

Understanding Bullying: The Impact Can Last a Lifetime

Recognizing the signs, understanding the long-term effects, and knowing how to help.

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Bullying can have lasting effects on a child's mental health, relationships, and success in school. Understanding what bullying is, how it affects children, and what families can do is an important step toward prevention and healing.

What Bullying Is

- Repeated over time: The hurtful actions happen more than once or have the potential to happen again.
- Imbalance of power: The person doing the bullying has more physical strength, social standing, or age/authority, making it hard for the target to defend themselves.
- Intent to harm: The behavior is done on purpose to humiliate, threaten, or control.

What Bullying Is Not

- A single argument or fight: A one-time disagreement, shouting match, or isolated scuffle between peers of equal footing is a conflict, not bullying.
- Mutual teasing or roughhousing: When two friends or peers trade good-natured jokes or play roughly where both parties are having fun and share equal power, it is not bullying.
- Random meanness: An isolated rude comment or a bad day where someone acts grumpy or snaps at another person lacks the persistent, controlling pattern of true bullying.

The Long-Term Effects of Bullying

When bullying happens, everyone who is involved or witnesses it can have lasting impacts on their mental health and well-being. Bullying is linked to many negative outcomes, including increased risks of depression and anxiety, substance use, and suicide. Knowing the potential effects and how to support kids in bullying situations is important to making sure kids get the help and resources they need to heal.

Kids Who Are Bullied

Kids who are bullied can experience negative physical, social, emotional, academic, and mental health issues that can last into adulthood. Kids who are bullied are more likely to experience:

- Depression and anxiety disorders, symptoms of borderline personality disorder, changes in sleep and eating patterns, and loss of interest in activities they used to enjoy, like sports teams and clubs.
- Self-esteem issues with feelings of shame that can impact all aspects of kids' lives.
- Health complaints, including higher rates of headaches, stomach aches, and colds.
- Behaviors, like increased rates of smoking, that increase the risk of future health concerns, like higher stress levels and sleeping problems.
- Decreased academic achievement, like lower GPA, standardized test scores, and school participation. They are more likely to miss, skip, or drop out of school.
- Struggles with friendships and maintaining relationships later in life.

Kids Who Bully Others

Kids who bully others can also engage in violent and other risky behaviors into adulthood. Kids who bully are more likely to:

- Abuse alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs in adolescence and adulthood.
- Experience depression or self-harm.
- Have poor academic achievement, miss, or drop out of school.
- Experience aggressive and impulsive behavior, resulting in higher risks of vandalism, fights, traffic offenses, and criminal charges.
- Perpetuate dating violence as early as eighth grade and become abusive toward their romantic partners, spouses, or children as adults.

Kids Who Are Bullied and Bully Others

Kids who have been bullied while also bullying others suffer the most serious consequences. These kids have the highest risk of mental health and behavioral problems, making it crucial for adults to connect these youth with support and resources like mental health counseling. Kids who are bullied and bully others are more likely to:

- Engage in early sexual activity and become a young parent.
- Struggle with making and keeping friendships.
- Have trouble keeping a job and honoring financial commitments in adulthood.
- Experience mental health issues like anxiety, depression, and antisocial personality disorder, as well as similar physical health concerns to kids who were only bullied.

Kids Who Witness Bullying

Bullying also impacts kids who are not directly involved but witness the bullying taking place. These kids may:

- Have increased feelings of helplessness or guilt for being unable to stop or prevent it.
- Feel unsafe at school, which can affect academic performance, mental health, and school climate.
- Use tobacco, alcohol, or other drugs at increased rates.
- Experience increased risk for mental health problems, such as depression and anxiety.
- Have poor school attendance due to missing or skipping school.

The Relationship Between Bullying and Suicide

Suicide is a serious concern for all kids who experience traumatic situations or mental health issues, including bullying. Although most kids who are bullied do not experience suicidal thoughts or self-harm, research has identified an association between a history of bullying and suicidal ideation.

In one study of youth visiting emergency departments with suicidal ideation, researchers found that kids who reported cyberbullying were 11.5 times more likely to present suicidal ideation, while individuals reporting verbal bullying were 8.4 times more likely.

It's important to talk to all kids about what's going on in their lives to determine if they're involved in bullying or other concerning behaviors. Support from parents and caregivers, peers, and adults at school can help prevent and repair the consequences of bullying.

Feelings of not fitting in led to increased depression, marijuana use and truancy over time, which were associated with lower academic progress by the end of high school. That, in turn, lowered students' odds of

going to college.

Girls were 57 percent and boys 68 percent less likely than their peers of the same race, social class and academic background to attend college if they had feelings of not fitting in. Girls who were obese or reported being attracted to the same sex were far more likely to feel that they did not fit in and experience the negative consequences of these feelings.

Kids who have social problems — often because they are overweight or identify as LGBTQ+ are at greater risk of missing out on going to college simply because of the social problems they have and how it affects them emotionally, not because of anything to do with intelligence or academic progress.

When you feel different because of what is happening to you in high school—real or imagined — that is messing up the identity development process, which is an important part of adolescence.

Teenagers cope with the discomforts of being bullied in ways that are protective in the short term, but disastrous in the long term. Those coping strategies interrupt the educational process — the classes they take, the grades they make — which, in turn, affect their ability to go to college.

Teenagers are forced to navigate the complex social hierarchy of high school where they run the risk of either being prized for being “real,” or punished for being too different.

What Kids can do

If you are being bullied

- Stay calm and walk away: Do not cry, look super angry, or fight back, because bullies want a reaction to feel powerful.
- Use a clear voice: Firmly tell the person to stop, then walk away to a safe place.
- Stick with others: Use the "buddy system" and stay near groups of kids or adults. Bullies are less likely to target people who are not alone.
- Tell a trusted adult: Report what happened to a teacher, principal, parent, or school counselor. Ask the adult for an action plan to help fix the problem.
- Handle cyberbullying safely: Do not reply to mean texts or messages. Save or screenshot the evidence, block the person, and show a parent.

If a Friend is Being Bullied

- Don't join in: Never laugh, cheer, or repeat the mean things the bully is saying.
- Be a buddy: Walk with your friends, sit with them at lunch, or invite them to hang out so they are not isolated.
- Include them: Pull your friend away from the situation by saying something like, "Come on, let's go to class" or "I need help with this project."
- Stand up safely: If it is safe to do so without getting hurt, use humor or a calm, direct statement to shift the focus. Never use physical violence.
- Report it: Tell an adult right away. Reporting is being brave to keep someone safe, not "tattling".

Things to tell adults:

- How old the child is
- Whether bullying is happening at school or online

What Parents Should know

Educate Yourself about the symptoms of Depression and Anxiety. There is a scale that can be downloaded at www.chcr.brown.edu/pcoc/cesdscale.pdf

Be on the lookout for troublesome signs like substance abuse and academic disengagement.

Act as soon as you see these signs even if it means sometimes, you are acting too hastily

Help your child find their passion, talent, an activity, a club, or volunteering somewhere that they feel a connection and sense of accomplishment.

Get online with your child and see what their online lives look like. Encourage positive online content.

Make sure you are communicating with the school when your child is in trouble or struggling due to their involvement at the school. Show your child you are willing to stand up for them.

Reach out for mental health support as soon as possible through the school or community or crisis resources.

If you or someone you know needs help, you can call, text, or chat the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline at any time, day or night, for free and confidential support from a counselor. All you have to do is dial or text 988.

You can also reach out to your local Community Mental Health Center for 24-hour crisis support.

Sources and References

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If you or someone you know needs support, call or text **988** for the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. The Center also offers 24/7 crisis support at [\(620\) 792-2544](tel:6207922544).

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