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# An Intro to



**T**he Jonesboro Middle School shooting and other episodes of school violence renewed focus on the issue of school aggression—bullying in particular—because many high-profile incidents escalated from bullying. As a new teacher, you must understand the warning signs, causes and effects and, most importantly, tactics to help stop this unacceptable behavior. As educators who have researched bullying behaviors, it is our responsibility to share our knowledge.

## What Is Bullying?

Though bullying has been defined in various ways over the years, we prefer the composite description compiled by Australian educational

psychologist Ken Rigby: “Bullying involves a desire to hurt + hurtful action + a power imbalance + (typically) repetition + an unjust use of power + evident enjoyment by the aggressor and a sense of being oppressed on the part of the victim.”<sup>1</sup>

Bullying behaviors can and do happen anytime, anywhere—in classrooms, hallways, playgrounds, gyms, lunch rooms, and bathrooms.<sup>2</sup> Outside school, students and teachers alike also may face cyberbullying, described as: “The use of information and communication technologies such as e-mail, cell phone and pager text messages, instant messaging, defamatory personal Web sites, and defamatory online personal polling Web sites, to support deliberate, repeated, and hostile behavior by an individual or group that is intended to harm others.”<sup>3</sup>

To combat bullying, teachers must know what bullying is. Definitions only begin the understanding of this problem. Let’s look at those involved in bullying and the effects of this destructive behavior.

## Bullies and Their Victims

Traditionally, bullying behaviors have been different between the sexes,

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with incidences of bullying higher among boys than girls. One large study reported that an average of 24 percent of middle school boys and 17 percent of middle school girls bully others regularly, while an average of 25 percent of middle school boys and girls reported being bullied in the same time period.<sup>4</sup> Boys tend to bully physically or with threats of violence, while girls tend to use tactics such as ignoring and gossip in bullying.<sup>5</sup> Recently, this assumption has been challenged. With the rise of the “Mean Girls” phenomenon, it can be assumed safely that girl bullies often take on the violent nature of their boy counterparts. Girls also are more aggressive than boys in cyberbullying.<sup>6</sup>

Whether bully or victim, the individuals caught up in bullying behaviors face the same detrimental risks, such as carrying or using a weapon, being injured in a fight, absenteeism, staying out at night, and loneliness.<sup>7</sup> Each is at higher risk to engage in dangerous behaviors, such as tobacco use, alcohol consumption, gang membership, and weapons involvement.<sup>8</sup> Each group also is more prone to suffer from depression and anxiety.<sup>9</sup> The negative impact of bullying is long lasting. In one study, boys identified as bullies in middle school had been convicted of at least one crime by the age of 24 at a rate three to four times higher than the rate of non-bullies.<sup>10</sup>

## Now What?

The statistics are grim and the impact of bullying is devastating. So, what can you do to help stem this destructive behavior? It begins with understanding your students and their lives, then committing to action in all areas of bullying and for all of those affected by it. Here are some ideas to shape your role in bullying prevention.

**Set an action plan and work it consistently and fairly.** A commitment to change the culture from the earliest years of schooling and in every part of the school system is necessary to make an anti-bullying program work. Bullying behavior is seen at every level of education—and in the workforce as well. Efforts to stop it must begin as early in a child’s education as possible.

**Work on building powerful, sustainable relationships with children.** Exercise behaviors that can be monitored and observed and for which outcomes can be measured. To help counteract the destructiveness of aggression, emphasize the positive aspects of assertiveness, establish individual self-worth, use positive role models, and create a nurturing environment by modeling affirmative respectful behavior in the classroom. Prevention and protection require parents and teachers to be proactive.

**Set up resources for yourself and your school.** Teachers and parents need sources for preventing and dealing with bullying. Numerous places offer anti-bullying materials at little or no cost, including online resources. In addition, your guidance counselor, resource officer, or school nurse may have materials, and these professionals usually know which kids are at risk for bullying behavior.

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## Notes

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