

Myths about Bullying

Bullying is unwanted, aggressive behavior among school aged children that involves a real or perceived power imbalance. The behavior is repeated, or has the potential to be repeated, over time. Both kids who are bullied and who bully others may have serious, lasting problems.

In order to be considered bullying, the behavior must be aggressive and include:

- ❖ **An Imbalance of Power:** Kids who bully use their power—such as physical strength, access to embarrassing information, or popularity—to control or harm others. Power imbalances can change over time and in different situations, even if they involve the same people.
- ❖ **Repetition:** Bullying behaviors happen more than once or have the potential to happen more than once.

1. Bullying is the Same Thing as Conflict.

Wrong. **Bullying** is aggressive behavior that involves an imbalance of power or strength. Often, bullying is repeated over time.

Conflict involves antagonism among two or more people. Whereas any two people can have a conflict (or a disagreement or a fight), bullying only occurs where there is a power imbalance—where one child has a hard time defending himself or herself. Why is the difference between bullying and conflict important? Conflict resolution or mediation strategies are sometimes misused to solve bullying problems. These strategies can send the message that both children are “partly right and partly wrong,” or that, “We need to work out the conflict between you.” These messages are not appropriate messages in cases of bullying (or in any situation where someone is being victimized). The appropriate message to the child who is bullied should be, “Bullying is wrong and no one deserves to be bullied. We are going to do everything we can to stop it.”

What does work? Research suggests that the best way to deal with bullying is through comprehensive programs that focus on changing the climate of a school and the social norms of the group. For more information, visit www.stopbullying.gov.

2. Most Bullying is Physical (Involves Hitting, Shoving, Kicking).

Physical bullying may be what first comes to mind when adults think about bullying. However, the most common form of bullying—both for boys and girls—is verbal bullying (e.g., name-calling). It is also common for youth to bully each other through social bullying (e.g., leaving a child out on purpose, rumor-spreading).

3. Bullying isn't Serious. It's Just a Matter of “Kids Being Kids.”

Bullying can be extremely serious. Kids who are bullied can experience negative physical, school, and mental health issues. Kids who are bullied are more likely to experience:

- ❖ Depression and anxiety, increased feelings of sadness and loneliness, changes in sleep and eating patterns, and loss of interest in activities they used to enjoy. These issues may persist into adulthood.
- ❖ Health complaints
- ❖ Decreased academic achievement—GPA and standardized test scores—and school participation. They are more likely to miss, skip, or drop out of school.
- ❖ Research suggests that adults who were bullied as children are more likely than their non-bullied peers to be depressed and have low self-esteem as adults.
- ❖ Children who bully are more likely than other children to be engaged in other antisocial, violent, or troubling behaviors. Bullying can negatively affect children who observe bullying going on around them—even if they aren't targeted themselves.

4. Bullying Doesn't Happen at My Child's School.

Bullying is more common at some schools than others, however it can happen anywhere children and youth gather. There are two sources of federally collected data on youth bullying:

- ❖ The 2009 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) indicates that, nationwide, 20% of students in grades 9–12 experienced bullying.
- ❖ The 2008–2009 School Crime Supplement (National Center for Education Statistics and Bureau of Justice Statistics) indicates that, nationwide, 28% of students in grades 6–12 experienced bullying.

5. Bullying is Mostly a Problem in Urban Schools.

Bullying occurs in rural, suburban, and urban communities, and among children of every income level, race, and geographic region.

6. Bullying is More Likely to Happen on the Bus than at School.

Although bullying does happen on the bus, most surveys indicate that bullying is more likely to occur on school grounds. Common locations for bullying include playgrounds, the classroom, the cafeteria, bathrooms, and hallways. A student survey can help determine where the hotspots are in any particular school.

7. Children and Youth Who Are Bullied Will Almost Always Tell an Adult.

Adults are often unaware of bullying—in part because many children and youth don't report it. On the 2008–2009 School Crime Supplement, only 1/3 of students who had been bullied reported in to adults. Boys and older children are less likely than girls and younger children to tell adults about bullying. Why are children reluctant to report bullying? They may fear retaliation by children doing the bullying. They also may fear that adults won't take their concerns seriously or will deal inappropriately with the bullying situation.

8. Children and Youth Who Bully are Mostly Loners with Few Social Skills.

There are two types of kids who are more likely to bully others:

- ❖ Some are well-connected to their peers, have social power, are overly concerned about their popularity, and like to dominate or be in charge of others.
- ❖ Others are more isolated from their peers and may be depressed or anxious, have low self-esteem, be less involved in school, be easily pressured by peers, or not identify with the emotions or feelings of others.

9. Bullied Kids Need to Learn How to Deal with Bullying on Their Own.

Some children have the confidence and skills to stop bullying when it happens, but many do not. Moreover, children shouldn't be expected to deal with bullying on their own. Bullying is a form of victimization or peer abuse. Just as society does not expect victims of other types of abuse (e.g., child maltreatment or domestic abuse) to “deal with it on their own,” we should not expect this from victims of bullying. Adults have critical roles to play in helping to stop bullying, as do other children who witness or observe bullying. To learn more about what you can do to help, visit www.stopbullyingnow.gov.

10. Most Children and Youth Who Observe Bullying Don't Want to Get Involved.

The good news is that most children and youth think that bullying is “not cool” and feel that they should do something if they see it happen. In a recent study of tweens, (Brown, Birch, & Kancherla, 2005), 56% said that they usually either say or do something to try to stop bullying that they observe or tell someone who could help. These children and youth play a critical role in helping stop bullying in schools and communities.