

Facts and Myths about Bullying

1. Myth: Bullying does not cause any serious harm.

Fact: Bullying is associated with a range of physical and mental health problems, as well as suicide, educational problems, antisocial problems and relationship problems.

For example:

- Victimized children are more likely to report headaches and stomach aches than non-victimized children (Due et al., 2005; Williams, et al., 1996). Children who both bully and are victimized may be at greatest risk for physical health problems.
- Victimized children are more likely to report anxiety and depressive symptoms than children not involved in bullying (Due et al, 2005; Kaltiala-Heino et al, 1999). Of greatest concern is the fact that psychiatric problems associated with involvement in bullying tend to persist into later life (Kumpulainen & Rasanen, 2000).
- A high risk of suicidal ideation (having thoughts of suicide) is found among children who are bullied, who bully others, and who are involved in both roles (Kaltiala-Heino et al., 1999).
- Both victimized children and children who bully are at risk for poor school functioning, in terms of poor attitudes towards school, low grades, and absenteeism (Rigby, 2003; Tremblay, 1999).

2. Myth: Children grow out of bullying.

Fact: Without intervention, a significant proportion of youth who bully others in childhood will continue to use their power negatively through adolescence and into adulthood. The nature of bullying changes as children mature. From early adolescence, new forms of aggression, carried out from a position of power, emerge. With developing thinking and social skills, children become aware of others' vulnerabilities and of their own power relative to others. Bullying then diversifies into more sophisticated forms of verbal, social, homophobic, and sexually- and racially-based aggression. Over time, these new forms of aggression are carried forward into different relationships and environments. The destructive lessons learned in childhood about the use of power may translate into sexual harassment in the workplace, dating violence, marital abuse, child abuse and elder abuse.

Solution: Early identification and intervention of bullying will prevent patterns of aggressive interactions from forming. Adults must be aware that bullying changes with age and may become more difficult to detect.

3. Myth: Only a small number of children have problems with bullying.

Fact: Approximately 12% of girls and 18% of boys reported bullying others at least twice in previous months, whereas 15% of girls and 18% of boys reported being victimized at least twice over the same time period (Craig & Harel, 2004) These figures suggest that in a classroom of 35 students, between four and six children are bullying and/or are being bullied. Many more children observe bullying and know it is going on. At some point, the majority of children will engage in some form of bullying and experience some form of victimization. A small minority of children will have frequent, long-lasting, serious, and pervasive involvement in bullying and/or victimization (Craig & Pepler, 2003).

Solution: To ensure that children have healthy and productive relationships, it is important to include all children, regardless of their involvement in bullying, in bullying prevention programs. This means that programs and strategies must address the needs and provide the necessary support for children who are victimized, children who bully others, and children who watch bullying occur.

4. Myth: Reporting bullying will only make the problem worse

Fact: Given the power imbalance that exists between the child who bullies and the child who is victimized, it is incredibly difficult for children who are being victimized to remove themselves from this destructive relationship. They make numerous attempts to make the bullying stop on their own, but these efforts are usually unsuccessful and may make the bullying worse. Adult intervention is required to correct the power imbalance. Children and parents may have to report the bullying to more than one person before the behaviour will stop. Victimized children who tell an adult about being bullied report being less victimized the following year, compared to children who did not report being bullied (Yuile, Pepler, & Craig, 2004). When no one talks about bullying, children who bully feel they can carry on without consequences. Secrecy empowers children who bully.

Solution: Children need to be encouraged to report bullying and be given multiple strategies to make these reports. Adults must convey the message that they want to know about children's experiences and that it is their job to make the bullying stop.

5. Myth: Children who are victimized need to stand up and fight back.

Fact: Encouraging children who are victimized to fight back may, in fact, make the bullying interaction worse. We know that when children use aggressive strategies to manage bullying situations, they tend to experience prolonged and more severe bullying interactions as a result (Mahady Wilton, Craig, & Pepler, 2000).

Solution: Children should be encouraged to be assertive, not aggressive, and to inform a trusted adult about what has happened to them.

6. Myth: Bullying is a school problem.

Fact: Bullying occurs wherever children gather to live, learn or play. As such, the majority of bullying tends to occur in the classroom, on the school playground, and on the school bus where children are most often together. Although bullying tends to occur in school, we know that bullying is a community problem, not just a school problem. As the primary institution in children's lives, schools can play a leadership role in addressing bullying problems.

Solution: Adults are essential for children and youth's healthy relationships. All adults are responsible for creating positive environments, promoting healthy relationships, and ending violence in the lives of children and youth. They are role models and must lead by example, and refrain from using their power aggressively. Adults must look for, listen and respond to bullying. Adults can organize social activities in ways that protect and support children's relationships and stop bullying.

7. Myth: Bullying does not occur within the family or the family home.

Fact: Unfortunately, bullying does occur within families. Bullying is defined as a relationship problem in which there is repeated aggression by a person with greater power directed at a person with lesser power. Repeated aggression within family relationships is most commonly called "abuse" or "family violence," and within peer relationships, it is called "bullying" or "harassment." The family is the first context in

which children learn about relationships, and lessons learned in the family provide the foundation for future relationships. Research shows that there is a developmental connection between experiencing or witnessing abuse in the family, and experiencing or perpetuating bullying and abuse in future relationships.

If we look closely at the elements of the definition of bullying, we can clearly see the overlap and subtle distinction between bullying and abuse, with abuse being a form of bullying that implies a violation of adult responsibility.

- **“Occurs in the context of a relationship.”** Abuse can also occur in romantic relationships between couples (spousal abuse), parents and children (child abuse, elder abuse), and in other relationships in the extended family (grandparents, in-laws, aunts, uncles, cousins, etc.). Bullying can occur within sibling relationships and between cousins.
- **“When one person in the relationship has greater power than the other.”** In a romantic relationship, there is often an imbalance of power due to biological, cultural, psychological and economic factors. It is clear that parents have greater power due to the child's immaturity, vulnerability and dependence on the caregiver. In relationships between adult children and their elderly parents, the balance of power becomes reversed as the caregiving role is reversed. Between siblings or cousins, it is often, but not always, the older child who has greater power because of greater size and maturity.
- **“Repeated aggression.”** Aggression can take many forms, but the common denominator is disrespect of another human being's rights to physical and psychological safety and sense of dignity. Within families, there is a universal expectation that those with greater power assume responsibility to safeguard the wellbeing of more vulnerable family members. When there is a repeated pattern of the violation of this responsibility, either by neglect or by acts that cause

distress, we use the term “abuse.” When children and youth bully their peers, they violate the rights of the other; however, they are not in the same position of responsibility for safeguarding the well-being of the other, due to their own immaturity. Thus, bullying can be seen as a signal that the child or youth needs support in learning about relationship values and skills.

Solution: It is critically important that children experience secure and healthy relationships in the family. It is imperative that we teach our children that relationships in which there is a power imbalance are precisely the relationships in which the person with more power has the responsibility to safeguard the well-being of the more vulnerable person. Through modeling respectful relationships and taking responsibility for the wellbeing of those who are dependent and vulnerable, both within and beyond the family, adults can help to promote healthy relationships and prevent bullying and abuse.

It is essential to identify children at risk for bullying and/or victimization and to provide support for their development in order to prevent the negative consequences associated with this type of disrespectful peer relationship.