

# Bullying 101:

## Guide for Middle and High School Students

*A guide to the basics of bullying, what it is and isn't, the role of students, and tips on what you can do in response to it.*



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# What Is Bullying?

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*A lot of teens describe bullying as, "When someone tries to make you feel less about who you are as a person, and you aren't able to make it stop."*

Bullying is more than disagreements, differences of opinion, or conflicts that occur between friends and classmates.

Bullying definitions typically include:

- The target is being hurt or harmed by unwanted words or behavior
- The hurtful behavior is repeated or there is a concern that it will be repeated
- The target being hurt has a hard time stopping or preventing the unwanted behavior
- The hurtful behavior is carried out by those who have more (real or perceived) power, which is used to control or harm others. Power can mean students who are older, are physically stronger, have access to embarrassing information, have more social status, or are part of a group that is singling out an individual.

**Note:** *This is not a legal definition, but rather a way to help understand and identify bullying. For your school's definition, check the district's bullying prevention policies. For a legal definition, consult your state's law on bullying at [StopBullying.gov](https://www.stopbullying.gov).*

# “ How Is Someone Bullied? ”

## How Is Someone Bullied?

Bullying can take many forms: face to face, whispered comments, notes passed, hurtful things written on bathroom walls, humiliation in front of a group, gossip and rumors, telling stories about someone when they're unable to defend themselves.

*All these instances of bullying can take place in the classroom or hallway, on the bus or in the locker room, while at lunch or playing at recess.*

Bullying can also happen through social media, texts, and photos shared via phones, tablets, or computers. When technology is used to bully someone, it's called *cyberbullying*. Specific instances of cyberbullying include sending mean text messages, making fun of someone's post, sharing videos, stories, or photos that ridicule or humiliate someone, "trolling" someone to the point of harassment, posting personal information about someone else on the internet, and spreading rumors or gossip.



# “What Are the Types of Bullying?”

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## Physical

This form of bullying is usually visible, and therefore easy to recognize. Think about the stereotypical movie scenes when someone knocks someone else's books out of their hands or pushes them up against a locker. Depending on the nature and severity of the contact, anyone who physically bullies usually faces consequences like detention, suspension, or expulsion. Examples of physical bullying include pushing, shoving, hitting, kicking, biting, hair pulling, inappropriate touching, breaking objects, and taking or damaging another's possessions.

## Verbal

Using words, either out loud or in writing, is a common type of bullying because it's quick, often done impulsively to elicit a response (and getting a response is typically the goal of bullying). Verbal bullying is also easier to do without catching the attention of adults, making it harder to detect and more difficult to reprimand. Examples include teasing, name calling, threats, intimidation, demeaning jokes, rumors, gossip, and slander—all of which can occur both in person or online.



# “What Are the Types of Bullying?”

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## **Sexual**

Not everyone thinks of unwanted sexual contact or comments (both in-person and online) as bullying. It's also often difficult to talk about as it can be very personal and confusing, especially if it's coming from someone whom you had a relationship with or thought you could trust. It can include using demeaning words about someone's gender or sexuality, spreading rumors of a sexual nature that harm a person's reputation, unwanted or inappropriate touching or physical contact, sharing personal information about relationships, or posting inappropriate photos online.

## **Emotional**

Emotional bullying can be subtle and difficult to detect. It's calculated and manipulative. It can be perpetuated by a single person but is more often executed by a group. Emotional bullying can be extremely damaging and traumatic. It's targeted at a person's sense of self, causing them to question their self-worth and usually results in low or a complete lack of self-esteem. Emotional bullying, whether it's done in-person or online, could be excluding someone from a group or purposely leaving them out of activities, threatening to hurt or harm someone, telling lies in order to hurt another person's reputation, or humiliating someone publicly.

Verbal, sexual, or emotional bullying can happen both in-person or online through cyberbullying.

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# How Often?

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## Does bullying happen more often than adults know? YES!

A few reasons include:

### Physical pain is often noticed, while emotional pain can be hidden

Most bullying harms young people emotionally rather than physically. Bullying through intimidation, gossip, threatening to reveal secrets, or social exclusion usually can't be seen. To make it more complicated, students often don't reveal what they are truly feeling.

### Happens outside the view of adults

Bullying most often occurs with whispered words, through gossip or rumors told from person to person. In addition to kids bullying outside the view of adults in the physical world, it's especially true online. Kids hang out in places that adults don't have access to, like group chats, gaming platforms, and social media sites designed for teens.

### Youth don't tell

In addition to the fact that adults do not witness the bullying, the kids who experience it often do not tell their parents or their teachers. When a parent or teacher knows what's going on, they are in a much better position to help change it for the better.



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# Who Is Involved?

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**There are three potential roles in a bullying situation:**

1. Targets = The individual(s) to whom the behavior is directed
2. Those who bully = The individual(s) who are directing the behavior
3. Witnesses = The individual(s) who see or know of the behavior



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# Who Is Involved?

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## Who is targeted by bullying?

Bullying behavior could be directed at the shy, quiet student or the class tough guy. Research shows that students who are perceived to be different in some way—whether it's height or weight or the clothes they wear; it might also be because of their disability, race, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, religion, immigration status, or gender—are at an increased risk of being bullied.



It's important to recognize that bullying can happen to **ANYONE**.



# “ Who Is Involved? ”

## Who does the bullying?

While there are stereotypes about those that bully—scary tough guys with short tempers and intimidating qualities—it’s not appearance that defines who bullies; it’s behavior.

*Bullying is an action, not a personality trait.*

Students who bully can be any size, age, grade, or gender.

There is no single characteristic or personality trait that indicates who bullies others.



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# Who Is Involved?

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## The next question is who witnesses bullying?

*Almost all kids see bullying happen at some point.*

They may not be getting bullied nor the ones doing the bullying, but witnesses are important because their reactions can have a direct impact on the bullying situation.

*When a group is watching a fight, there might be some who see what's happening and then walk away; others who continue watching, but say nothing; and then there might be those who cheer on the violence.*

Each response can affect the outcomes of a bullying situation.



# “ Who Is Involved? ”

## Can someone play more than one role?

*Yes! It's often the case that being bullied, doing the bullying, or witnessing bullying are not distinct categories.*

It's more common that kids play multiple roles throughout the day. Someone who was bullied on the bus in the morning might be the one who makes fun of a younger kid that afternoon. The kid who laughed while watching a fight yesterday might ask the new kid with no friends to sit with him at lunch today. The individual who was the target of a vicious rumor on social media might spread gossip about a former friend during lunch the next day. When thinking about who is involved in bullying, it's important to not strictly label individuals. Calling someone a bully doesn't factor everything that they may be experiencing. Because bullying is about behavior, roles can be complex and complicated; there often aren't clear-cut villains or heroes. But that also means we're all capable of altering that behavior and preventing bullying.



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# Why Does It Matter?

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*In the United States, more than 20% of students report being bullied.*

That's more than one of every five students. They are often scared to go to school. That means those students lose the opportunity to learn. It is every student's right to feel safe—and be safe—in school. Students who are bullied may also have lower self-esteem, less self-confidence, increased fear and anxiety, more depression, lower grades, and even suicidal thoughts.

It's not just the targets of bullying who are affected. Students who bully grow up to have a greater risk of getting in trouble with the law. By the age of 25, one in four who have bullied will have spent time in jail.

Those who witness bullying often express that they feel less safe at school. Their feelings about seeing the bullying range from anger to guilt to fear, and they often wish they could help but don't know how.



# “What If I’m Being Bullied?”

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## First, know that:

- No one ever deserves to be bullied
- You have the right to ask for help to stop the behavior
- Your opinion about what to do to is important
- You don’t have to go through the bullying experience alone

## Next, think through how to advocate for yourself. What is advocacy?

Self-advocacy means communicating on your own behalf, letting others know what you need, and taking action in a direct and respectful manner. Being your own advocate means that you ask for what you need while respecting the needs of others.

## With bullying, learning self-advocacy skills is important because it helps you:

- Obtain what is helpful for you
- Be involved in the decision-making process
- Learn to say “no” and be OK with it
- Respectfully express disagreement or differing opinion
- Help express your ideas to prevent any bullying you’re experiencing

# “ What If I’m Being Bullied? ”

There are three important steps to take:

## 1. Tell someone, especially an adult

Bullying thrives on silence.

Those who bully depend on their targets being silent, as it allows their behavior to continue without consequences. And yes, it can be really hard to talk about what’s happening.

As difficult as it might be, it’s important to connect with someone and share what you are going through. Ideally, you’ll talk about it with a parent or an adult whom you trust. If you don’t feel able to tell an adult, confide in a friend.



# “What If I’m Being Bullied?”

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## 2. Develop your own action plan

Being a self-advocate means speaking up for yourself and letting people know what you need. Set things in motion by working through a plan:

- Write down what is happening to you, when and where it takes place, and who is involved
- List your role in this action plan, who else should be involved, and what they could do
- Share this information with a parent and an adult you trust at school

Use the STUDENT ACTION PLAN to self-advocate. Download at <http://www.pacer.org/publications/bullypdf/BP-25.pdf>

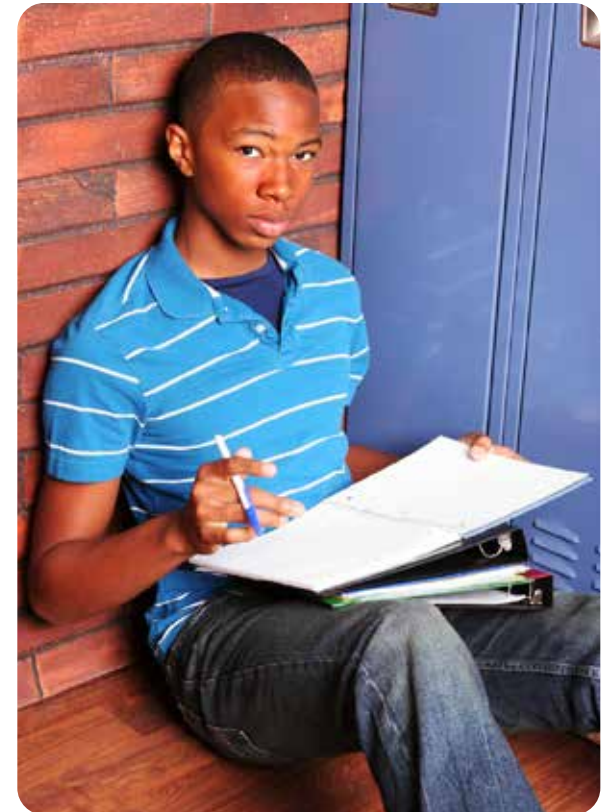
# “ What If I’m Being Bullied? ”

## 3. Assert your rights

Every student has the right to feel safe at school. If one adult isn’t able to help you, don’t give up! It is your right to talk with another adult, such as a parent.

When you do speak to a teacher, an administrator, or a person you trust at school:

- Share all the information in your action plan
- Ask: “What can be done so I feel safe and other kids do, too?”
- Remind adults that there are laws and school policy outlining the school’s responsibility in handling bullying situations.





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# What If I Am Bullying?

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What's so great about hurting someone? Teasing, tripping, punching, kicking, excluding, ignoring, hazing—it really says more about you than them.

Know that bullying is about behavior and that you can change your behavior.

Steps to take:

- Talk with an adult you trust
  - This can be someone at school, at home, or in your community.
  - Share what's going on.
  - Ask for their advice and help.
- Set a goal to change the negative behavior
  - It's helpful to plan and strategize responses that are appropriate for situations.
  - Find a mentor and role model to guide you through challenging situations.
- Be intentional with your actions
  - Think through how you want to respond to situations.
  - Frame your responses to be kinder, and more inclusive and accepting.



# “What If I Witness Bullying?”

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Think about what can happen to someone as a result of being bullied:

- Feeling all alone,
- Believing that no one cares,
- Questioning whom you can trust, and
- Wondering if anything will ever change.

That is a lonely place to be.

Now imagine how that could be different. Think about how powerful it would be for someone who feels all alone to have another person reach out to them, especially someone their own age who understands what they might be feeling and shows that they care.

**That person can be YOU.**

Have you ever thought, *“It’s none of my business—I should just ignore it and walk away.”* Put yourself in the other person’s place. If you were being pushed around, laughed at, gossiped about, made fun of, or ignored on purpose, wouldn’t you want someone to be there for you?

Know that when someone is hurting, especially emotionally, your support as a peer is incredibly meaningful!



# “What If I Witness Bullying?”

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## 1. Be available for conversation

Students who experience bullying often don't tell anyone. If you know someone being bullied, let them know you care by encouraging them to talk about their experiences. Your goal doesn't need to be fixing the problem; instead, focus on letting them express their story and their emotions.

### Here are some ways to connect:

- Listen without judgment
- Then, ask questions that allow them to talk through the story and their emotions:
  - Want to tell me what happened?
  - How are you doing?
  - What would be helpful to you right now?
- Help them think through how they can tell others about their experience
- Support them when they reach out to a parent or other trusted adult



# “What If I Witness Bullying?”

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## 2. Respond with intentional acts of kindness, acceptance, and inclusion

*The one thing anyone can do to help is show support for the person being bullied.*

Here are some ways to be intentional with your support:

Speak up, your words matter. Try saying:

- I'm here for you.
- You didn't deserve to be treated that way.
- Can I help you find an adult to talk to?

Reach out, your actions are important.

- Connect with them during class breaks, even if it's just to say hi.
- Invite them to sit with you, or to play a video or card game.
- Do homework together.

Be a friend. Build them up.

- Remind them that no one deserves to be disrespected and that bullying won't last forever
- Recognize what they do well and compliment their talents.
- Even if they don't want to talk, invite them into the conversation.



# “What If I Witness Bullying?”

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## 3. Redirect the situation

Research shows that peers can be very effective at intervening in a bullying situation. A creative and sometimes challenging solution is to change the direction of the situation to a more positive course. It might take some preparation, practice, planning, and extra thought—it’s not easy to speak up against a wave of negativity—but research also shows that when one person speaks up, others will follow.

- Help them get away from a bullying situation by:
  - Asking them to walk with you.
  - Inviting another friend to join you—there’s safety and support in numbers!
- Change the subject when your peers start tearing someone down
- Find an adult who can come quickly and intervene
- If you see cyberbullying, you can:
  - Write something positive in response.
  - Contact the person being bullied and let them know you are there for them.
  - Report it to an adult at school or to the social media site.

Understand that this is not about getting in the middle of a fight or confronting those who are bullying. In fact, confrontation can be counterproductive and unsafe. The focus should be on supporting the person who is being bullied.

# “What If I Witness Bullying?”

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## 4. Talk with an adult

In situations where you're not sure what to do, seeking advice from an adult you trust can be helpful. An adult, such as a parent or a favorite teacher, can help you think through different ways to respond, while ensuring everyone stays safe.

**Here are some ideas for talking with an adult.**

- Let them know that you're coming to them for advice
- Share that someone is going through a situation that they can't fix on their own
- Being bullied can involve a lot of personal details; if you don't want to share everything, let the adult know that there are certain things you are not ready to share and ask them to respect that
- Emphasize that you want the bullying to stop, and that the behavior has hurt the person targeted as well as others who are involved
- Ask, “What can be done so that we can help, and we can all feel safe?”
- Decide what steps you can take together
- Thank them for listening and caring

# “What If I Witness Bullying?”

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## 5. Encourage others to come together against bullying—and unite for kindness, acceptance, and inclusion

Have you ever heard the old saying, “There is power in numbers”? In the world of bullying prevention, this is especially true. While it is absolutely important that each person does what they can, individual actions are magnified when we join forces. When a group of individuals works together for a common cause, that is when real change happens.

### Try getting others involved by:

- Starting a club or activity at your school that focuses on inclusion. For example, invite students with and without disabilities to work together on an art project each week.
- Asking your teacher about researching other cultures for a presentation or project
- Holding an open event where board games are played, resources are shared, anyone can participate, and everyone has someone to work with
- Inviting everyone to a kick ball game designed so that all levels of participants can actively participate with root beer floats to celebrate
- Creating “safe spaces” on playgrounds that are monitored by peers and adults

Do your best to help, but also know that each bullying situation is different. It’s not up to you to solve it but recognize that your support can make a difference.

# “Teens Against Bullying web site”

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Visit [TeensAgainstBullying.org](https://TeensAgainstBullying.org), a website created by and for teens through PACER's National Bullying Prevention Center.

