



National Center
for School Safety



Key Considerations for Bullying Prevention

Contributors

Allison Schreiber, MAIR
School Safety Specialist
National Center for School Safety

Sarah Mason, MPH Candidate
Research Assistant
National Center for School Safety

Erin Wyatt
Marketing and Communications
Specialist
National Center for School Safety

Brent Allen Miller, MA, PMP
Training Manager
National Center for School Safety

Beverly Kingston, PhD
Director and Senior Research Associate
Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence
Institute of Behavioral Science, University of Colorado
Boulder

Alyssa Carvo
Research Assistant
National Center for School Safety

About the National Center for School Safety

The National Center for School Safety (NCSS) is a training and technical assistance center at the University of Michigan Institute for Firearm Injury Prevention and affiliated with the School of Public Health. As a multidisciplinary, multi-institutional center focused on improving school safety and preventing school violence, the NCSS team is composed of national leaders in criminal justice, education, social work, and public health with expertise in school safety research and practice. NCSS provides comprehensive and accessible support to Bureau of Justice Assistance Students, Teachers, and Officers Preventing (STOP) School Violence grantees and the school safety community nationwide to address today's school safety challenges. NCSS serves as the national training and technical assistance provider for the STOP School Violence Program.

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schoolsafety@umich.edu
nc2s.org

Bullying Prevention Overview

Bullying is defined as aggressive behavior towards others that occurs repeatedly over time and within the context of a power imbalance.¹ Bullying inflicts harm or distress on youth, including physical, psychological, social, or educational harm and can have lifelong consequences.^{2,3,4} Bullying of any kind is not a conflict; it is a form of victimization like child abuse or domestic violence.⁵

Cyberbullying, a subcategory of bullying, takes place when technology, such as social media and texting, is used to harass and cause emotional harm to others.⁶ 88% of children who experienced cyberbullying also reported experiencing in-person bullying.⁷ Students often struggle to find relief from cyberbullying because digital platforms where this kind of bullying takes place are accessible 24/7.⁸



In 2020, 1 in 5 students reported being bullied in person, and 1 in 6 students reported being bullied online.³

Bullying connects with other school safety issues in a variety of ways:

- Youth who are bullied are more likely to report decreased academic performance, physical ailments including disrupted sleep and increased illness, and increased rates of depression and anxiety.⁹
- Youth who participate in bullying are more likely to engage in other violent or dangerous behavior including the use of illegal substances, fighting, vandalism, early sexual activity, and domestic violence.⁹
- Youth who witness bullying are more likely to miss school or drop out entirely, use illegal substances, and report increased rates of depression and anxiety.⁹
- Both victims and perpetrators of bullying are at higher risk of suicide than their peers.³

Bullying can happen to any child, for any reason. However, depending on the environment, some groups—such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or questioning (LGBTQ) youth, youth with disabilities and socially isolated youth—may be at a greater risk of being bullied.

In most cases, bullying focuses on anything that results in a child being perceived as “different.” This could include their:

- physical appearance
- ethnic, linguistic, or cultural background
- gender (including not conforming to gender norms or stereotypes)
- family structure
- social status
- disability status



Currently, there are no federal laws specifically about bullying. But in cases where bullying overlaps with discriminatory harassment (if based on sex, race, age, disability, etc.), schools are federally mandated to address it. Depending on the type of bullying (race, sexual orientation, disability, etc.), it can even fall under hate crimes, in which case the behavior is considered criminal.¹⁰

All states have a law that requires schools to have a bullying or bullying prevention policy, yet the specific components of the state-specific laws and school policies vary tremendously.¹¹ Many states do not currently account for cyberbullying in their laws.¹²

For more information on state anti-bullying laws, visit [StopBullying.gov](https://stopbullying.gov)'s table on [Common Components of State Anti-Bullying Laws and Regulations, by State](#).

Bullying in Context

Before considering which specific bullying prevention strategy you might adopt, it is important to understand how bullying occurs in different contexts.

- Between 2005 and 2019, the percentage of students reporting bullying was higher in rural environments when compared to suburban and urban schools, which had no significant difference. Public and private schools see about the same prevalence of bullying.¹³
- Across all school settings, the majority of bullying took place inside the classroom and in hallways or stairwells.¹³
- Prevalence of bullying typically increases throughout elementary school years and reaches a peak during middle school and young adolescence, with slight declines throughout high school.¹⁴ Almost 14% of public schools report that bullying is a discipline problem dealt with at least once a week.² School climate is influential in the prevalence of bullying. Schools that are perceived as unfriendly, unwelcoming, or unfair see higher rates of bullying—up to double the rates in schools perceived as friendly, welcoming, and safe.¹⁴
- There are many behaviors that look like bullying but require different approaches. It is important to determine whether a specific situation is bullying or another type of aggressive behavior, such as dating violence or gang violence.¹⁵



Cyberbullying is any form of bullying that takes place in a digital space. This includes social media, text messages, apps, gaming platforms, and more.⁸

- In the 2017-2018 school year, cyberbullying was most prevalent in rural schools, followed by suburban and then urban schools.¹³
- What is written in a digital platform often stays there, unless reported and removed (which usually takes significant amounts of time). In the short-term, this can have a detrimental effect on student mental health; in the long-term, this can also impact victims by giving them a negative online reputation that may emerge during college admissions or when applying for jobs.⁸
- It can be challenging for teachers and caregivers to be aware of what is taking place as messages sent on digital platforms are not always available for public viewing nor are they always on platforms that adults are familiar with.¹⁶
- Victims of cyberbullying may or may not know who is responsible due to the anonymity granted by online spaces.⁸
- Some states also have policies in place to address off-campus behavior that causes a substantial disruption of the learning environment at school.¹² For more information on each state's bullying laws, visit the [Cyberbullying Research Center](#).



Rates of traditional bullying and cyberbullying by state can be found at the [National Center for Educational Statistics](#).

Consider Your Own School Community

In order to address bullying, it is important to first conduct a bullying assessment. This will allow you to streamline the use of resources and establish a baseline that the success of your interventions can be measured against. Assessments can collect information on the frequency, type, and location of bullying; adult and peer responses to bullying; and general staff and student perceptions of safety on and off campus.¹⁷

There are a variety of bullying assessments that are reliable and have been validated for different populations.¹⁷ The results of these assessments can be used to assess the overall situation or investigate specific trends in bullying, concentrate efforts, and measure the results of interventions that the school has implemented. It is important to obtain parental consent if needed, ensure respondent privacy and anonymity, analyze data, and create an action plan to address your results.



- For a collection of assessments to understand both bullying and victimization among students, visit the CDC’s compendium of assessment tools called [Measuring Bullying, Victimization, Perpetration, and Bystander Experiences](#).
- The Department of Health and Human Services has developed an assessment designed to evaluate your school’s capacity for bullying prevention and provide a guide to potential improvements, called [Assessing Prevention Capacity & Implementing Change](#).

Recommendations for Schools to Address Bullying

It is important to remember that addressing bullying takes time. It is critical that school administrators make a long-term commitment to addressing bullying and supporting the victims. Studies have shown that youth violence prevention programs, especially those that focused on building youth skills, positive family environments, and relationships can be very effective in changing behavioral outcomes and decreasing incidences of bullying and other youth violence.¹⁸ One study found that in the United States, on average, school-based anti-bullying programs decreased bullying behavior by 20%-23% and victimization by bullies by 17%-20%.¹⁶

Establish Policies, Expectations, and Rules

Schools can infuse bullying prevention efforts into the various types of documentation that guide how schools operate.¹⁹

School Mission Statement

The mission statement serves to provide an overall vision for the school and allows each member of the school community to understand how they can contribute to working toward that goal.

Sample Mission Statement:

[Name of School] is committed to each student’s success in learning within a caring, responsive, and safe environment that is free of discrimination, violence, and bullying. Our school works to ensure that all students have the opportunity and support to develop to their fullest potential and share a personal and meaningful bond with people in the school community.

Code of Conduct

The code of conduct is a collection of the positive behaviors expected of students and that can be expected of school staff and teachers. It helps set standards for behavior and expectations for all members of the community in order to support safety and trust in schools. Some states have specific requirements for codes of conduct.



- [The Georgia Department of Education](#) shares general guidelines and concepts to consider in creating a Student-Specific Code of Conduct.
- [North Andover Public Schools](#) also features a specific Anti-Bullying Code of Conduct that addresses expectations for both students and for school staff featuring clearly communicated policies like in the example below.

Sample Anti-Bullying Code of Conduct:

As a school, we will take any report of bullying seriously. The District's approach to bullying is one of restitution, resolution and reconciliation. Staff will provide support for the victim while working to change the behavior of the bully through a combination of education and problem solving. When appropriate, staff will meet with one or more of the students playing the role of the bullied, the bully, and/or the bystander to resolve issues and try to achieve reconciliation. Bullying will be responded to through a continuum of consequences and interventions as outlined in this handbook. Consequences can range from positive behavioral interventions up to and including suspension or expulsion of students. Consequences shall be varied and graded according to the nature of the behavior, the developmental age of the student and the student's history of problem behaviors and performance and will be consistent with the discipline rights and responsibilities, and due process contained in this handbook. Please understand that we want all our students to feel valued and respected in our school. These situations are hard for everyone—students, parents, school administrators, and educators alike, but the actions we take in these moments truly show what we stand for as a community.

Student Bill of Rights

The student bill of rights gives students an idea of what positive things they can expect in the school environment.

Sample Student Bill of Rights:

Each student at [school] has a right to: Learn in a safe and friendly place. Be treated with respect. Receive the help and support of caring adults.

Clear Reporting System

Encourage students to bring concerns about bullying to a trusted adult in the school such as a teacher, counselor, or other staff members. Ensure that teachers and staff know how to report bullying. Some schools may even choose to use an Anonymous Reporting System for students and families to report concerns.

Enhance School Climate

Creating a positive school climate, where everyone feels like they belong, are valued, and where they feel physically and emotionally safe is an essential component of bullying prevention. Below are some areas to focus your efforts on.²⁰

- Create ground rules.
 - » Develop rules collaboratively with students so there is a clear understanding of not only what the rule is but why.
 - » Frame rules positively as what to do, rather than what not to do.
 - » Ensure ground rules support school norms and that everyone is informed.
- Reinforce rules and expectations consistently.
 - » Be a role model and follow the rules as staff members.
 - » Reward good behavior.



- » Provide corrections one-one-one rather than in public.
- » Consistently communicate expectations.
- Encourage open conversation, positive conflict resolution, and opportunities to learn and grow.
- Ensure staff supervision in areas that may see more bullying, such as playgrounds and cafeterias.
- Encourage bystanders to become upstanders so they can question bullying behavior, redirect conversations, and intervene as a group.^{21,22}

Conduct Staff Training

Administrators should also consider staff training that enhances everyone’s knowledge and skills when it comes to preventing bullying, such as:²³

- Identifying bullying and cyberbullying.
- The kinds of bullying (i.e., verbal, social, or physical) and how to identify each.
- Risk factors and warning signs that bullying may be taking place.
- Steps to take to prevent bullying before it occurs.
- Steps to take to address bullying in the classroom.
- School policies and expectations for reporting, discipline, etc.



Staff training can take many different forms, from regular professional development opportunities to innovative solutions, such as an individualized teacher coaching intervention like the [Bullying Classroom Check-Up](#).²⁴

Encourage Bullying Prevention-Focused Classroom Lessons



Interactive classroom lessons can help raise student awareness and improve their responses to bullying.²³ School administrators can encourage teachers to incorporate lessons into the curriculum such as the following:

- Educators could assign a research project to high school students on the different kinds of bullying they see in school and online.



School counselors might join class to lead students in role-playing how bystanders can and should react to bullying.



Students, educators, and staff could collaborate on developing a bullying awareness campaign.

- Projects could include designing posters, drafting announcements, and creating infographics.
- Teachers could assign creative writing projects on how fictional characters could combat bullying.



Other considerations for teaching students about bullying prevention include:²³

- Teach bullying prevention at a comprehension level appropriate for all students with the major message: *Treat everyone with respect and talk to a trusted adult if there are concerns.*
- Encourage students to talk to a trusted adult if they see or suspect bullying, or if they feel they are being bullied.
- Discuss bystander effect and clearly explain the appropriate steps to take if one sees or suspects bullying, and what to do if a student feels they are being bullied themselves.
- Empower students to take a role in preventing bullying, either individually or as a group by encouraging open discussions, and providing opportunities to be actively involved in anti-bullying initiatives.



A collection of kid-friendly, age-specific videos on preventing or addressing bullying can be found at [StopBullying.gov](https://www.stopbullying.gov).

Engage Caregivers

School safety committees can take a variety of actions to engage caregivers in bullying prevention efforts.²⁵

- Educate the school community about bullying to ensure everyone understands the problem and their role in stopping it. Ensure caregivers know how bullying is addressed at school and what their role is in reporting and/or addressing it. If an anonymous reporting system exists, make sure all students and caregivers understand how to use it and how the school will respond.
- Conduct school-wide bullying assessments and review other data, such as incident reports. Feedback can be collected from caregivers via surveys, open-ended questionnaires, or email, and shared back once results are analyzed.
- Cultivate opportunities for involvement that allow parents to contribute to a positive, inclusive on-campus environment. Additionally, building a relationship with teachers, staff, and other parents can increase a parent's awareness of dynamics that may be present at the school. Some ways that parents may be able to get involved include:
 - » Parent-Teacher Organizations
 - » Volunteer at events or in the classroom
 - » Booster Clubs for sports teams, music groups, etc.



- Engaging caregivers in understanding, identifying, and addressing cyberbullying is essential. Individually, caregivers, teachers, and other adults may not be aware of all the digital media and apps that a child is using, but together they can work to be mindful of warning signs. These signs include noticeable increases or decreases in device use, hiding screens/devices when others are near, and avoiding social situations, even those that were enjoyed in the past.²⁶

Resources to Help Engage Caregivers:

- [The Eyes on Bullying Toolkit](#) features activities, reflection points, and situational questions to assist caregivers and educators in the prevention of bullying.
- Additional resources for families, such as how to talk to children about bullying, can be found on the [Committee for Children's website](#).
- Refer to [StopBullying.gov's Prevent Cyberbullying](#) page for resources on how to address cyberbullying when it occurs.

Avoid Common Mistakes in Bullying Assessment and Prevention

Whether reviewing the results of bullying assessments or dealing with individual bullying situations, it is important to avoid a few key mistakes.

- Avoid placing blame on the victim. No student deserves to be bullied, regardless of the specific situation.²⁷
- Do not ask students to undergo mediation together. Bullying is not a conflict, it is a form of victimization and making victims go through mediation with their bully may be unsettling for the students and send the wrong message of shared culpability.⁵
- Avoid confrontation between parents/guardians or other family members. All conversations should be facilitated by a school or other official.²⁷
- Do not assume that what works for one school will work for another. It is important to consider a variety of evidence-based programs and assessment methods and select the program, tool or strategy that best fits the local context.¹¹



Additional Resources

[A Multi-Tiered Approach to Bullying Prevention](#) provides a summary of evidence-based strategies aimed at building an inclusive school climate with a tiered approach that provides guidance for universal, selective, and intensive interventions in a school setting.

[How to Talk about Bullying](#) provides conversation starters and guidance on how adults can talk to youth about bullying before it happens and when there are current concerns. The guide also features tips for youth on how to talk to an adult about bullying.

[Resources on Bullying Prevention](#) is a collection of resources curated by the National Association of School Psychologists. It provides guidance on how to talk about bullying, how to help victims and perpetrators of bullying, and how to break the connection between bullying and youth suicide.

[Five Things About School-Based Violence Prevention and Intervention Programs](#) includes a summary of five important evidence-based concepts on how and why school-based violence prevention and intervention programs are most successful.

[Bullying Prevention in Out-of-School and Afterschool Settings](#) describes how out-of-school time programs can address and prevent bullying.

[Practice Profile: Bullying Prevention Programs](#) includes programs designed to reduce bullying perpetration and victimization and to increase positive bystander behavior in bullying situations.

[Practice Profile: School-Based Cyberbullying Prevention Programs](#) aim to decrease cyberbullying perpetration and victimization and promote cyber-bystander behaviors among students in kindergarten through grade 12.

[Model Programs Guide Literature Review: Bullying and Cyberbullying](#) summarizes research related to the scope of bullying in the United States; different types of bullying; theoretical foundations; predictors, risk factors, protective factors, and consequences of bullying; and interventions focused on prevention and/or reduction.

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schoolsafety@umich.edu

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