Bullying: An Overview

Bullying is a repeated behavior occurring over a period of time that includes a malicious intent to harm and assumes a perceived power imbalance between the bully and the victim. Bullying is not the same as teasing, normal conflict, or rough-housing.

Bullying behavior might include direct verbal (threats, teasing, criticism) or physical (hitting, kicking, etc.) attacks. But bullying actions might also be indirect, such as facial expressions or gestures, isolation, malicious rumors, or exclusion. As a result, indirect bullying is more difficult to perceive.

Bullying Myths and Facts

Bullying is often misunderstood, particularly by the adults who could help prevent it. For example, many people think that bullying is the natural behavior of boys and that only a few children are involved in bullying. Other common myths about bullying include the idea that bullying is the result of class or school size, population makeup, or individual student characteristics (Olweus, 2003).

Research suggests that bullying is not only increasing, but that more students are involved in bullying (Olweus, 2003). Recent studies conclude that nearly 25 percent of all students experience some kind of regular (daily or weekly) bullying (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2009).

In any bullying situation, there is at least one bully and one victim. But there are usually bystanders who play a role by either supporting the bully or the victim (Wright, n.d.). Some may not initiate the bullying, but may participate once it has begun. Some support it without taking part, and others passively support it by watching without stopping it. Some bystanders may want to defend the victim, but
don’t, and still others may actually step forward to help the victim in some way (Olweus, 2003).

Bullying often occurs in places where there is not a lot of adult supervision or structure, such as playgrounds, hallways, and bathrooms (Wright, n.d.).

**Effects of Bullying**

Bullying affects its victims in a variety of ways. Academically, victims’ performance and attendance may drop. Emotionally, students feel loneliness, anxiety, and depression. Later in life, these victims can continue to experience depression and anxiety linked to earlier bullying. In turn, bullies themselves often experience negative outcomes. Those who witness bullying also suffer (CASEL, 2009).

**Why Address Bullying?**

Because bullying is not a legal term, school authorities have often looked the other way when bullying occurs because they do not know how to react. But when the victims of past bullying became the perpetrators of the Columbine shootings in 1999, schools and state legislatures began to wake up to the complicated nature of bullying.

School districts are obligated to protect the constitutional rights of their constituents—both the bullies and the victims. When charges of harassment are levied against an individual, for example, the bully’s defense might be to proclaim the right to free speech, as guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution. However, protection is not absolute. Fighting words, defamatory words, and true threats are excluded from First Amendment protection.

Today all 50 states have anti-bullying and/or anti-harassment statutes, and many legislatures require that school systems address bullying through prevention policies (CASEL, 2009).
What Does Research Say About Bullying?

Research indicates that a social and emotional learning (SEL) framework influences bullying on a wider scale by developing critical skills in both students and their surrounding adults (CASEL, 2009). Many experts believe that school-wide evidence-based intervention strategies are the key to successfully addressing bullying on a wide scale.

Although these intervention strategies vary in some of their components, nearly all of them feature a multifaceted approach that includes an emphasis on trained adult involvement at the school, classroom, and individual level; clear definitions of bullying behavior; education of the whole school body; and consistent and firm responses to bullying.