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# Bullying in elementary school

Jennifer P. Dixon  
*University of Northern Iowa*

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# Bullying in elementary school

## **Abstract**

The prevalence of bullying is very high among elementary students, and students are affected by bullying, whether or not they are the bully, victim, or bystander. When working with bullies and victims, it is important to be aware of the different types of bullying, as well as the various forms and characteristics of bullies and victims. The school staff and community can help prevent bullying by gaining knowledge about various aspects of bullying and making the school a safe environment.

# BULLYING IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

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Jennifer P. Dixon

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\_\_\_\_\_  
Advisor/Director of Research Paper

William P. Callahan

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\_\_\_\_\_  
Head, Department of Educational  
Leadership, Counseling, and Postsecondary  
Education

## Abstract

The prevalence of bullying is very high among elementary students, and students are affected by bullying, whether or not they are the bully, victim, or bystander. When working with bullies and victims, it is important to be aware of the different types of bullying, as well as the various forms and characteristics of bullies and victims. The school staff and community can help prevent bullying by gaining knowledge about various aspects of bullying and making the school a safe environment.

Bullying is defined as, "A form of aggressive behavior which is usually hurtful and deliberate; it is often persistent, sometimes continuing for weeks, months, or even years and it is difficult for those being bullied to defend themselves (Sharp & Smith, 1994, p.1)." Bullying generally occurs during childhood (Smith, Morita, Junger-Tas, Olweus, Catalano, & Slee, 1999), is twice as high among elementary students than secondary students, and declines as students progress through school. According to Smith, Morita, Junger-Tas, Olweus, Catalano, and Slee (1999), 27% of elementary school students reported being bullied and 12% reported bullying others. In secondary schools, 10% of the students reported being bullied and 6% reported bullying others. In addition, children in the lower grades tend to be the victims of the children in the upper grades (Barton, 2003). For example, in elementary schools, 10% of students reported being bullied at least once a week, whereas in secondary schools, that number dropped to 4% in secondary schools (Sharp & Smith, 1994).

The purpose of this paper is to increase awareness about bullying, including the types of bullying; characteristics of bullies, victims, and bystanders; the effects of bullying; and interventions. In addition, the purpose of this paper is to provide information on how bullying can be prevented and the importance of knowing the various aspects of bullying. Having the knowledge about bullying, school staff and parents will be able to identify bullying and they will know the steps to take in preventing bullying.

## Types of Bullying

### *Verbal Bullying*

According to Coloroso (2003), verbal bullying is the most common type of bullying in schools and accounts for 70% of bullying. This type of bullying is most commonly used because children can easily get away with this type of bullying. For example, children can whisper negative remarks to a classmate without anybody else hearing or yell negative remarks across the playground that will blend in with other noise, according to Coloroso.

Verbal bullying can include teasing, put-downs, and swearing. Because some children are very sensitive to forms of verbal bullying, they are often easily hurt. When children verbally bully and cause distress to the victim, the bully feels powerful. This creates an imbalance of power between the victim and the bully because of the weakness of the victim. It is important to note that power imbalances may change overtime when victims learn how to defend themselves and when bullies lose their supporters (Rigby, 2002).

### *Physical Bullying*

Less than one-third of bullying is physical, and male bullies are three to four times more likely to be physical than female bullies (Sullivan, 2000). Physical bullying includes acts such as choking, punching, poking, slapping, kicking, and biting. Physical bullying is the most visible form of bullying, but it is the least reported of all other types of bullying because children who are being bullied are afraid of the possibility of retaliation and are less likely to reports incidents of physical bullying (Ross, 1996). When physical bullying occurs, it can become more dangerous for the victim if the bully is

older and stronger (Coloroso, 2003). Although bullies do not intend to cause serious harm towards the victim, they might inadvertently do so. In some cases, their only intent was to scare the victim, but because of their strength, they may break the victim's arm.

### *Relational Bullying*

Relational bullying includes acts such as spreading rumors, ostracizing, and exclusionary behaviors (Barton, 2003). The most difficult form of bullying to detect is relational bullying because it is not as visible as physical bullying. (Coloroso, 2003). According to Sullivan (2000), girls are more likely than boys to use relational bullying by spreading false rumors. Victims of relational bullying may be the targets of rumors and consequently they may be excluded from social events, such as a birthday party. Another example of relational bullying is having a friend tell someone that he or she will not continue being friends with that person unless that person does something. More than likely, individuals who are victimized by peers or friends are victims of relational bullying (Juvonen & Graham, 2001).

### Characteristics of Bullies

#### *Physical Characteristics*

Physical strength is one of the characteristics of bullies (Hazler, 1996), and among boys, strength plays a very important role in bullying. There has been a high correlation between the popularity among peers and strength among boys. In the school setting, the students that are not seen as popular seem to be threatened by the popular students. In addition, physical strength seems to provide boys with ways of defending themselves if somebody were to attack them (Olweus, 1993).



### *Mental Characteristics*

Bullies manifest a variety of mental characteristics. They often feel inadequate and think that when they put other kids down it will make them feel better. When they act as though they are superior, they mask their feeling of inadequacy (Coloroso, 2003).

Another mental characteristic that some bullies possess is that they have an understanding of other people's perspectives. For example, females who engage in relational bullying seem to have high socio-cognitive skills and some of these females use these cognitive skills as a way to isolate their victims even more (Barton, 2003).

### *Family Characteristics*

According to Barton (2003), certain family factors can contribute to bullying. Attachment theory is often used to explain child development in social situations and provides a strong explanation for bullying behaviors. Attachment theorists believe that infant attachment and the reciprocal love bond between the infant and the mother has long-term effects on children. Children who have parents that use inconsistent parenting styles develop insecure attachments. Therefore, these children have low self-worth and unpredictable interpersonal relationships. When children have low self-esteem and unpredictable relationships, they tend to initiate conflicts more than children with secure attachments.

Another family factor that is important is the way in which parents handle family conflicts. For example, siblings might argue over a toy and the argument will continue until someone gives up. Therefore, the sibling who won the argument is rewarded for his or her behavior and may continue to use the same type of behavior in the future when conflicts arise (Barton, 2003).

Bullies often come from families where the relationships are poor and there is little or no communication within the family. Bullies are more likely to say that their parents do not like them very much (Hoover & Oliver, 1996). The way in which children act outside of their family is related to their family structure (Sullivan, 2000). According to Barton (2003), parents who fight in front of their children are more likely to have aggressive children at home than parents who do not fight and argue in front of their children. In addition, children who have parents that fight in front of them tend to model their parent's behavior during social conflict.

It is not uncommon that many bullies see their father as being more powerful than their mother. When boys observe their father having more power than the mother, they tend to believe that the male should always have the most power. Therefore, at school males might act more powerful. In addition, there is also sometimes a power imbalance between siblings of bullies. The siblings usually possess more power than the bully (Van Oost, 2002), so when bullies lose conflicts with their siblings, they may feel the need to always win conflicts and be aggressive around their peers.

### Types of Victims

#### *Provocative Victims*

Proactive victims are victims who react more emotionally than other victims (Harris & Petrie, 2003). Provocative victims are more likely to be boys. They are also generally physically weaker than their peers (Olweus, 1993). Although these victims are physically weaker, they are more assertive, confident, and active than other types of victims.

Provocative victims provoke negative situations and then complain when their peers retaliate (Suckling & Temple, 2001). Furthermore, provocative victims tend to create irritation and tension with their peers. They can be very hot-tempered, and when their peers retaliate, they fight back ineffectively. When fights or conflicts arise between provocative victims and bullies, the provocative victims prolong the fight even when the bully is “winning” the fight. The reason why they prolong fights or conflicts when they are losing is because they become easily aroused emotionally. Furthermore, this attributes to their illogical behavior. Their high level of arousal prevents them from “walking away” (Ross, 1996).

Provocative victims are the least popular of all victims because their classroom behavior is very disruptive. Consequently, their classmates tend to react negatively towards them (Harris & Petrie, 2003). Although provocative victims are the least popular, they do not appear to have low self-esteem. Because of these children’s personalities, their responses on self-esteem inventories may not be accurate because they are being defensive (Ross, 1996).

### *Passive Victims*

The majority of victims are passive victims. Unlike proactive victims, passive victims will not retaliate if they are insulted or attacked (Olweus, 1993). These victims are more insecure and anxious than their peers, as well as more cautious, quiet, and sensitive. These victims also lack confidence and confrontation skills (Besag, 1989). Along with confidence and confrontation skills, they also see themselves as unattractive, stupid, and failures. Although these victims have negative self-concepts, they are intelligent and creative, but they lack the appropriate skills to interact with their peers and

make friends. Consequently, they often become social isolates in school. Due to the fact that they do not have friends, they do not have social support that could protect them from bullying (Ross, 1996).

Olweus (1993) stated that boys who are passive victims have closer relationships with their mothers, who may be overprotective. Tendencies such as being overprotective can be the cause and consequence of bullying. Because these victims usually demonstrate more sensitivity, male bullies observe this and zero in on an easy target.

## Bystanders

### *Role of the Bystander*

Bystanders are neither victims nor bullies, but actually see the act of bullying. (Garrett, 2003). It is not uncommon for victims to see the bystanders as being on the bully's side (Barton, 2003). Bystanders usually do not receive any attention, but they are greatly affected by observing bullying behavior. Although bystanders are not physically involved in bullying, they are still involved vicariously and are afraid that they will eventually become victims (Horne, Bartolomucci, & Newman-Carlson, 2003).

Bystanders are usually very empathic and sensitive. In addition, they are very concerned about the victims, but do not know how to intervene or find it difficult. They often feel guilty because they are afraid that the bully might come after them if they choose to intervene (Horne, Bartolomucci, & Newman-Carlson, 2003). Instead of intervening, bystanders simply stand by or walk away (Coloroso, 2003).

According to Coloroso (2003) there are four main reasons why bystanders do not intervene. The first reason is that the bystander is afraid of getting hurt because the bully is usually bigger and the bystander believes that the bully will hurt him or her. The

second reason is that the bystander does not want to become the next target for the bully. The third reason is because bystanders believe that if they do something to help the victim, they will make the situation worse. The final reason is the fact that the bystander does not know how to intervene. For example, the bystander may not have been taught how to report bullying. Furthermore, since bullying is a learned behavior, knowing how to intervene should be taught (Coloroso, 2003).

### *Intervening with Bystanders*

There are several ways counselors and teachers can help bystanders intervene. One way is to help them recognize their uncomfortable feelings. More specifically, it is important to help bystanders understand that they are not the only students who feel the same way that they do. Discussing these feelings is referred to as “survivor guilt” (Horne, Bartolomucci, & Newman-Carlson, 2003, p. 287), which is defined as, “The feelings of guilt one develops for having survived a traumatic situation when others experienced much more pain and suffering” (Horne, Bartolomucci, & Newman-Carlson, 2003, p.287).

The second way in which teachers and counselors can intervene is by encouraging bystanders to become involved as a group rather than staying to themselves. Furthermore, it is important to normalize the feelings that bystanders have. By normalizing these feelings, they will feel as though their feelings are validated, encouraged, and supported. When bystanders form a group, they will be more willing to take a stand (Horne, Bartolomucci, & Newman-Carlson, 2003).

The final way is to help the bystanders give support to the victims without being afraid of being a victim themselves. Direct intervention with the victims will be more

successful if there are a larger number of bystanders intervening. Bystanders can give support by spending time with the victim, being a good listener, and inviting the victims to become involved in their group activities (Horne, Bartolomucci, & Newman-Carlson, 2003).

### Effects of Bullying

#### *On the Victims*

Children who have been victims of bullying will remember the pain that they went through forever. Furthermore, it is not uncommon for victims of bullying to have long-term and short-term negative responses. According to Garrett (2003), a female recalled that when she was in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, she got picked on non-stop for two years. A girl that she had been a friend with since she was two years old stopped being friends with her because no one else talked to her. This particular female quoted, "I have a fear that if one girl doesn't talk to me, they will all start again and it will never stop" (Garrett, 2003, p.60).

Garrett also gave an example of a seventy-seven year old male named James Bricker, who remembers how a football player used to bully him in 1942. Bricker's memories of being bullied are still fresh in his mind even though it happened sixty years ago (Garret, 2003).

In order to deal with the effect of being bullied, some children seek revenge. For example, some children's anger may lead to violence (Garrett, 2003). General crime characteristics are consistent with research on victims in schools where the majority of males are identified as being victims of bullies (Hazler, 1996).

Another effect of bullying is stress among the victims. There are three types of stressors related to bullying: acute, chronic, and neutral. Chronic stressors include long-term illness, long-term parental arguing, and repeated abuse. Children who experience chronic stress generally have low self-esteem, anxiety disorders, depression, accident proneness, and a decline in their general health (Thompson, Arora, & Sharp, 2002).

Acute stressors are very sudden, intense, and brief. Acute stressors include accidents, sudden injury, and traumatic incidents. In addition, acute stressors tend to lead to a major change in a child's life only for a short period of time. Some negative effects of acute stress are flashbacks, sleep disturbances, anxiety, and irritability. Many children who experience acute stress eventually develop post-traumatic stress disorder (Thompson, Arora, & Sharp, 2002).

The last type of stress that victims experience is neutral stress. Neutral stressors are common experiences that children go through such as a birth of a sibling or having a new teacher (Thompson, Arora, & Sharp, 2002). Victims of bullying experience chronic and acute stress more than neutral stress.

Being rejected from peers in school is a strong predictor of social problems in adulthood. When victims experience low self-esteem, it can effect their social interaction in adulthood. Furthermore, eighty percent of heterosexual men who had a difficult time progressing beyond casual contact and social interaction with the opposite sex had been bullied in school (Ross, 1996).

Because of the stress from bullying, and the peer rejection, some victims resort to suicide (Thompson, Arora, & Sharp, 2002). It is important to remember that suicide

notes sometimes point out that the child was a victim of bullying (Juvonen & Graham, 2001).

There are also several physical effects that are associated with bullying. Victims of bullying have reported physical symptoms such as sleeping problems, stomach aches, and headaches. Furthermore, children who are bullied are three times more likely to have sleeping problems. Victims of bullying are also twice as likely to wet the bed and over twice as likely to have regular stomach aches and headaches. These symptoms are more common for those victims who have been bullied almost everyday than those victims who were not bullied as much (Williams, Chambers, Logan, & Robinson, 1996).

Truancy has also been found to be an effect of bullying. In fact, 15% of absentees said that they stayed home from school because they were being bullied, and these students also reported higher frequencies of disease and illnesses (Thompson, Arora, & Sharp).

### *On the Bullies*

Bullies are also affected by their own behavior. For example, bullies use force and intimidation in order to get what they want. When bullies use force and intimidation, they learn that these behaviors are rewarding in certain situations, so they continue to exhibit these behaviors. They are very aggressive, enjoy dominating other children, and like showing other children how powerful they are in aggressive ways such as kicking, biting, and hitting. As a result of their aggressive behaviors, they tend to continue to handle negative situations by behaving in this manner because they have had rewarding results in the past (Garrett, 2003).



It is not uncommon for bullies to see threats where there are really no threats at all. For example, they may misinterpret someone bumping into them as an attack. In addition, when bullies see a threat, they tend to strike back. When bullies reach the age of seven or eight, they are in the habit of turning minor situations into attacks. Due to the fact that bullies behave this way, they feel justified in retaliating in a situation when it was simply imaginary (Garrett, 2003). If these behaviors are allowed to continue, they can turn into more serious behaviors; as they get older, bullies are likely to engage in criminal activity or sexual harassment or engage in family violence (Garrett, 2003).

### Interventions at the School Level

#### *Student Watch Programs*

Student watch programs train student volunteers, who are not involved in bullying to patrol the inside and outside of the building and report instances of bullying and illegal activities (Ross, 1996). A student watch program is a yearlong course in which commitment to self, community, and school are emphasized through leadership activities. Jocks, straight A students, and students who would not normally be involved in school activities are participants in this program (Ross, 1996). It is mandatory that all student volunteers enroll in a student leadership class. Students enrolled in this course must participate in other volunteer activities (Ross, 1996). Those involved in the student watch program consider this to be high status.

When student watch volunteers report unusual behavior, it is the staff's responsibility to also make observations of those identified by the students in the program. The students in the program are taught to behave like concerned students rather

than behaving like the authority. "The goal of these programs is to improve the school by making it a safer and more pleasant place for students in general (Ross, 1996, p.125)." This program has been successful because the students generally have more knowledge about what is going on than the faculty.

### *Video Monitoring*

Video monitoring has been proven to be highly effective in schools because school staff members are able to confront the bully by simply showing what was recorded. The procedure of video monitoring is to have a staff member monitor the screens, and when the staff member observes any sign of trouble, he or she is to notify the teacher on duty (Ross, 1996).

If parents deny the fact that their child was being a bully, they can watch the tape, which will raise their awareness about bullying problems in the school. Video monitoring is also effective because the bully is forced to watch the tape and examine his or her behavior. The tapes can also be shown in classrooms to discuss the problem of bullying. When the tapes are shown in classrooms, the bully is looked upon as the bad person (Ross, 1996).

There is a concern that students are being subjected to surveillance, which is unreasonable. However, this particular concern is not justified because there are surveillance cameras in gas stations and in shopping malls, as well as metal detectors in some schools and in airports.

### *Supervision*

*Playground.* Bullying often takes place during recess, so it is important that there is adequate supervision during recess. Not only should there be adequate supervision

during recess, but teachers and other adults should be prepared to intervene quickly in bullying situations. Furthermore, they should also be prepared when there is a suspicion that bullying is going to take place. Teachers and adults are generally able to tell if bullying is about to occur by looking at the atmosphere of the activities and the facial expressions. "The guiding rule of action should be to intervene too early rather than too late" (Olweus, 1993, p.71).

It is important for playground supervisors to exchange information about what is taking place during recess. In addition, they should report bullying incidents or attempts of bullying to the classroom teacher of the students who were involved in the bullying incident. When playground supervisors take these specific measures, bullying can be discovered at its earliest stage (Olweus, 1993).

Some playground supervisors do not have any experience dealing with behavior management. Consequently, they need to be taught these skills. Once they learn these skills, they will gain more confidence in handling difficult situations on the playground. Teachers and counselors can also share behavior management skills that have worked for them during playground supervision, and they can have regular meetings to discuss behavior management on the playground. (Thompson, Arora, & Shaprp, 2002).

*Lunchroom.* In addition to adequate supervision during recess, it is also important that there is adequate supervision in the lunchroom (Olweus, 1996). The majority of lunchtime supervisors have not undergone any formal training supervision, and because they are faced with some of the most difficult behavior that children engage in while they are in school, this training would be beneficial (Sharp & Smith, 1994).

Many lunchroom supervisors tend to deal with behavior management in the same way they would with their own children. What works at home may not be successful in the lunchroom. Some of the tactics that lunchroom supervisors use may even cause the students to behave worse (Sharp & Smith, 1994).

### *In-service Training*

It is beneficial to organize an in-service day around the problem of bullying. Teachers, the principal, school counselors, school psychologists, the school nurse, and parents should attend. The goal of an in-service should be to develop a plan of action to stop bullying (Olweus, 1993). This plan should be concrete with adequate discussion about the specific measures that should be taken. Everybody at the in-service should come to a consensus about these measures (Olweus, 1993).

### *School Anti-Bullying Policy*

A school anti-bullying policy gives the school commitment, direction, consistency, and clear expectations in tackling bullying behavior. In addition, this policy gives the school an opportunity to clearly state that bullying will not be tolerated and it will be seriously dealt with (Suckling & Temple, 2001).

The school anti-bullying policy should contain a definition of the term bullying so that the faculty and parents have the same understanding of the term. In addition, there should also be prevention strategies included in the policy such as, effective playground supervision and leadership practices. This policy should also include how to report bullying; how to deal with a bullying incident; the rights and responsibilities of teachers, parents and students to uphold the school's anti-bullying program; and monitoring and evaluating the policy (Suckling & Temple, 2001).

## Interventions at the Classroom Level

### *Class Rules*

One strategy that teachers can use in the classroom to help prevent bullying is implementing class rules. It is important to have the students involved in the discussion of the rules because they will experience greater responsibility for the rules. These rules should be posted in a visible place so that the teacher and the students can refer back to them (Olweus, 1993).

Olweus (1993) identified examples of three rules that get teachers and students started:

- 1.) We shall not bully other students.
- 2.) We shall try to help students who are bullied.
- 3.) We shall make a point to include students who become easily left out (p. 82).

### *Class Meetings*

Classroom meetings provide an opportunity for students to discuss issues such as bullying and be involved in the problem-solving and decision-making process. There are many issues that the teacher should consider before planning a class meeting. One is re-arranging the classroom so that the chairs are in a circle to allow the students to be heard. Another issue that should be taken into consideration is keeping the meeting specific. For example, having a written agenda would keep the meeting on task (Suckling & Temple, 2002).

The meetings should last for about twenty or thirty minutes so that students do not become inattentive. In addition to the time frame, the teacher should create a non-

threatening tone in classroom so that students feel comfortable during the meeting (Suckling & Temple, 2002).

### *Role Playing*

Role-playing is an effective strategy to use with students concerning bullying because it gives students the opportunity to get inside the roles of the bully and the victim. Younger children enjoy role-playing because much of their play involves pretending to be other people (Sullivan, 2000).

Many bullies lack empathy; therefore, if they are placed in a victim role, they can learn to empathize with their victims. In addition, those children who are not being bullied and are not the bullies have the opportunity to make the bullying experience a real experience. This is especially important if the issue about bullying is not raised like it should be (Sullivan, 2000).

## Interventions at the Individual Level

### *Interventions with the Bully*

When a teacher or counselor is aware or suspects who a bully is, he or she should individually discuss the issue with the bully. It is important for the teacher or counselor to be aware that bullies tend to be fairly self-confident. Therefore, when bullies are approached, it is likely they will talk themselves out of the situation. In addition, the bully will probably make the behavior of the victim seem aggressive and proactive for justification of the bullying (Olweus, 1993).

### *Interventions with Victims*

The victims are usually afraid of getting the bullies into trouble because they feel as though they do not have protection and the bully might come after them. Furthermore,

the victims have more than likely been threatened by the bully. Therefore, when talking with the victims, it is important to guarantee them protection against harassment and encourage them to trust whoever they are talking with. In addition, the situation between the bully and the victim should be followed up until the bullying has completely stopped (Olweus, 1993).

### *Interventions with Parents*

When the school discovers bullies, the teacher or counselor should make contact with all of the parties concerned. There should be a meeting with the bully, victim, and the parents. If it is a hostile situation, it may be better to meet separately with the parents of the bully and the parents of the victims (Olweus, 1993).

The goal of the meeting is to come up with a plan for solving the problem. After the first meeting, there should be a follow-up meeting in which there should be an evaluation of the situation. In addition, it is important to make sure that the issues discussed in the first meeting were carried out. An important step in these meetings is to form a positive relationship between the parents of the victims and bullies (Olweus, 1993).

### Conclusion

Bullying affects children in many different ways such as stressors, physical effects, aggressive behaviors in adulthood, and suicide. Adults working with children should be aware of how bullying affects the victims, bystanders and the bullies. Parents, teachers, and counselors should also have knowledge about interventions which can be used to prevent bullying in schools. More specifically, they should have knowledge about interventions at the school level, class level, and individual level. In addition,

playground and lunchroom supervisors should also have knowledge about how to prevent bullying.

It is important to aware of the different types of bullies and victims, as well as different characteristics of bullies and victims. The more that school faculty know about the different types of bullies and victims, the better they will be able to help them deal with the problem.

According to Olweus (1993), there was a fifty percent marked reduction in bullying problems due to particular interventions. For example, interventions such as in-service days and training for lunchroom supervisors have reduced the incidents of bullying. Olweus's interventions have also showed improvement of the social climate in the classroom, such as a more positive attitude toward schoolwork and improved social relationships.

Many schools have already implemented strategies to prevent bullying by implementing anti-bullying programs. Hopefully, if more schools were to implement these interventions, there would not be such prevalence among bullying in schools.



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