# FAQs: Bullying in schools

*FAQs: Bullying in schools* answers frequently asked questions about bullying, provides useful advice to parents and students about dealing with bullying, and summarises contemporary approaches to bullying in Australian school communities.

More information is available in the *Research snapshots* and a recent review of the literature which can be found at Bullying. No Way!

Answers are organised under the following eight questions.

1. What is bullying?
2. What is the prevalence of bullying?
3. Why does bullying happen?
4. What is the impact of bullying?
5. What can parents do if bullying happens?
6. How can schools counter bullying?
7. What can students do if bullying happens?
8. Who else can parents and students contact for help?

The answers are based on the latest research on student bullying. More detailed information can be found in *A review of literature (2010-2014) on student bullying by Australia's Safe and Supportive School Communities Working Group* and the accompanying *Research snapshots* in The Facts section of bullyingnoway.gov.au

Bullying. No Way! is an initiative of all Australian education sectors working together to promote safe and supportive school communities.

## 1.    What is bullying?

| *1.1 What is bullying?* | The national definition of bullying for Australian schools says: |
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| | *Bullying is an ongoing misuse of power in relationships through repeated verbal, physical and/or social behaviour that causes physical and/or psychological harm. It can involve an individual or a group misusing their power over one or more persons. Bullying can happen in person or online, and it can be obvious (overt) or hidden (covert). Online bullying refers to bullying through information and communication technologies, e.g. the internet or mobile devices. Bullying of any form or for any reason can have long-term effects on those involved, including bystanders.* |
| | *Single incidents and conflicts or fights between equals, whether in person or online, are not defined as bullying.* |
| | In short, bullying is an ongoing misuse of power in relationships involving a pattern of harmful verbal, physical or social behaviour. |

*1.2 Is every conflict between students bullying?*

Not all aggressive or harmful behaviour between people is bullying. While conflicts and aggressive behaviour need to be addressed, it is important to be clear when these behaviours are not actually bullying.

The definition of bullying has three critical aspects: it is a misuse of power within relationships, it is repeated and ongoing, and it involves behaviours which can cause harm. All three aspects need to be present in order for behaviour to be called bullying.

*1.3 What does the 'misuse of power' mean?*

In a situation where there is a power imbalance, one person or group has a significant advantage over another, and if this power is misused, this enables them to coerce or mistreat another for their own ends. In a bullying situation this power imbalance may arise from the context (e.g. having others to back you up), from assets (e.g. access to a weapon) or from personal characteristics (e.g. being stronger, more articulate or more able to socially manipulate others).

*1.4 How is bullying different from violence, harassment and discrimination?*

The critical aspect that distinguishes violence, harassment and discrimination from bullying is that bullying happens within social relationships, featuring repeated and harmful behaviours that stem from a misuse of power. Violence, harassment and discrimination can occur as part of bullying, but also can occur in one-off conflicts or between strangers.

It is important to know the difference as the effect on the individual or group may be different and the responses to each may need to be different.

*Violence* is the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against another person/s that results in psychological harm, injury or in some cases death. Violence may involve provoked or unprovoked acts and can be a single incident, a random act or can occur over time.

*Harassment* is behaviour that targets an individual or group due to their race, culture or ethnic origin; religion; physical characteristics; gender; sexual orientation; marital parenting or economic status; age and/or ability or disability, and that offends, humiliates, intimidates or creates a hostile environment. Harassment may be an ongoing pattern of behaviour, or it may be a single act.

*Discrimination* occurs when people are treated less favourably than others because of their race, culture, or ethnic origin; religion; physical characteristics; gender; sexual orientation; marital, parenting or economic status; age and/or ability or disability. Discrimination is often ongoing and commonly involves exclusion or rejection.

Intervening early can often prevent harassment, discrimination and more serious negative behaviours from becoming part of a bullying pattern.

*1.5 Why is the definition of bullying important?*

A clear, comprehensive and shared definition is essential to enable schools to identify bullying, and distinguish it from other types of conflicts or violence, so that appropriate strategies and interventions can be used. Positive solutions to bullying are relationship-based, and not only focused on the behaviour of individuals.

The way that schools and the community respond to bullying, conflict, violence, harassment and discrimination will be influenced by their underlying understanding about them.

*1.6 What are the different types of bullying?*

The types of bullying behaviours are physical, verbal or social. Bullying can be obvious (overt) or hidden (covert). Bullying can take place in person or online.

*1.7 What is covert bullying?*

Covert bullying is a subtle type of non-physical bullying which usually isn't easily seen by others and is conducted out of sight of, and often unacknowledged by adults. Covert bullying behaviours mostly inflict harm by damaging another's social reputation, peer relationships and self-esteem. Covert bullying can be carried out in a range of ways (e.g. spreading rumours, conducting a malicious social exclusion campaign and/or through the use of internet or mobile phone technologies).

Covert bullying includes social exclusion and intimidation. The term 'covert' highlights the fact that not all bullying is physical or obvious to others. Covert bullying can have the same harmful impacts as more obvious bullying, as it can be more isolating, can go on for longer before other people become aware of it, and can be more easily denied by the other person.

*1.8 What is online bullying?*

Online bullying (sometimes called cyberbullying) is bullying that is carried out through information and communication technology, including the internet (e.g. on social media sites) and mobile devices. Research indicates that the majority of young people who bully online also bully others in person.

Communication technologies allow for different ways to bully others, but do not change the fact that the bullying behaviour (and not the technology itself) is the main issue. Technology can expand the opportunities for people to bully others and creates new challenges for dealing with bullying.

One action – such as a comment or an embarrassing photo – which is repeated through sharing and forwarding to others, can be bullying if the individuals involved know each other, and have ongoing contact either online or in person.

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| *1.9 What is online aggression, and how is it different from online bullying?* | Online aggression includes a number of behaviours that occur as single or untargeted acts between people who don't know each other. For example, 'trolling' is intensive verbal abuse of an individual online done anonymously and by strangers. The difference between online aggression and online bullying is that bullying occurs within the context of an existing social relationship. |

## 2.     What is the prevalence of bullying?

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| *2.1 How common is bullying amongst students in schools?* | Australian research suggests that up to one in four students has experienced some level of bullying face-to-face and one in five has experienced bullying online. Researchers have made different findings about how common bullying is, largely due to differences in how they measure 'bullying'. It is important to remember, most young people do not engage in bullying behaviour. |
| *2.2 Is there a pattern to bullying?* | Australian research has revealed that bullying peaks in the middle primary school years and the first year of high school. This appears to be related to the rapid changes in the social skills and social demands for students at these stages.<br><br>Some other general patterns of bullying have been identified. Younger children are more likely to bully others physically or verbally, and then as they get older social bullying behaviours increase (including exclusion and manipulation). Online bullying (cyberbullying) increases when students begin to have greater access to online communication and mobile phones. |
| *2.3 Is bullying increasing?* | The fact that we are hearing a lot about bullying these days may well be a positive sign that we are taking it seriously and exploring ways to reduce it. Australian researchers have suggested we are more aware of the potential impact of ignoring bullying, and willing to take the necessary positive action, rather than bullying actually increasing. |
| *2.4 Why is it hard to know exactly how common bullying is?* | Children and young people often don't tell adults about bullying. Sometimes children and young people don't want their parents or teachers to become involved as they are afraid of what might happen if the person who is doing the bullying finds out they have told. Sometimes, students simply don't think to ask for adult help or they don't think anyone will believe them or could help even if they told. |

## 3.     Why does bullying happen?

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| *3.1 Why do people bully others?* | People who bully others are often motivated by the status and social power they can achieve through bullying. Some may bully others to compensate |

for what is happening to them and their own feelings of powerlessness. Bullying behaviours can also be copied by others. Investigating how students view the situation and why they think the bullying is happening is central to appropriate school responses.

*3.2 Who bullies others?*

All individuals have the potential to bully others or to be bullied. However some individuals persistently bully others for a range of reasons and in a range of contexts.

Bullying is highly dynamic. Students' roles can change in different contexts. Individuals can occupy various roles in bullying, including the individual being bullied, those bullying others, and bystanders who may be assistants, reinforcers, outsiders, or defenders. One individual can play one role in one context while taking a different role in another.

*3.3 Are some people more likely to be bullied more than others?*

Research indicates that any characteristic that makes a child stand out or sets a child apart from the peer group places them at greater risk of being bullied. Standing out in any way increases the likelihood of being bullied.

*3.4 Why is it sometimes hard to identify bullying?*

Bullying can be hard to identify because it involves the types of actions and behaviours that also happen outside of a bullying situation, it can be hidden (or covert) as well as obvious (overt), and can occur in both individual and group situations. Some bullying can be quite subtle or involve words known only by the students, making it difficult for adults to recognise. Students may also be reluctant to tell someone else. These complexities can make it difficult to identify if a person or group is being bullied. This means that families and schools need to be alert to possibly subtle signs of bullying and to check in regularly with students.

## 4.    What is the impact of bullying?

*4.1 Is bullying really something to be worried about?*

Bullying affects everyone involved, including people who witness it. It can have serious and long-term emotional or psychological consequences in addition to the immediate harmful effects.

Communities that condone or ignore bullying may create an environment where more serious anti-social behaviour is condoned. Bullying undermines key values that schools aim to promote in students – respect, trust and honesty.

*4.2 Isn't bullying just a normal part of growing up?*

Bullying is not a normal stage that all children and young people pass through, and it is not just something to put up with as 'part of life'. Behaviour that is intended to harm can impede healthy development.

Ignoring bullying, thinking that it is just something that children and young

people do, or considering that bullying will be 'character building' can give silent approval for bullying to continue and further traumatise those who are bullied.

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| *4.3 What are the impacts of bullying on those students who are bullied?* | Being bullied can result in a person feeling miserable and powerless, so the response of those around that person is important in making a change.<br><br>Research shows that bullying can have a negative impact on students' academic performance, self-esteem, and coping skills, and can increase anxiety and unhappiness. It is important that students, staff and parents get involved to make a positive change.<br><br>Bullying can negatively affect how children and young people see themselves and how they feel about themselves. |
| *4.4 What are the impacts on those who bully others?* | The outcomes for people who bully others are also not good in the long-term. Children and young people who bully others may come to see bullying as a normal and acceptable way to behave. Those who bully others need support to learn more appropriate ways to behave and resolve conflict to prepare them for adulthood and to reduce the likelihood of developing even more serious anti-social behaviours. |
| *4.5 Is there an impact on bystanders to bullying?* | Bystanders are present in many bullying incidents. Research indicates that bystanders can be negatively impacted by witnessing bullying. Students can feel distressed about not knowing how to act and can feel concerned about their own status or safety. |

## 5.    What can parents do if bullying happens?

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| *5.1 What can parents do if their child tells them they are being bullied?* | There are six key steps for parents if their child tells them they have been bullied:<br><br>1.  listen calmly to what your child wants to say and make sure you get the full story<br>2.  reassure your child that they are not to blame and ask open and empathetic questions to find out more details<br>3.  ask your child what they want to do and what they want you to do<br>4.  discuss with your child some sensible strategies to handle the bullying – starting a fight is not sensible<br>5.  contact the school and stay in touch with them<br>6.  check in regularly with your child. |
| *5.2 What strategies can parents suggest to their child who is being physically bullied?* | The Bullying. No Way! website provides information about various strategies. These can be tried to avoid physical bullying situations:<br><br>1.  avoid areas which allow the bullying students to avoid detection by teachers |

2. stay with other students
3. talk to an adult at school or home who can help stop the bullying
4. keep asking for support until the bullying stops.

*5.3 What strategies can parents suggest to their child who is being verbally or socially bullied?*

The Bullying. No Way! website provides information about various strategies. These can be tried if the child feels safe:

1. ignore them
2. tell them to stop and then walk away
3. pretend you don't care, try to act unaffected or unimpressed
4. try to deflect the bullying (e.g. pretending to agree in an offhand way 'okay, yeah, maybe')
5. go somewhere else
6. get support from your friends
7. talk to an adult at the school or at home who can help stop the bullying
8. keep asking for support until the bullying stops.

*5.4 What strategies can parents suggest to their child who is being bullied online?*

If bullying happens online, some of the strategies for face-to-face bullying may apply and as well, suggest that the child:

1. avoid responding to the bullying
2. block and report anyone who is bullying online
3. protect yourself online – use privacy settings and keep records.

*5.5 What should parents avoid telling their children to do?*

Strategies not recommended for dealing with bullying include:

- fighting back
- bullying the person who has bullied them
- remaining silent about the problem.

*5.6 What can parents do if they are told or suspect that their child is bullying others?*

The Bullying. No Way! website provides information about things to do. If a parent suspects their child has been bullying others, they can talk to their child about:

- why they have been behaving this way
- taking responsibility for their behaviour
- how to sort out differences and resolve conflicts
- how to treat others with respect
- the effect of bullying on others
- the need to repair harm they have caused to others
- the need to restore relationships.

Parents may also like to talk to their child's school to come up with a plan to help their child learn more appropriate ways to behave.

*5.7 What can parents expect from their child's school?*

Schools will consider your child's circumstances and will develop the most appropriate strategies for them. These strategies could include:

- teaching and learning programs to develop students' communication,

social, assertiveness and coping skills
- changes to the school environment such as redesigning the playground
- increasing teachers' supervision of students at particular times or places
- support from a school counsellor, psychologist or guidance officer
- mediation for the students involved with a trained teacher to resolve their problem
- changes to technology access at school
- timetable or class changes (that may be temporary or permanent) to decrease the contact the students have with each other
- disciplinary action for students who continue to bully others despite the efforts of the school to promote appropriate behaviour.

The school may develop an action plan for your child and any other children involved. Strategies you could use at home may also be included in this plan.

*5.8 What else can parents do?*

Parents who are child-centred (focused on the child's experience), warm and authoritative (firm and reasonable about their authority over the child) have an overall positive influence in reducing both the likelihood of bullying happening and impact if it does happen.

Cooperation between home and school to prevent bullying is essential. Efforts to address bullying by schools are unlikely to succeed if the school and home are treated as separate settings.

## 6.    How can schools counter bullying?

*6.1 Why is the way we talk about bullying important?*

Aggressive language, like 'Stamp out bullying' or language which labels students, like 'Get tough on bullies' can actually become part of a bullying problem. More positive language, like 'We stand together' refers to ways to build the capacity of students to take actions to reduce bullying.

*6.2 What can schools do if bullying is happening?*

In creating and maintaining a safe and supportive school environment, strategies to address bullying include:

- preventing bullying through promoting a positive whole-school culture based on values agreed to by the whole school community
- intervening early in suspected or identified bullying issues and communicating clearly with all involved
- responding to bullying incidents with approaches which have been shown to be effective.

These elements need to be outlined in the school's policy and other relevant documents. The Bullying. No Way! website provides advice, strategies and other information for teachers, parents and young people on how they can help reduce bullying.

Not all hurtful behaviours are bullying, but schools address inappropriate behaviour whether or not it meets the definition of bullying.

Bullying that appears to involve criminal behaviour such as violence, threats, intimidation, inciting violence, etc., should be reported to the police (in line with school guidelines) and will require management by the school to ensure the risks to student safety are reduced.

*6.3 Is a school policy on bullying important?*

Most schools have a written policy about how they manage student behaviour, including bullying.

The school's policy is an important place to articulate the school community's shared understanding of bullying and how best to respond, and the agreed preventative and responsive strategies to be implemented within the school. It fosters collaboration between home and school to counter bullying.

The involvement of students as well as parents and carers in developing and implementing the school's policy help to create a document that is useful for all members of the school community.

*6.4 What approaches to bullying are effective?*

Effective school responses to bullying incidents are:

- solution-focused
- relationship-based
- at the school level, the class level, the student level, and
- based on strong links between parents and schools.

Students who bully others need to understand that their behaviour is not acceptable and to learn more appropriate ways to behave and to resolve conflicts. School staff may also need to address the underlying causes for the bullying. Staff and other students need to be taught what to do if they witness bullying happening.

Effective approaches to student bullying include restorative practices, conflict management, equalising power imbalances amongst students, and social skills development.

More than one method of addressing bullying may be needed as no single approach is appropriate or effective in all circumstances or for all people.

Dealing with bullying can be complex and challenging. Both short and long-term approaches need to be adopted, including regular reviews of policy and procedures and monitoring of progress using the school's data.

*6.5 Why are other people (bystanders) important in dealing with school bullying?*

Everyone plays a part in ensuring the safety and wellbeing of others – parents, staff, students and community members. It is essential that these members of the school community know how to deal with incidents of bullying effectively and safely. It is important to note, however, that the majority of people are not involved in bullying.

Students who bully others often aim to impress or intimidate bystanders. The reaction of bystanders can either support or discourage bullying from happening. If bystanders do nothing, this can be seen as a form of silent approval.

Supportive bystander behaviours are actions and/or words that are intended to support someone who is being bullied. The actions of a supportive bystander can stop or diminish a specific bullying incident or help the bullied student to recover from it.

The attitude and reaction of bystanders can affect the culture of the school. Social disapproval of bullying can prevent bullying from occurring and help to stop it when it is happening.

Training in how to intervene safely assists in effective bystander behaviour. The majority of students do not want bullying to occur, but often don't know how to stop it. Schools can help students learn what to do when bullying occurs.

## 6.6 What doesn't work when dealing with bullying

Short-term 'solutions' alone, like punishing the student doing the bullying, do not improve the relationships and social factors which allow the bullying to happen. Although the bullying may stop in the short-term, unless these factors are addressed, it is very likely to reoccur or be hidden (covert).

Punishment as the only intervention is not effective in preventing bullying. Interventions need to be matched to the particular circumstance of the bullying. No single approach to bullying is appropriate or effective in all circumstances or for all people.

If the school's response to bullying further disempowers students who have been bullied or fosters a negative school culture, this can make the situation worse.

## 6.7 Why don't 'get tough' solutions work to reduce bullying in the long-term?

Approaches to bullying need to include relationship and social solutions at the whole-school, class and student level, and on occasion, at the family and community level. Although bullying may stop in the short-term after a 'get tough on bullying' approach, unless the relationship and social factors are addressed, it is very likely to reoccur, take another form, or just become hidden (covert).

## 6.8 What is the role of school climate?

Schools that are responsive to students' needs and have a whole-school approach to optimising student wellbeing experience lower levels of bullying. This includes the explicit teaching and modelling of positive values and wellbeing through Social and Emotional Learning curriculum and pastoral care.

Anti-bullying campaigns and programs are just one aspect of the work that schools need to do to counter bullying. The long-term aim is to foster a school culture based on positive values and supportive relationships which feature respect, inclusion, belonging and cooperation.

*6.9 What can schools teach students about online safety?*

Online safety (or cybersafety) refers to a broad range of safe, respectful and responsible behaviours as well as ways to guard security and privacy online. Online safety is one way to reduce the risk of bullying, identity theft or predatory behaviour by others online.

Students need to be taught safe and appropriate online behaviour, which includes recognising when someone's online behaviour is bullying, how to avoid engaging in or supporting online bullying, and being aware of the sort of support that bystanders can provide online.

## 7.    What can students do if bullying happens?

*7.1 What can I do if I am being bullied in person?*

If you are being bullied, and you feel safe to do so:

- ignore them
- tell them to stop and then walk away
- pretend you don't care - try to act unaffected or unimpressed
- go somewhere safe
- talk to an adult at the school or at home
- get support from your friends; ask friends, parents or teachers for their help to deal with the issue safely.

Having the courage to talk to someone is important if you are being bullied. Sometimes, just telling someone firmly to stop bullying you can be effective. If that doesn't work ask friends, parents or teachers for their help to deal with the issue safely.

*7.2 What can I do if I am being bullied online?*

If you are being bullied online (cyberbullied), and you feel safe to do so:

- don't respond to the message or image
- save the evidence as a screenshot if you wish to use it as part of dealing with the bullying
- block the sender and delete the message
- report the situation to the website or Internet Service Provider
  talk to trusted people—friends, adults, teachers, parents and police if necessary.

7.3 What can I do if I see someone else being bullied?

The Bullying. No Way! website provides information about things to do. If you see someone else being bullied, and feel safe to do so, you can:

- refuse to join in
- not watch
- tell the person doing the bullying to stop
- tell the person doing the bullying that you will talk to a teacher

- say something supportive to the person who is being bullied or invite them to join your group
- say to the person being bullied that the other person's behaviour is not okay
- leave negative online conversations – don't join in with online bullying

## 8.    Who else can parents and students contact for help?

*8.1 Who else can I talk to?*

Kids Helpline 1800 55 1800 or www.kidshelp.com.au
Parents Helplines (each state has a helpline)

*8.2 Where can I report online bullying (cyberbullying)?*

Children's eSafety Commissioner – Online help and reporting
www.esafety.gov.au

*8.3 Where do I report bullying that might involve a crime?*

Australian Federal Police www.afp.gov.au

*8.4 Where can I get more support and information online?*

Reach Out  www.reachout.com.au
Beyondblue  www.beyondblue.org.au
Headspace  www.headspace.org.au
Australian Psychological Society  www.psychology.org.au
Australian Guidance and Counselling Association  www.agca.com.au

*8.5 Where can I learn more about bullying?*

Bullying. No Way!  www.bullyingnoway.gov.au