

FACT SHEET

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Bystanders are Essential to Bullying Prevention and Intervention

Bullying can have significant mental, developmental, and social effects, which is why it is a public health concern. When it comes to prevention many people can take an active role to intervene – especially bystanders. A bystander to bullying is anyone who witnesses bullying either in person or in digital forms like social media, websites, text messages, gaming, and apps. When bullying occurs, bystanders are present 80 percent of the time.¹ A bystander has the potential to make a positive difference in a bullying situation, particularly for the youth who is being bullied. When youth who are bullied are defended and supported by their peers, they are less anxious and depressed.² When bystanders to bullying intervene, bullying stops within 10 seconds 57 percent of the time.¹ Sometimes adolescents and young adults who witness bullying are not sure what their role is and or what they can do to address bullying.³



Bystander Roles

Bystanders can play different roles in bullying situations:

- **Outsiders** witness the bullying situation, but stay out of it and do not get involved.⁴
- **Defenders** help by intervening when bullying occurs¹ or extend support to the person being bullied – privately or in the moment – or take other actions to address the bullying.
- **Reinforcers** support the youth who bullies or bullying behavior¹ and may laugh, encourage, or cheer during or after the bullying incident.²
- **Assistants** help the individual doing the bullying and join in. For example, an assistant may physically restrain or block the target of bullying so that they cannot get away.²

Cyberbullying has also been linked to psychological problems. Kids who have been cyberbullied reported higher levels of depression and thoughts of suicide, as well as greater emotional distress, hostility, and delinquency compared with peers who were not.

While bullying can lead to psychological problems, kids who have mental health concerns to begin with are also more likely to be bullied. Therefore, this is a complex cycle that is not easy to study and understand.

Why Bystanders Intervene or Not

There are many reasons why youth may or may not intervene or defend the target of bullying.

Some reasons bystanders **do not** intervene or respond to the bullying include:

- Fear of retaliation and being bullied themselves.^{4,3}
- Fear of losing their social status.³
- They are not friends with the target of the bullying.⁴
- Lack of knowledge about the individuals involved, the incident, and whether they perceive someone to be right or wrong in the situation.^{2,3,4}
- Awareness about a specific situation that takes into account the people involved and information about their on-going actions.³
- They do not believe teachers or school staff will address the bullying.³
- They believe that adults will make the bullying worse.
- They do not know what to do to intervene or address bullying.³

Bystanders **do** intervene or defend the targets of bullying because they:

- are friends with the target of bullying⁴
- are [morally engaged](#)³ and treat others with respect or believe “bullying is wrong”
- consider how serious or dangerous the behavior is and how frequently it occurs³
- view the target of bullying as innocent³
- have empathy and sympathy for the target of the bullying³
- believe teachers or school staff will appropriately address bullying³

Prevention and Intervention

Bystanders can take positive actions to prevent bullying and to address it while it is happening or after it occurs. Parents, teachers, and other caring adults can recommend safe ways that bystanders can prevent, intervene, or address bullying.

Prevention steps include:

- Being inclusive by welcoming or inviting others to join their activities and groups.²
- Being a role model for pro-social behavior by showing kindness, respect, and empathy for others.
- Walking or sitting with or near vulnerable kids who may be targets of bullying.
- [Getting involved](#) with bullying prevention efforts at school or in the community.

Bystander interventions during a bullying incident may include:

- Defending the target of the bullying.
- Intervening as a group.²
- Changing the subject.
- Questioning the bullying behavior.
- Using humor to lighten up a serious situation.
- Openly stating an objection to bullying.
- Stating approval of the victim and validating his or her social status.

Bystanders can address bullying after it happens by:

- Reaching out privately to the target of bullying to express support or concern.
- Reporting the bullying to a trusted adult, parent, teacher, or school administrator.
- Reaching out privately to the person doing the bullying to express concern, if they feel safe to do so.

Teachers and Schools

Teachers and schools play an important part in helping students understand their roles in bullying situations. When teachers and schools address bullying consistently, students have an expectation that the role they play in bullying matters. Teachers can conduct [activities](#) to enhance student’s social emotional learning and provide safe strategies for supporting their peers.² [Adults](#) in schools can also be role models, reward positive social behavior, and set the tone for healthy social relationships. By understanding the different roles they play in bullying situations, bystanders can take positive actions to address and reduce bullying.

1. Espalage, D., Pigott, T., Polanin, J. (2012) A Meta-Analysis of School-Based Bullying Prevention Programs’ Effects on Bystander Intervention Behavior. *School Psychology Review*, Volume 41, No. 1, 47–65
2. Salmivalli, C., (2014) Participant Roles in Bullying: How Can Peer Bystanders Be Utilized in Interventions?, *Theory Into Practice*, 53:4, 286-292, DOI: 10.1080/00405841.2014.947222 To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2014.947222>
3. Forsberg, C., Wood, L., Smith, J., Varjas, K., Meyers, J., Jungert, T., and Thornberg, R. (2018) Students’ views of factors affecting their bystander behaviors in response to school bullying: a cross-collaborative conceptual qualitative analysis, *Research Papers in Education*, 33:1, 127-142, DOI: 10.1080/02671522.2016.1271001 To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2016.1271001>
4. Thornberg, R., Tenenbaum, L., Varjas, K., Meyers, J., Jungert, T., & Vanegas, G. (2012). Bystander Motivation in Bullying Incidents: To Intervene or Not to Intervene? *Western Journal of Emergency Medicine*, 13(3), 247–252. <http://doi.org/10.5811/westjem.2012.3.11792> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3415829/>

Source and Research Limitations

This report includes the most up to date research on bullying, but it is important to note that this research has several important limitations. Most of the research is cross sectional, which means it took place at one point in time. This type of research shows us what things are related to each other at that time, but cannot tell us which thing came first or if one of those things caused the other to occur.

Another limitation is that many of the studies use self reports to identify who bullied or was bullied and to capture symptoms or experiences. While the use of self report is common in bullying research, it can result in biases or errors. The study participants must report information accurately, and some children may not want to admit to others that they have been bullied or have bullied others.

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