, verbally harass or socially exclude an individual or group. Using these technologies to distribute damaging messages and pictures allows bullies to remain anonymous and bullying to become widespread.

How many youth are involved in bullying others?

Boys

- 42% of boys in grades 6 to 8 reported that they had bullied in the past two months ⁴.
- 41% of boys in grades 9 to 12 reported that they had bullied in the past two months ⁵.
- 19% of boys between the ages of 11 and 18 were involved in frequent and consistent bullying ⁶.

Girls

- 23% of girls in grades 6 to 8 reported that they had bullied in the past two months ⁷.
- 21% of girls in grades 9 to 12 reported that they had bullied in the past two months ⁸.
- 4% of girls between the ages of 11 and 18 were involved in frequent and consistent bullying ⁹.

How many teens are bullied? ¹⁰

Boys

- 10 to 13% of boys in grades 6 to 10 reported being bullied once or twice per month or more, with most bullying occurring in grade 10.

Girls

- 4 to 11% of girls in grades 6 to 10 reported being bullied once or twice per month or more, with most bullying occurring in grade 8.

Ethnoculturally-based bullying

- 8 to 19% of middle school students reported being bullied because of their ethnicity ¹¹.
- 21% of high school students from minority groups reported being bullied because of their ethnicity ¹².

How many teens witness bullying?

Not all youth are directly involved in bullying incidents, but many get involved in other ways -- some watch, some encourage the bullying and some try to stop it.

- 85% of bullying incidents are witnessed by others ¹³.
- Peers try to stop the bullying in 11 to 19% of incidents ¹⁴. Someone stepping in can help even out the power imbalances.

When other children intervene -- more than half the time, the bullying will stop within 10 seconds! -- Hawkins, Pepler & Craig, 2001

TOGETHER WE CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN BULLYING *

Adults helping youth: Practical advice

The young person who comes to you for help may need some reassurance along with practical advice on what to do. You could try some of the following, using your judgement about the particular circumstances:

If the teen is being bullied, you can suggest:

- "Stay calm and try not to show you are upset. Try to respond to the person bullying you without anger. Anger can make things worse."
- "Look the person in the eye and say you don't like what they are doing."
- "As soon as you can, find an adult you trust and tell the adult what happened. It is your right to be safe."
- "Stay close to peers you can count on to stick up for you."
- "Stay away from places where you know bullying happens."
- "If the bullying continues, walk away, join other teens or ask someone else for help."

If the teen sees someone being bullied, you can suggest:

- "Speak out and help the person being hurt. Nobody deserves to be bullied. You can help by telling the person who is bullying to stop."
- "Comfort the person who was hurt and make it known that what happened was not fair or deserved."
- "If this does not work right away or if you are afraid to say or do something on your own, find an adult you trust to help you."
- "Help a teen who is being bullied by being a friend. Invite that person to participate in your school activities. This will reduce the feeling of being alone."

Some assurances you can give to the teen:

- "Despite how it may seem, it is not a hopeless situation. Something can be done to stop the hurtful behaviour. I will help you."
- "Remember: if you walk away and get help, you are part of the solution. If you stay and watch you are part of the problem."
- "You can help to make your school, sports team or community a better place by taking action against bullying."

Your role: How adults can help

Bullying is not a problem that youth can solve themselves. It is a power struggle that is difficult to change without the help of an adult. In most cases, it will require only a few minutes to stop the behaviour, especially if you act immediately and in a consistent manner.

If you are there when the bullying occurs, talk with the youth who are being aggressive. Explain the hurt they are causing and have them make amends to those who were harmed. This can break the cycle.

However, most bullying happens when you are not looking. When you are told about it, take it seriously since young people usually go to adults with these problems as a last resort.

In a small number of cases, bullying behaviour is a chronic problem requiring the involvement of families and the assistance of a health professional.

If you are a parent or guardian

- Listen and respond to all complaints from your teen about bullying, even the seemingly trivial ones such as name-calling.
- Talk to the adults who were in charge when the bullying occurred to find ways to remedy the hurt and prevent future problems.
- Stop bullying behaviour that happens at home. Consistency matters!
- Consider how you treat others and how you allow others to treat you. As a role model, your actions and reactions can influence how youth relate to each other.

If you are an adult responsible for young people (e.g. a teacher or coach)

- Listen and respond to all complaints from youth and parents about bullying, even the seemingly trivial ones such as name-calling. Consistency matters!
- Be aware of the social interactions among the youth in the group. Arrange groupings to separate youth who tend to have negative interactions with others.
- Place youth who tend to be left out of groups into one where they will be accepted. Try to avoid situations that will victimize at-risk youth (e.g. picking teams or group partners).
- Consider how you treat others and how you allow others to treat you. As a role model, your actions and reactions can influence how youth relate to each other.

If you are a leader of an organization responsible for young people (e.g. a school principal or manager of a sports team or other youth program)

- Listen and respond to all complaints from youth, parents or adults responsible for youth about bullying, even the seemingly trivial ones such as name-calling. Consistency matters!
- Support the adults who work directly with teens in their constructive approaches to end bullying such as separating disruptive teens, increasing supervision in bullying hotspots and placing vulnerable youth in positive groups.
- Create an effective anti-bullying policy in your organization that clearly sets the limits on acceptable behaviour. Include meaningful consequences in the policy to help teach the aggressive youth healthier ways of interacting.
- Allow time for the policy to be reviewed and agreed upon by everyone (including teens).
- Ensure the policy is consistently and universally applied by all involved.
- Consider how you treat others in the organization and how you allow others to treat you. As a role model, your actions and reactions can influence how youth relate to each other.

