

## Schools and Bullying

**We often think schoolyard teasing is a normal part of growing up. Everyone seems to have experienced it or witnessed it in childhood. A good-natured joke between friends is one thing. Behavior that threatens students' safety and well-being is something else. We call such behavior bullying.**

Bullying is a type of unwanted aggressive behavior by one student or students against others who are victims. The behavior is repeated, or has the potential to be repeated. It also involves an imbalance of power. This means that the victim is weaker or more vulnerable than the bully.

### Types of Bullying

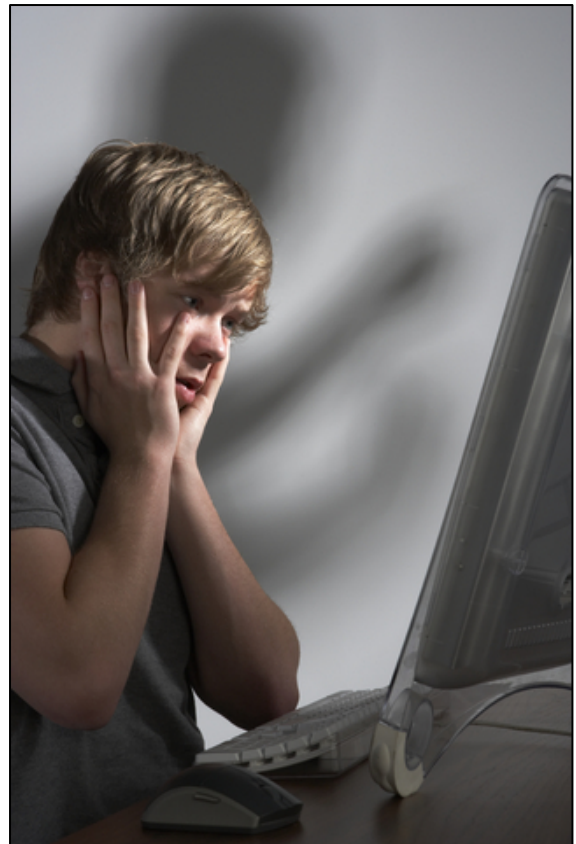
Bullying can be physical, verbal, or emotional abuse or harassment. In all cases, it involves a victim feeling intimidated. Physical bullying ranges from pushing and shoving to hitting and kicking, or worse.

Verbal and emotional bullying occur face-to-face or on the Internet. Bullying by electronic communication, like the Internet, is called "cyberbullying." Sometimes bullies reveal private information about people or spread rumors about them. Even verbal behavior can lead to emotional or physical harm. Bullying often involves discrimination, too, such as racism or "homophobia." Homophobia is prejudice against lesbian and gay persons.

### Effects Of Bullying

In 2010, a Massachusetts 15-year-old named Phoebe Prince committed suicide. She had suffered face-to-face bullying by other students. They called her a "whore" and a "slut." They wrote mean-spirited comments on Facebook. One student threw a drink can at her from a moving car.

After her suicide, several teens were charged with criminal harassment. This is a misdemeanor crime. This means it can have a sentence of up to one year in jail. Five teens were sentenced to probation and community service.



Bullies often feel more uninhibited online than face-to-face. Psychologists call this the "disinhibition effect" of cyberbullying.

Victims like Phoebe Prince may suffer depression. Depression is a state of mind that includes feelings of shame and hopelessness. Victims may also have anxiety and loss of self-esteem. They might develop relationship problems with parents and friends.

Bullying can also harm victims' school life. Many victims' grades fall. They also might stay home because of depression or fear of harassment. Severe bullying problems can cause dropout rates to rise.

Students who bully are more likely to get into fights, vandalize property, and drop out of school. Teenage bullies are more likely to be convicted of crimes in adulthood.

## **Anti-Gay Bullying**

Anti-gay bullying is directed at lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered ("LGBT") students. In 2011, almost 82 percent of LGBT students experienced verbal harassment at school. Over 38 percent experienced physical harassment. The harassment was a result of bullies' homophobia.

In the 1990s, several students at a high school near San Jose, California taunted and harassed another student named Alana Flores. In her locker, Alana found threatening anti-lesbian messages, one of which stated, "We'll kill you."

Around the same time in that same school district, a student named Freddie Fuentes suffered physical and verbal abuse. Freddie was beaten by a group of boys in seventh grade at a bus stop in front of a school bus driver. There and in class bullies called him derogatory words for being gay.

Alana, Freddie, and other victims faced another problem. They complained to school officials but said they were ignored. Worse, Alana and Freddie said they were told their complaints were "too much of a fuss." Alana attempted suicide in her senior year.

These students sued the school district for not trying to stop the bullying. In the case, the federal court of appeals ruled that when school officials know about anti-gay harassment, they must take steps to protect students. The school district also began training employees and students about how to stop anti-gay bullying.

Sometimes a bully might perceive a heterosexual student as LGBT. It is important to remember that anti-gay harassment against heterosexual students is unwanted aggressive behavior. Therefore, it is still bullying.

## **Schools and Cyberbullying**

Cyberbullies might feel scared to say hurtful things in person. But on the Internet, they lose their fear. Social networks also allow cyberbullies to share hurtful messages with many others.

Schools face a dilemma about cyberbullying. Schools can punish bullying on campus. Much cyberbullying, however, starts off-campus. Cyberbullies might send messages from home computers or cell phones.

The California Education Code states that a student who engages in cyberbullying can be suspended or expelled. The code defines cyberbullying as “bullying committed by means of an electronic act...directed specifically toward a pupil or school personnel.” To be punishable the cyberbullying must be “related to school activity.”

In *Tinker v. Des Moines*, the U.S. Supreme Court held that schools could regulate student speech or expression that causes a “substantial interference” at the school. Sometimes, off-campus electronic acts interfere with school activity.

### **For Discussion and Writing**

1. What is bullying? Why is it a problem?
2. Many believe that the Internet has made the problem of bullying worse. Do you agree? Why or why not?
3. Why do schools face a dilemma about punishing a bully when the cyberbullying occurs or originates off campus?