

# What Bullying Is and Is Not

*Table Talk: Family Conversations About Current Events*

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## **Topic Summary**

Bullying is a phrase we hear regularly and often: in the media, on TV shows and movies, in schools and in conversations among both adults and children. Parents, students and schools are rightfully worried about bullying. It is a problem and cause for concern but may not be as widespread as many think because the term “bullying” is often used as an umbrella to describe all kinds of mean behavior—from a rude comment to a conflict between two people to a one-time physical altercation. In the U.S., 20.2% (NCES, 2017) of students age 12-18 report being bullied at school and 36.5% (Cyberbullying Research Center, 2019) of 12-17 year-olds have experienced cyberbullying over the course of their lifetime.

## Definition of bullying

Bullying is **defined** as follows:

*The **repeated actions** or threats of action directed toward a person by one or more people who have or are perceived to have **more power or status** than their target in order to **cause fear, distress or harm**. Bullying can be physical, verbal, psychological or any combination of these three.*

Here's a definition to use for younger, elementary age children:

*When a person or a group behaves in ways—on purpose and over and over—that make someone feel hurt, afraid or embarrassed.*

It is important to **distinguish bullying from other unkind, mean and harmful behavior**. Calling someone a name or pushing someone once, being rude or having an argument with someone is not bullying. Of course, these behaviors should be addressed but may have different consequences and interventions, which is why the distinction is critical. To be defined as bullying, all three components must be present: (1) repeated actions or threats, (2) a power imbalance and (3) intention to cause harm. If bullying is identified correctly, there are **various ways** to address it.

## Identity-based bullying

Many bullying incidents can be described as “identity-based,” which is any form of bullying related to characteristics that are part of a person’s identity or perceived identity group, such as race, religion, disability, immigration status, sexual orientation, gender identity, physical appearance, etc. Because identity-based bullying targets who the student is—a core part of their identity—it can be especially harmful. It impacts not only the individual student but everyone else around them who identifies in the same way and who worries that they may be the next target. In discussing identity-based bullying with young people, it’s important to make the point that bullying happens because of an aggressor’s bias, not because of the target's identity.

## **Ally behavior**

Because a great deal bullying takes place **when and where adults aren't around** and because young people increasingly (as they get older) don't report bullying to adults, it is especially important to help young people learn how to **be an ally** which includes: supporting targets, not participating, telling aggressors to stop, informing a trusted adult, not judging people and getting to know them and being an ally online.

## **Age**

7 and up

## **Questions to Start the Conversation**

- Do you know what bullying is? How is it different than mean behavior?
- Is someone engaging in bullying just because they are mean to you?
- Have you ever experienced mean behavior? What about bullying? Can you tell me more about it?
- Have you ever been mean to someone else? Do you think you have bullied someone before? Please explain.
- What do students do when they see bullying take place in school? What do you do?

## **Questions to Dig Deeper**

- Have you ever acted as a bystander when someone was being bullied? What was that like?
- Have you ever acted as an ally when someone was being bullied? What was that like?
- Have you seen students targeted for bullying based on an aspect of their identity (race, religion, disability, etc.)? What was that like?

- How can we make our school safer and decrease or eliminate bullying?

## **Ideas for Taking Action**

Ask: What can we do to help? What actions might make a difference?

- Consider one of the six simple ways to move from being a bystander to [being an ally](#) when faced with a bullying situation.
- Talk with teachers about what they can do to take bullying more seriously. This [resource](#) may help.
- Talk with your school about bringing ADL's [No Place for Hate](#) and/or [Peer Training](#) Program to the school.

## **Additional Resources**

- [Every Conflict Isn't Bullying](#)
- [Identity-Based Bullying](#) (Lesson Plan)
- [Cyberbullying: Understanding and Addressing Online Cruelty](#) (Lesson Plan)
- [What Can I Do about Bullying Among Young Children?](#)