

# Prevention Programs Addressing Bullying and Conflict Resolution

- [Introduction](#)
- [What We Know About School-based Bullying and Conflict Resolution Programs](#)
- [References](#)
- [Prevention Programs Addressing Bullying and Conflict Resolution](#)

**Bullying among children is the repeated, negative acts committed by one or more children against another. These negative acts may be direct physical or verbal actions, and/or indirect actions, such as the manipulation of friendships, gossip, and the exclusion of others from activities (Olweus, 1991).**

Conflict occurs naturally in the process of decision making and working with others. Conflict, in and of itself, is not damaging, but how one deals with conflict can be. Efforts to teach children to resolve conflict constructively, such as in conflict resolution or peer mediation programs, began in the late 1960s and early 1970s and continue today. Such programs address normal conflicts but are not recommended for dealing with bullies.

Bullying is not about resolving problems but about having power and control over another. Although bullying is generally thought of as a childhood problem it takes many forms across the lifespan: sexual harassment, gang attacks, dating violence, assault, domestic violence, child abuse, harassment in the workplace, and elder abuse (National Crime Prevention Council, 1997). When we understand that bullying is about asserting power over someone, the dots between the various forms of violence connect. Seeing "bullying" behaviours that children learn, practice and experience from a very young age as a potential antecedent to other forms of violence heightens the need to address this behaviour early and consistently (Stein, 1995).

Bullies acquire power over their victims in numerous ways: physical size and strength, pinpointing the target's vulnerabilities, peer group standing, or enlisting cooperation from other children (National Crime Prevention Council, 1997; Pepler & Craig, 1999). When bullying repeats over time, control over the victim becomes entrenched, resulting in the victim feeling increased distress and fear. Bullying can be expressed in many ways (Health Canada, 1997; Pepler & Craig, 1999; Smith & Sharp, 1994):

- Physical aggression — kicking, hitting, taking or damaging belongings;
- Social alienation — excluding someone from social groups (often referred to as indirect bullying);
- Verbal aggression — name-calling, insulting, repeated teasing, racist remarks;
- Intimidation — spreading nasty rumours, threatening.
- Sexual harassment

The research on childhood bullying typically identifies only bullying behaviours that occurs in school playgrounds. In a Canadian survey of 4,743 children in Grades 1 through 8, O'Connell et al. (1997) reported that:

- 6% of children admitted bullying others "more than once or twice" in the previous six weeks;
- 15% reported that they had been victimized during the same time period; and
- 2% stated that they both bullied and were victimized.

In the Canadian National Longitudinal Study of Children and Youth (NLSCY), which surveyed over 11,300 children, aged 4 to 11, and their parents (Craig, Peters, & Konarski, 1998) parents reported that of children aged 4 to 6, 14% of boys and 9% of girls bullied, while 5% of boys and 4% of girls were victimized. Among children ages 7 to 9, 15% of boys and 8% of girls bullied, while 4% of boys and 7% of girls were victimized. In the 10 to 11 year old cohort, 13% of boys and 9% of girls bullied, while 9% of boys and girls were victimized. Self-reports were gathered only from the 10 to 11 year old cohort. They suggest that 17% of boys and 9% of girls admitted bullying, while 14% of boys and 8% of girls reported being victims of bullying.

These figures are similar to those from Scandinavia, Ireland, and England (Olweus, 1991). The percentage of students from different grades who reported being the target of bullying in a large sample (more than 83,000 youth) gradually decreased across the grade levels but with a definite gender difference. After grade 5, the proportion of girls reporting being bullied decreased more than boys (Olweus, 1996). In the same study, self-reported bullying gradually decreased for girls across the grade levels, but increased for boys.

The individual characteristics of bullies and victims have been studied, as well as the social contexts in which bullying occurs (family, peer group, school, and community). Children become bullies in many different ways - there is not a single type of bully. A number of risk factors have been associated with bullying behaviours:

- Child poverty;
- Family violence and/or childhood traumas (physical and/or sexual abuse);
- Racism, forms of discrimination;
- Abuse of alcohol, drugs and other substances;
- Inconsistent and/or excessive discipline practices;
- Media violence;
- Academic failure; and
- Abnormal neurological functioning.

However, it is not known what factors, alone or in combination, are necessary and sufficient to produce a behavioural pathway leading to bullying behaviour.

A bully's abuse is harsh and wears down a victim's self-esteem, which in turn reinforces the bully's sense of importance. This spurs on further instances of bullying. Bullying often takes place in front of other children, 'by-standers'. By-standers can play different roles in a bullying episode: joining in, cheering, passively watching and occasionally intervening. By-stander behaviour has become a focal point for a number of programs to break the bullying cycle (Jeffrey, Miller & Linn, 2002).

While the victim and the bully experience the consequences of bullying most dramatically, the whole school environment can be impacted. Fear and anxiety become the norm, diminishing many children's ability to learn.

[Return to top](#)

## What We Know About School-based Bullying and Conflict Resolution Programs

Dan Olweus from Norway was a pioneer of early research (1980s) and bullying prevention program development. In reaction to the suicides of several Norwegian children who were victimized by bullies, Olweus developed and implemented a comprehensive school-based program to address the problem. Today, researchers and educators in most industrialized nations recognize bullying as a significant problem, with far-reaching consequences if left unchecked. Unfortunately, news reports of suicides and school shootings by those victimized by bullies continue.

Bullying is the most frequently identified form of violence in schools and has prompted school-wide efforts to address this problem. The following characteristics have been identified as key to successful prevention of violence (Cueto, Bosworth, & Sailes, 1993; Pepler & Craig, 1999; Shaw, 2001):

- Using a multi-dimensional approach — a combination of individual, classroom, school-wide, and community initiatives with students, teachers, school staff, and parents;
- Continuity over grade levels, with prevention efforts starting before adolescence and programs of a longer duration;
- Incorporating cognitive, affective, and behavioural components;
- Skill building and active participation in non-violent conflict resolution by all students and school staff; and
- Changes in school policies and procedures dealing with violent incidences.

Several approaches address conflict in schools. Prosocial strategies focus on teaching children appropriate methods to address conflict. Conflict resolution, peer mediation, and peaceable schools are three common prosocial approaches (Cueto, Bosworth, & Sailes, 1993). *Conflict resolution* generally refers to strategies that enable students to handle conflicts in a peaceable and cooperative manner. *Peer mediation* is a specific form of conflict resolution, whereby trained students act as neutral third parties in the settling of non-physical disputes between other students. Traditionally, peer mediation has involved a selected group of students (cadre) who are trained in mediation skills and then offer their services in the playground or lunchroom. More recently, peer mediators have been students who volunteer for this service after everyone in the school has participated in the conflict resolution skill building. A *peaceable school* results when the values and skills of cooperation, communication, tolerance, positive emotional expression, and conflict resolution are taught and supported throughout the culture of the school.

Other prevention programs focus specifically on dealing with bullies. They typically take a different approach, teaching about the power inherent in bullying and the way in which bystanders endorse bullies, by being silent or not protesting. Bullying prevention programs invite teachers to intervene when children's conflict is about power and control not negotiation. Until recently, teachers have often ignored bullying, perceiving it as conflict that children can cope with themselves. This is supported by research by Craig and Pepler (1997) who observed that teachers intervened in only 4% of the bullying episodes. Bullying prevention programs have also underscored the importance of looking at school policies and procedures in addressing bullying.

**Program Objectives:** In schools, bullying occurs from junior kindergarten through to the senior grades (Roher, 1997). The programs reviewed for this project span these years. In the early development of bullying prevention, the main focus was on younger children (up to grade 5), but with an expanded definition and understanding of the power dynamics operating in bullying, programs have expanded curricula for junior and senior high school students. The program

objectives include reducing aggressive behaviour (through knowledge of what bullying is and learning non-violent conflict resolution strategies) and/or increasing resistance to victimization (strategies of how to recognize and avoid hostile situations; increasing self-esteem). Some programs also encourage bystanders to feel empathy for victims, to respond to incidents of bullying, and change attitudes, such as intolerance for differences, that underlie bullying.

At the classroom and school level, anti-bullying interventions focus on: 1) setting rules and procedures for responding quickly and consistently to incidents of bullying, and 2) modelling the values and principles of non-violent conflict resolution and respect for diversity through school policies, procedures and activities that involve students, school staff and parents.

**Program Content:** The curriculum content to address the above objectives varies by program and by grade level. A broad definition of bullying that includes teasing and exclusion is not stressed in every program, while overt aggressive behaviour is always acknowledged. Common to most Kindergarten to Grade 5 curricula is information about feelings, managing anger, differences and diversity and rules or steps to resolve conflict. Skills that are promoted and practiced include problem solving, cooperation and conflict resolution.

Many of the above information and skills are further developed and refined in Grades 6 through 8. Common topics include managing anger, understanding the dynamics of conflict, making choices in conflict situations, dealing with bullies, negotiation skills, communication skills, avoiding and dealing safely with conflict, recognizing social cues prior to violence and self-talk that can be used to reduce stress and de-escalate conflict.

Building on knowledge and skills learned in Grades 6 through 8, highschool students tend to focus on attitudes that are associated with promoting violent solutions to conflict, the causes and effects of violence, difficult interpersonal issues, high-risk behaviours such as drug, alcohol and weapons use, and strategies for preventing the escalation of conflict to violence.

**Presentation Methods:** Interactive learning techniques are used to promote/apply conflict resolution and communication skills. In the younger grades, these generally include telling stories and role-plays of conflict situations and how to deal with them. Older students are sometimes given homework exercises such as interviewing adults about violence and conflict resolution. Discussions in large and small groups following live-action videos as well as research assignments about the causes and effects of violence are also commonly suggested.

**Teacher Training:** Only a few programs make teacher training mandatory for delivery of the program. Of the remaining programs, about half recommend and offer specific teacher training, while the others made no mention of the need for in-service training. Teacher training usually consists of providing teachers with techniques that might be useful in delivering the program, information on what bullying is, how to identify bullying situations and how to deal with these situations. Such information stresses that bullying looks different across various age groups.

**Parent Involvement:** The majority of the reviewed programs include materials and strategies to involve parents in bullying prevention education. Parent meetings, letters, workshops and take home cards with information about specific conflict resolution and problem solving techniques are the most common strategies. One program that stressed school culture change suggested incorporating parents on a committee to develop and implement school-wide activities that would promote change at the school level.

**Did They Work?** Most violence prevention programs reported some measure of success in increasing knowledge and/or decreasing violence. However, the multitude of ways that were used to measure reductions in violence makes comparisons across programs challenging. Different ways that researchers measured decreases in physical aggression include:

- Violence-related referrals to the principal;
- Frequency of fighting (observed, self-, teacher- or parent-reported);
- Self-report questionnaires about actual or intended use of aggression;
- Incidents of witnessing bullying;
- Feeling safer at school;
- School suspensions;
- Threats with a weapon;
- Behaviour problems in classroom as reported by teacher;
- Frequency and intensity of fights with siblings as reported by parents; and
- Self-reported aggressive thoughts or fantasies.

In measuring a programs' effectiveness in reducing bullying, only two evaluations assessed a reduction in verbal bullying and only one also focused on "excluding" behaviours: both expressions of bullying that are utilized by more girls than boys. By concentrating on physical acts of aggression, violence prevention programs miss more covert expressions of bullying and, as result, may be primarily measuring changes in way that boys bully. Programs rarely address gender differences in either the expression of bullying or program results. Conducting a gender analysis on results from dating violence and sexual harassment is fairly standard, but only one evaluation of general violence prevention programs compared the behaviour of girls to boys. In this analysis, while boys demonstrated a decrease in physical violence from pre- to post-test, girls did not. Although increasing prosocial behaviours was a stated objective of some programs, it was measured in only a few evaluations.

Not all evaluations of bullying and conflict resolution programs have been successful in their efforts to reduce violence. For example, Orpinas et al. (2000) conducted an evaluation of the Students for Peace program using a strong research design. This multi-component program (formation of school council, peer mediation training, teacher-training in conflict resolution, violence-prevention curriculum, and parent newsletter) was evaluated over 3-years with 9,000 students each year in which 2,246 were followed across the three year period. Few positive effects were found in any year and the entire period in the goals of reducing aggressive behaviours, fights at school, injuries due to fighting, being threatened, or missing classes due to feeling unsafe.

[Return to top](#)

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