



Adolescent Bullying

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Most adults can remember a time when they were teased at school. This teasing could have been friendly or mean-spirited. Teachers, parents, therapists, and researchers have become more concerned about teasing that leads to bullying. According to recent studies, between 20-40% of U.S. teenagers report being bullied three or more times during the past year. Between 7-15% report bullying others three or more times during the past year.

Some people argue that bullying has increased dramatically in the last 20 years due to changes in society, families, and schools. Others say bullying is no more common now than it was in the past. They suggest that the difference today is that school staff and parents are taking bullying more seriously. In the past, it may have been overlooked. Regardless of its history, with one in three teens affected, bullying is considered a major problem today.

Bullying Defined

Bully: v. to hurt, frighten, or tyrannize over; to browbeat

Bullying is a way to dominate another person through behavior. It is usually defined as ongoing physical or verbal harassment between two people that have an imbalance of power. Those who use physical, verbal, and emotional or psychological methods to humiliate, embarrass, or overpower someone. Bullying typically includes:

- Kicking, hitting, pushing, spitting, or other forms of physical abuse
- Taunting, teasing, name-calling, saying mean things, or deliberately isolating someone
- Spreading rumors, telling lies, or deliberately setting up someone to get in trouble
- Taking or stealing things from someone
- Forcing or pressuring someone to do something he or she doesn't want to do
- Sexually harassing someone in any way



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Characteristics of Bullies

Researchers have found two types of adolescents involved in bullying. The first are *bullies*, or those who victimize others. The second are *victims*, or those who are the targets of such behavior. In some cases, bullies become victims and vice versa. As the characteristics below demonstrate, there are similarities and differences between both these groups.

Compared to Non-Bullying Teens, Bullies tend to:

- Have difficulty accepting criticism
- Think too highly of themselves
- Have the need to be the center of attention
- Be more likely to drink alcohol and use drugs excessively
- Be at greater risk of being victimized themselves (about 50% of bullies are also victims at some point)
- Be at higher risk for mental health problems such as conduct disorder and attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder
- Be more likely to be antisocial in adulthood
- Be more likely to use violence in relationships
- Be more likely to get in trouble with the law

Compared to Non-Bullied Teens, Victims tend to:

- Be at higher risk for mental and physical health problems such as depression, stomachaches, and headaches
- Be absent from school more frequently because of bullying
- Continue to experience higher levels of anxiety through adulthood
- Have low self-worth
- Feel that control of their lives rests with someone else

How to Help

Adults who live and work with teens need to know how to help stop bullying. The suggestions of youth development experts are listed below:

- Teach teens that violence is never an acceptable way to solve problems or to get attention from others. Set a good example of peaceful communication during times of conflict. Remember that young people model what they see.

- Encourage teens to use words to solve problems, both with their friends and when seeking help from adults. Praise them when they use these skills.
- Ensure that everyone knows what bullying is. Many times bullying behavior continues simply because adults and teens aren't sure what bullying is. Be clear about rules and consequences—at home, at school, and at activities. Let teens know what's okay and what's not, and what will happen if they break the rules.
- Encourage by-standers, both youth and adult, to intervene in a peaceful way. By not helping, by-standers are condoning the behavior.
- Know your teen's friends and those friends' parents. If trouble starts, talk non-defensively with other parents to help find ways to ease the problem. Stress that you are trying to do what's best for both teens.
- Talk with teens who are being bullied about what they think could be the problem. What coping skills have and haven't worked in the past? Try to give them the skills they need to first try to solve the problem on their own. Help them practice being assertive by insisting that the bully leave them alone. Teach them how to walk away. Teach them how to ignore the behavior.
- If your teen is bullying others, he or she needs support to learn other ways to handle anger. Your teen also needs to know that this behavior will not be tolerated. Talk with teachers, school counselors, or the teen's physician to find out how to address the problem before it gets worse. Many schools have peer mediation available.

Resources/References

- www.aacap.org/web/aacap/publications/factsfam/80.htm
Fact sheet from the American Academy of Adolescent & Child Psychiatry
- www.ianr.unl.edu/pubs/family/nf309.htm
Fact sheet from the University of Nebraska—Lincoln
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