

Facts for Teens: Bullying

Introduction

In the United States, bullying among children and teenagers has often been dismissed as a normal part of growing up. Little attention has been paid to the devastating effects of bullying, or to the connection between bullying and other forms of violence. In recent years, however, students and adults around the country have begun to make a commitment to stop bullying in their schools and communities.

What is bullying?

Bullying includes a wide variety of behaviors, but all involve a person or a group repeatedly trying to harm someone who is weaker or more vulnerable. It can involve direct attacks (such as hitting, threatening or intimidating, maliciously teasing and taunting, name-calling, making sexual remarks, and stealing or damaging belongings) or more subtle, indirect attacks (such as spreading rumors or encouraging others to reject or exclude someone).

How common is bullying?

Almost 30 percent of teens in the United States (or over 5.7 million) are estimated to be involved in bullying as either a bully, a target of bullying, or both. In a recent national survey of students in grades 6 to 10, 13 percent reported bullying others, 11 percent reported being the target of bullies, and another 6 percent said they bullied others and were bullied themselves.¹

Limited available data suggest that bullying is much more common among younger teens than older teens. As teens grow older, they are less likely to bully others and to be the targets of bullies.²

Bullying occurs more frequently among boys than girls. Teenage boys are much more likely to bully others and to be the targets of bullies. While both boys and girls say others bully them by making fun of the way they look or talk, boys are more likely to report being hit, slapped, or pushed. Teenage girls are more often the targets of rumors and sexual comments.³ While teenage boys target both boys and girls, teenage girls most often bully other girls, using more subtle and indirect forms of aggression than boys. For example, instead of physically harming others, they are more likely to spread gossip or encourage others to reject or exclude another girl.⁴

How does bullying affect teens who are the targets of bullies?

Bullying can lead teenagers to feel tense, anxious, and afraid. It can affect their concentration in school, and can lead them to avoid school in some cases. If bullying continues for some time, it can begin to affect teens' self-esteem and feelings of self-worth. It also can increase their social isolation,

Stop youth violence before it starts

leading them to become withdrawn and depressed, anxious and insecure. In extreme cases, bullying can be devastating for teens, with long-term consequences. Some teens feel compelled to take drastic measures, such as carrying weapons for protection or seeking violent revenge. Others, in desperation, even consider suicide.^{5,6,7} Researchers have found that years later, long after the bullying has stopped, adults who were bullied as teens have higher levels of depression and poorer self-esteem than other adults.⁸

Bullying can also affect those teens who witness the bullying.

In one study of junior high and high school students, over 88 percent said they had witnessed bullying in their schools.⁹ Teens who witness bullying can feel guilty or helpless for not standing up to a bully on behalf of a classmate or friend, or for not reporting the incident to someone who could help. They may experience even greater guilt if they are drawn into bullying by pressure from their peers. Some teens deal with these feelings of guilt by blaming the victim and deciding that he or she deserved the abuse. Teens sometimes also feel compelled to end a friendship or avoid being seen with the bullied teen to avoid losing status or being targeted themselves.^{10,11}

Which teens are most likely to become bullies?

While many people believe bullies act tough in order to hide feelings of insecurity and self-loathing, in fact, bullies tend to be confident, with high self-esteem.^{12,13} They are generally physically aggressive, with pro-violence attitudes, and are typically hot-tempered, easily angered, and impulsive, with a low tolerance for frustration. Bullies have a strong need to dominate others and usually have little empathy for their targets. Male bullies are often physically bigger and stronger than their peers.¹⁴ Bullies tend to get in trouble more often, and to dislike and do more poorly in school than teens who do not bully others. They are also more likely to fight, drink, and smoke than their peers.¹⁵

Teens who come from homes where parents provide little emotional support for their children, fail to monitor their activities, or have little involvement in their lives, are at greater risk for engaging in bullying behavior. Parents' discipline styles are also related to bullying behavior: an extremely permissive or excessively harsh approach to discipline can increase the risk of teenage bullying.¹⁶

Surprisingly, bullies appear to have little difficulty in making friends. Their friends typically share their pro-violence attitudes and problem behaviors (such as drinking and smoking) and may be involved in bullying as well.¹⁷ These friends are often followers who do not initiate bullying, but participate in it.¹⁸

As mentioned above, some teenagers not only bully others but are also the targets of bullies themselves. Like other bullies, they tend to do poorly in school and engage in a number of problem behaviors. They also tend to be socially isolated, with few friends and poor relationships with their classmates.¹⁹

What are the long-term consequences of bullying behavior?

Bullying is often a warning sign that children and teens are heading for trouble and are at risk for serious violence. Teens (particularly boys) who bully are more likely to engage in other

antisocial/delinquent behavior (e.g., vandalism, shoplifting, truancy, and drug use) into adulthood. They are four times more likely than nonbullies to be convicted of crimes by age 24, with 60 percent of bullies having at least one criminal conviction.²⁰

What can schools do to stop bullying?

Effective programs have been developed to reduce bullying in schools. Research has found that bullying is most likely to occur in schools where there is a lack of adult supervision during breaks, where teachers and students are indifferent to or accept bullying behavior, and where rules against bullying are not consistently enforced.²¹

While approaches that simply crack down on individual bullies are seldom effective, when there is a school-wide commitment to end bullying, it can be reduced by up to 50 percent. One effective approach focuses on changing school and classroom climates by: raising awareness about bullying, increasing teacher and parent involvement and supervision, forming clear rules and strong social norms against bullying, and providing support and protection for all students. This approach involves teachers, principals, students, and everyone associated with the school, including janitors, cafeteria workers, and crossing guards. Adults become aware of the extent of bullying at the school, and they involve themselves in changing the situation, rather than looking the other way. Students pledge not to bully other students, to help students who are bullied, and to make a point to include students who are left out.²²

What You Can Do

If You Are Being Bullied...

1. **Talk to your parents or an adult you can trust, such as a teacher, school counselor, or principal.** Many teens who are targets of bullies do not talk to adults because they feel embarrassed, ashamed, or fearful, and they believe they should be able to handle the problem on their own. Others believe that involving adults will only make the situation worse. While in some cases it is possible to end bullying without adult intervention, in other more extreme cases, it is necessary to involve school officials and even law enforcement. Talk to a trusted adult who can help you develop a plan to end the bullying and provide you with the support you need. If the first adult you approach is not receptive, find another adult who will support and help you.
2. **It's not useful to blame yourself for a bully's actions.** You can do a few things, however, that may help if a bully begins to harass you. Do not retaliate against a bully or let the bully see how much he or she has upset you. If bullies know they are getting to you, they are likely to torment you more. If at all possible, stay calm and respond evenly and firmly or else say nothing and walk away. Sometimes you can make a joke, laugh at yourself, and use humor to defuse a situation.

3. **Act confident. Hold your head up, stand up straight, make eye contact, and walk confidently.** A bully will be less likely to single you out if you project self-confidence.
4. **Try to make friends with other students.** A bully is more likely to leave you alone if you are with your friends. This is especially true if you and your friends stick up for each other.
5. **Avoid situations where bullying can happen.** If at all possible, avoid being alone with bullies. If bullying occurs on the way to or from school, you may want to take a different route, leave at a different time, or find others to walk to and from school with. If bullying occurs at school, avoid areas that are isolated or unsupervised by adults, and stick with friends as much as possible.
6. **If necessary, take steps to rebuild your self-confidence.** Bullying can affect your self-confidence and belief in yourself. Finding activities you enjoy and are good at can help to restore your self-esteem. Take time to explore new interests and develop new talents and skills. Bullying can also leave you feeling rejected, isolated, and alone. It is important to try to make new friendships with people who share your interests. Consider participating in extra-curricular activities or joining a group outside of school, such as an after-school program, church youth group, or sports team.
7. **Do not resort to violence or carry a gun or other weapon.** Carrying a gun will not make you safer. Guns often escalate conflicts and increase the chances you will be seriously harmed. You also run the risk that the gun may be turned on you or an innocent person will be hurt. And you may do something in a moment of fear or anger you will regret for the rest of your life. Finally, it is illegal for a teen to carry a handgun; it can lead to criminal charges and arrest.

If Someone Else is Being Bullied...

1. **Refuse to join in if you see someone being bullied.** It can be hard to resist if a bully tries to get you to taunt or torment someone, and you may fear the bully will turn on you if you do not participate, but try to stand firm.
2. **Attempt to defuse bullying situations when you see them starting up.** For example, try to draw attention away from the targeted person, or take the bully aside and ask him/her to "cool it." Do not place yourself at risk, however.
3. **If you can do so without risk to your own safety, get a teacher, parent, or other responsible adult to come help immediately.**

4. **Speak up and/or offer support to bullied teens when you witness bullying.** For example, help them up if they have been tripped or knocked down. If you feel you cannot do this at the time, privately support those being hurt with words of kindness or condolence later.
5. **Encourage the bullied teen to talk with parents or a trusted adult.** Offer to go with the person if it would help. Tell an adult yourself if the teen is unwilling to report the bullying. If necessary for your safety, do this anonymously.

Helpful Links

[Addressing the Problem of Juvenile Bullying](http://www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles1/ojjdp/fs200127.pdf)

www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles1/ojjdp/fs200127.pdf

Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Department of Justice

This fact sheet reviews recent research on bullying and presents information on effective bullying prevention approaches.

[Division of Violence Prevention](http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/dvp/dvp.htm)

www.cdc.gov/ncipc/dvp/dvp.htm

National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

This Web site contains a number of fact sheets and publications on youth violence, with links to other valuable resources. It also includes the truth and myths about youth violence, kids' stories, things you can do to avoid violence, and a reading list for teens.

[Bullying In Schools. ERIC Digest](http://www.ericfacility.net/ericdigests/ed407154.html)

www.ericfacility.net/ericdigests/ed407154.html

U.S. Department of Education

This document provides a concise summary of research on bullying and what we know about effective programs to prevent bullying in schools.

[Survey on Bullying in U.S. Schools](http://www.nichd.nih.gov/new/releases/bullying.cfm)

www.nichd.nih.gov/new/releases/bullying.cfm

National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, National Institutes of Health

This news release summarizes the results of a recent national survey of 6th to 10th graders on bullying in U.S. schools.

[A Teenager's Guide to... Fitting in, Getting involved, Finding yourself](http://www.ncfy.com/expreng.pdf)

www.ncfy.com/expreng.pdf

Family and Youth Services Bureau, Department of Health and Human Services

When times get tough, it's important to know there are people you can count on. The ideas in this booklet can help you learn to deal with tough times and enjoy the good times by finding the people and places that are right for you. You might find these ideas useful in your everyday life. Or read them to see if they might be helpful to a friend.

[Virtual Library on Bullying in Schools](http://ericass.uncg.edu/virtuallib/bullying/bullyingbook.html)

<http://ericass.uncg.edu/virtuallib/bullying/bullyingbook.html>

ERIC Clearinghouse on Counseling and Student Services, U.S. Department of Education

This site offers a rich collection of documents on bullying, ranging from techniques to avoid bullying to descriptions of effective bullying prevention programs.

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