

# Myths About Bullying

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Stop Bullying Now! U.S. Department of Health and Human Services HRSA

## 1. Bullying is the same thing as conflict.

Wrong. **Bullying** is aggressive behavior that involves an imbalance of power or strength. Often, bullying is repeated over time.

**Conflict** involves antagonism among two or more people. Whereas any *two* people can have a conflict (or a disagreement or a fight), bullying only occurs where there is a power imbalance where one child has a hard time defending himself or herself. Why is the difference between bullying and conflict important? Conflict resolution or mediation strategies are sometimes misused to solve bullying problems. These strategies can send the message that both children are "partly right and partly wrong," or that, "We need to work out the conflict between you." These messages are not appropriate messages in cases of bullying (or in any situation where someone is being victimized). The appropriate message to the child who is bullied should be, "Bullying is wrong and no one deserves to be bullied. We are going to do everything we can to stop it."

What does work? Research suggests that the best way to deal with bullying is through comprehensive programs that focus on changing the climate of a school and the social norms of the group. For more information, see the tip sheet entitled, "Best Practices in Bullying Prevention and Intervention."

## 2. Most bullying is physical (involves hitting, shoving, kicking).

Physical bullying may be what first comes to mind when adults think about bullying. However, the most common form of bullying both for boys and girls is verbal bullying (e.g., name-calling, rumor-spreading). It is also common for youth to bully each other through social isolation (e.g., shunning or leaving a child out on purpose).

## 3. Bullying isn't serious. It's just a matter of "kids being kids."

Bullying can be extremely serious. Bullying can affect the mental well being, academic work, and physical health of children who are targeted. Children who are bullied are more likely than other children to have lower self-esteem; and higher rates of depression, loneliness, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts. They also are more likely to want to avoid attending school and have higher school absenteeism rates.

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Recent research on the health related effects of bullying indicates that victims of frequent bullying are more likely to experience headaches, sleeping problems, and stomach ailments. Some emotional scars can be long-lasting. Research suggests that adults who were bullied as children are more likely than their non-bullied peers to be depressed and have low self-esteem as adults.

Children who bully are more likely than other children to be engaged in other antisocial, violent, or troubling behaviors. Bullying can negatively affect children who observe bullying going on around them even if they aren't targeted themselves. For more information, visit "Why Should Adults Care About Bullying?"

#### **4. Bullying doesn't happen at my child's school.**

Bullying is more common at some schools than others, however it can happen anywhere children and youth gather. Studies show that between 15- 25% of U.S. students are bullied with some frequency ("sometimes or more often") while 15- 20% admit that they bully others with some frequency within a school term. The best way to find out about bullying at your child's school is to ask children and youth, themselves. One good way to do this is by administering an anonymous survey about where bullying occurs, when it occurs, and how often it occurs.

#### **5. Bullying is mostly a problem in urban schools.**

Bullying occurs in rural, suburban, and urban communities, and among children of every income level, race, and geographic region.

#### **6. Bullying is more likely to happen on the bus than at school.**

Although bullying does happen on the bus, most surveys indicate that bullying is more likely to occur on school grounds. Common locations for bullying include playgrounds, the classroom, the cafeteria, bathrooms, and hallways. A student survey can help determine where the hotspots are in any particular school.

#### **7. Children and youth who are bullied will almost always tell an adult.**

Adults are often unaware of bullying- in part because many children and youth don't report it. Most studies find that only 25%-50% of bullied children talk to an adult about the bullying. Boys and older children are less likely than girls and younger children to tell adults about bullying. Why are children reluctant to report bullying? They may fear retaliation by children doing the bullying. They also may fear that adults won't take their concerns seriously or will deal inappropriately with the bullying situation.

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## **8. Children and youth who bully are mostly loners with few social skills.**

Children who bully usually do not lack friends. In fact, some research finds that they have larger friendship networks than other children. Importantly, they usually have at least a small group of friends who support and encourage their bullying behavior. Bullies also generally have more leadership skills than victims of bullying or children not involved in bullying.

## **9. Bullied kids need to learn how to deal with bullying on their own.**

Some children have the confidence and skills to stop bullying when it happens, but many do not. Moreover, children shouldn't be expected to deal with bullying on their own. Bullying is a form of victimization or peer abuse. Just as society does not expect victims of other types of abuse (e.g., child maltreatment or domestic abuse) to "deal with it on their own," we should not expect this from victims of bullying. Adults have critical roles to play in helping to stop bullying, as do other children who witness or observe bullying.

## **10. Most children and youth who observe bullying don't want to get involved.**

The good news is that most children and youth think that bullying is "not cool" and feel that they should do something if they see it happen. In a recent study of tweens, (Brown, Birch, & Kancherla, 2005), 56% said that they usually either say or do something to try to stop bullying that they observe or tell someone who could help. These children and youth play a critical role in helping stop bullying in schools and communities.