

Introduction: Interrupting Bullying & Harassment in Schools Toolkit

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Goals

The goal of this online technical assistance package – or toolkit – is to give educators and school leaders the tools that they need to prevent bullying and harassment by fostering a positive school climate.

Learning Objectives

This package is meant to be used as a guide for teachers and administrators in their work to develop a safe and healthy school climate and, in the process, prevent bullying and harassment in their school community. Specifically, this package aims to provide educators and school leaders with:

- Research and background information on bullying and harassment in schools;
- Strategies and recommendations for improving school climate that can be implemented in their schools, classrooms, and communities;
- Guidance on how to use local data to drive action planning;
- Guidance on how to support students who may be particularly vulnerable to direct involvement with bullying and harassment.

Bullying and Harassment Overview

What are bullying and harassment?

Bullying and harassment are two forms of relational violence that can interrupt the establishment of safe spaces in schools and undermine students' abilities to learn. According to the National Centers for Disease Control: "**Bullying** is any unwanted aggressive behavior by another youth or group of youths who are not siblings or current dating partners that involves an observed or perceived power imbalance and is repeated multiple times or is highly likely to be repeated. Bullying may inflict harm or distress on the targeted youth including physical, psychological, social, or educational harm" (Gladden, et al., 2014).

Although the precision of this definition is useful for researchers working to hone their measurement tools, often students, families and educators define bullying more broadly. A broader definition of bullying includes any unwanted aggressive behaviors that involve an observed or perceived power imbalance and are likely to be repeated.

Although similar to bullying in some ways, harassment is defined differently. **Harassment** is a continuous pattern of intentional behavior that is reasonably perceived as being motivated by any characteristic of a student that is defined as protected and results in a student being unable to take part in the everyday activities of work or school (Ali, 2010).

Both bullying and harassment can result in a **dangerous and hostile school environment**. If the climate of a school does not feel safe for students, schools cannot achieve their mission of promoting personal and cognitive growth.

Prevalence and Impact

Bullying is a widespread issue in schools and communities across the United States. In fact, the phenomenon of bullying is experienced broadly by students across developmental periods, geographies and demographic groups. In 2019, about 22% of students ages 12-18 reported being bullied at school, while around 16% of students in grades 9-12 reported being electronically bullied in that same year (Irwin, et al., 2021). Those students who do attend school but remain afraid of being bullied (or feel compelled to engage in bullying behaviors) are often distracted from the central activities of school and find it difficult to learn (Glew, et al., 2005; Swearer, 2011; CDC, 2019).

The fallout from bullying can increase the risk for depression, anxiety, sleep difficulties, lower academic achievement, and dropping out of school. Youth who bully others are at

higher risk for substance abuse, academic problems, and experiencing violence in later adolescence and adulthood. Students who engage in bullying behaviors while being bullied themselves face the worst outcomes and are at serious risk for mental health and behavioral problems (CDC, 2019).

Causes

There are many reasons students engage in bullying behaviors and many reasons students may be more vulnerable to victimization. More often than not, students who engage in bullying behaviors are trying to meet a physical or psychological need but do not have the tools to engage in a prosocial way.

Some of the risk factors for direct involvement in bullying and harassment operate at the individual-level, and others operate at the level of a setting or context. While it is beyond the scope of this package to discuss research on the individual risk factors associated with bullying (stopbullying.gov, 2021), it is important to note that bullying behaviors are not static. Many students will engage in bullying behaviors at some point over the course of their development but not at other points. Many students will engage in bullying behaviors in some contexts but not others. Most often, the likelihood that a student will try to meet a need in a way that harms others depends, in part, on the factors at play in their environment.

Special Considerations for Educators

Bullying behaviors are a **relational issue**, driven by interactions, rather than one individual's deficiency. Adults should, first and foremost, view these behaviors in this way in order to veer away from blaming and deficit-based explanations.

Adults should be careful **not to label** students as bullies but rather refer to their specific behaviors. Students are not "bullies" (implying a fixed character trait), but rather are using harmful behaviors to meet their own needs during a particular developmental moment and in a particular context. For example, students exhibiting bullying behaviors in one context may be the targets of bullying behaviors in another. Similarly, individuals can be negatively impacted by the bullying behaviors of others in some contexts and not in others. Along the same lines, those suffering as a result of bullying behaviors should not be labeled "victims," as this attaches a characteristic to that student's identity. It is more useful to talk about the *specific behaviors* that youth are engaging in, as we consider the reasons behind these behaviors, as well as their consequences.

Adults should also remember that students who engage in bullying behaviors are negatively affected as well, not just the students suffering as a result of those behaviors.

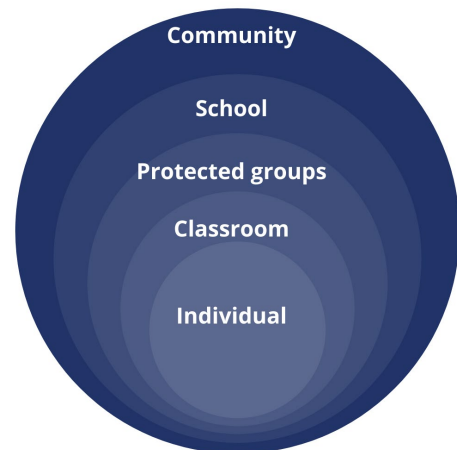
Bullying and harassment look different across contexts and cannot be easily generalized or detected. Educators, therefore, must equip themselves with knowledge and tools to understand when and where bullying and harassment might be happening at their school and how best to act.

Bullying and harassment look different across different developmental stages as well. For younger children, bullying behaviors might take the form of hurtful language and physical aggression to exert power over others (Pepler & Craig, 2009). Older children, on the other hand, might use less overt forms of aggression, such as manipulation and exclusion (Pepler & Craig, 2009). In addition, the salience of identity development during adolescence makes older children more likely to be impacted by – or participate in – identity-based bullying.

Across all developmental stages, the goal is to nurture positive relationships, which are developmentally appropriate, contextually appropriate, reciprocal, reliable and flexible (Brion-Meisels & Jones, 2012).

Next Steps

In order to ensure that all students have access to the everyday activities and lessons of school, educators must work to create safe educational spaces and prevent bullying and harassment in schools. **This work must happen at multiple ecological levels – individual, classroom, protected groups, school and community – for it to be most effective.** School climate programs should be largely preventative, with select programming that offers specific and targeted support to students in need.



Educators should take note that these efforts inherently take time. Because bullying behaviors are a relational problem, their solutions require long-term, relational shifts. Adults and students alike must hold themselves accountable in this large-scale and long-term effort.

Sections in this Package

- 1. Introduction**
- 2. Literature Review – Bullying and Harassment in Schools**
- 3. Data Collection Strategies**
- 4. Individual Level Strategies**
- 5. Classroom Level Strategies**
- 6. School Level Strategies**
- 7. Community Level Strategies**

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