



## Getting Pushed Around

### *Bullying Survives Generations As A Common Problem In Schools*

A generation earlier, news that bullying is a widespread problem in America's schools might have been greeted with a shrug of indifference. Today, with bullying reported to have been a factor in at least two horrific school shootings, this age-old problem is a source of concern.

The humiliation and pain of being bullied is experienced by nearly 17% of U.S. school children, according to a study funded by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD).

While being bullied rarely leads to lethal violence, it is not a benign experience for those who endure it and can contribute to psychological problems. Also, those who do the bullying are more likely to engage in other troubling behaviors, such as drinking.

#### **Bullied Often**

Generally, bullying is behavior intended to harm or disturb that occurs repeatedly and involves a more powerful person attacking a less powerful person. Hitting, pushing, taunting, threatening, spreading rumors, and intimidating are among the tactics used by bullies.

The NICHD study, based on a survey of 15,686 public and private school students in grades 6-10, is the first in-depth, nationwide look at the problem.

In all, 29% of the students said their have either been a bully, a target of bullying, or both.

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*Outside the U.S., several communities have taken on bullies and won. First, they recognized bullying as something much more serious as an unpleasant rite of passage. Then, they mobilized schools, parents, and students to limit opportunities to bully others and reduce the rewards of bullying.*

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- 8.4% of the students said they were victims of frequent bullying, acts of violence or intimidate that occurred at least once a week.
- Another 8.5% said they had been targets of bullying "sometimes."
- 13% of the students sampled said they had bullied others.
- About 6% reported having bullied others and having been bullied themselves.

Other dynamics of bullying were also reported.

- Bullying happens most often in 6th through 8th grade and the degree to which it does varies little between urban, suburban, and rural schools.
- Boys are more likely to bully others and are more likely to be victims of bullying.
- The most common type of bullying among boys is physical, such as being hit, slapped, or pushed.
- Girls are more often bullied ver-

bally and psychologically, usually through sexual comments or rumors.

Also, bullies, when verbally abusing a classmate, tend not to make derogatory statements about the other child's race or religion, suggesting stronger social norms against making those types of statements than against belittling classmates about their appearance or behavior.

#### **Beyond Physical Harm**

Physical harm is usually the first concern of victims of bullies. But if bullies go unpunished, a climate of fear can develop that affects victims in other ways. Their grades may suffer; fear may lead to absenteeism; victims may lose or fail to develop self-esteem; they may feel isolated or withdrawn; and some – even later as adults – may become hesitant to take social, intellectual, emotional or vocational risks.

As for the bullies, they are more likely to engage in smoking and drinking, as well as acts of delinquency, including vandalism and shoplifting.

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Dan Olweus, a pioneer in the study of bullying, found that 60% of males who were bullies in grades 6-9 were convicted of at least one crime as adults.

**High Profile Problem**

Bullying, long considered simply an unpleasant rite passage, became a serious, high-profile problem of American schools after it was identified as a contributing factor in the 1999 Columbine High School shooting in Littleton, Colorado and the 2001 Santee High School shooting in Santee, California.

The fact that bullying is something that studies suggest schools can effectively address also contributes to its recent prominence.

“A lot of it has to do with wanting to be able to identify these school shooters and the frustration of not being able to do so,” said Edward P. Mulvey, Ph.D., Professor of Psychiatry in the University of Pittsburgh’s Law and Psychiatry Program. “Working with bullying is frequently seen as reasonable. Studies show that dealing with bullying has had some success in reducing aggressive behavior in schools.”

**Turning Against Bullies**

Outside the U.S., several communities have taken on bullies and won.

These communities recognized bullying as a serious problem that often signals more troublesome antisocial behavior in the child’s future. The successful interventions they have used focus on limiting opportunities to bully others and reducing the rewards of bullying.

The best known and most thoroughly studied intervention is the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program developed in Norway in the mid-1980s and refined over the years. The program involves school staff, students, and par-

ents in a strategy to increase awareness of bullying, tighten teacher and parent supervision, set clear anti-bullying rules, and protect and support those who are bullied.

In school, staff and teachers measure the nature and scope of the problem by surveying students anonymously.

Students are more closely supervised during breaks and they discuss bullying in schoolwide assemblies and in their classrooms. Parents are asked not to tolerate bullying. Rules prohib-

iting bullying are enforced and response to a problem is not passive. School officials and teachers intervene with bullies, victims, and their parents to make sure the bullying stops.

Studies suggest the relatively straightforward program is highly effective among students in elementary, middle, and junior high schools, where reported incidents of bullying were reduced by half within two years and the rate of other kinds of antisocial behavior, such as theft and vandalism, also declined.

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## references

*This report was based on the following publications:*

Nansel, T.R., Overpeck, M., Pilla, R.S., Ruan, J., Simons-Morton, B., & Scheidt, P. (2001). Bullying behaviors among U.S. Youth: Prevalence and association with psychosocial adjustment. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, **285** (16): 2094-2100.

Olweus, D., and Limber, S. (1999). *Blueprints for Violence Prevention: Bullying Prevention Program (Book Nine)*. Boulder, CO: University of Colorado at Boulder, Institute of Behavioral Science, Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence.

*(Blueprints for Violence Prevention Bullying Prevention Program is available from the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, Institute of Behavioral Science, University of Colorado at Boulder, Campus Box 442, Boulder, Colorado 80309-0442, Phone: (303) 492-8465, FAX (303) 443-3297).*

*For information on bullying and conflict resolution, visit these Web sites:*

- **Communities In Schools** ([www.cisnet.org](http://www.cisnet.org))
- **National Center for Conflict Resolution Education:** [www.nccre.org](http://www.nccre.org)
- **Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention:** [www.ojjdp.ncjrs.org](http://www.ojjdp.ncjrs.org)

## contacts

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