Module 2: Developmental characteristics of adolescents and identifying bullying behaviors

Objective:
- Understand the psychological, emotional, and social development of adolescents and how it relates to bullying.
- Identify the symptoms and causes of bullying among high school students.
- Equip teachers with skills to recognize signs of bullying, both visible and subtle.
- Understand the psychological and behavioral markers of victims and aggressors.

Summary of content:
- Developmental characteristics of adolescents
- Differences between normal teen conflicts and bullying
- The role of gender and stereotypes in bullying behavior
- Socio-cultural aspects and bullying

Lessons:
Lesson 1. Developmental characteristics of adolescents and their relationship with bullying
Lesson 2. Differences between normal teen conflicts and bullying
Lesson 3. The role of gender and stereotypes in bullying behavior
Lesson 4. Socio-cultural aspects and bullying

Lesson 1. Developmental characteristics of adolescents and their relationship with bullying

Adolescence is a critical period characterized by significant changes in brain development, cognitive functioning, and social dynamics. These changes not only shape how adolescents perceive themselves and others but also influence their behaviors, including tendencies towards both being bullied and bullying others. Understanding these developmental factors helps educators recognize the causes and symptoms of bullying and provides them with insights into how to intervene effectively.

Cognitive development
Adolescents experience heightened cognitive abilities during this period, which include improved critical thinking, emotion regulation, problem-solving, and the development of a sense of identity (Erikson, 1968). This cognitive maturation is facilitated by the ongoing changes in the prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for decision-making, impulse control, and future planning. However,

these abilities are still in development, making adolescents more prone to impulsive and risk-taking behaviors, especially in the presence of peers (Crone & Dahl, 2012).

As they seek to understand who they are, peer influence becomes a significant factor in shaping self-perception. Social comparison and the need for peer approval can lead to aggressive behavior or feelings of inferiority, both of which are precursors to bullying behaviors.

Identity vs. role confusion: Erik Erikson's theory suggests that adolescence is a critical period for developing a sense of self. Failure to achieve this can result in role confusion, which may manifest as aggression toward others (Erikson, 1968).

Egocentrism and peer pressure: Adolescents are more focused on how they are perceived by their peers, which can lead to behaviors designed to assert dominance or fit in, increasing the likelihood of bullying (Erikson, 1968).

Emotional development and regulation

Adolescents experience heightened emotional reactivity due to the changes in the limbic system, the part of the brain responsible for emotions and motivation. Studies have shown that poor emotional regulation is associated with an increased likelihood of becoming either a bully or a victim (Garner, 2017). Adolescents who have difficulty controlling their emotions are more prone to impulsive behaviors, including aggression and bullying (Murray-Close et al., 2007).

This period is marked by an increased sensitivity to both positive and negative stimuli, leading to emotional volatility. As adolescents learn to navigate this emotional landscape, they are more susceptible to feelings of rejection and social exclusion, which can exacerbate conflicts among peers (Steinberg, 2014). These characteristics may also explain why adolescents who are bullied often experience increased rates of anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal. The emotional toll of bullying can also affect academic performance and overall well-being. On the other hand, individuals who engage in bullying may do so as a maladaptive response to their own emotional difficulties or insecurities.

Social development

Adolescence is a time when social belonging becomes very important and peer groups often exert a strong influence over behavior. Popularity and social status become sources of power, and this can lead to bullying behaviors, as some adolescents attempt to assert dominance or maintain their position within a social group or conform to group norms (Bukowski & Sippola, 2001; Crone & Steinbeis, 2017) .

Adolescents often form cliques, and those who are marginalized or perceived as different may become targets of bullying (Espelage & Swearer, 2003). Popular students may use bullying as a tool to maintain social dominance. Bullying often stems from this social context, with more popular students sometimes engaging in aggressive behaviors to maintain their status. On the other hand, adolescents from marginalized groups or those who do not fit into traditional social hierarchies are at a higher risk of being targeted. Social dynamics such as exclusion, rumor-spreading, and public humiliation are common tactics used in relational bullying, which is often difficult to detect and address because it operates under social codes that are invisible to adults.

Lesson 2. Differences between normal teen conflicts and bullying

Teenagers frequently experience conflicts due to their developing social skills, emotional reactivity, and need for independence. While conflict is a natural part of adolescent social interactions, it is important to distinguish between normal disagreements and bullying.

Characteristics of normal conflicts include:
- Equal power: Both parties have relatively equal social or emotional standing.
- Spontaneity: Conflicts are often isolated incidents rather than a pattern.
- No intent to harm: The conflict arises from a disagreement or misunderstanding, rather than an intent to hurt the other person.
- Resolution possible: Normal conflicts can often be resolved through communication, negotiation, and compromise.

Example 1: Two students disagree about how to divide responsibilities in a group project. They argue, but after a discussion with a teacher, they find a solution that works for both of them.

Example 2: Two students, Lisa and Maria, are close friends but disagree on which after-school activity to join. Lisa wants to join the basketball team, while Maria prefers the drama club. They argue about which activity is better and become upset with each other, but after some time, they decide to pursue their own interests separately. The disagreement does not involve any intent to harm or a power imbalance, and after cooling down, the students remain friends. In this example, both students have equal power in the relationship, the disagreement is situational, and it can be resolved through communication and compromise without lasting harm to either individual.

Teachers can help students navigate normal conflicts by:
- Encouraging open communication and active listening.
- Teaching conflict resolution skills, such as negotiation and compromise.
- Mediating discussions between students to ensure both parties feel heard.

- Promoting empathy by helping students see the issue from each other's perspective.

Bullying, on the other hand, is characterized by deliberate and repeated aggressive behavior aimed at causing harm to another person. Features of bullying include:
- Imbalance of power: The bully has more power, whether it be social, emotional, or physical, over the victim.
- Intent to harm: The bully's actions are meant to cause emotional, physical, or social harm.
- Repetition: Bullying is not a one-time event but rather a repeated pattern of behavior.
- No resolution: In bullying, the victim often feels powerless to resolve the situation, and the aggressor is not interested in finding a solution.

Example 1: A student repeatedly mocks a classmate for their appearance in front of others, deliberately embarrassing them over time, with the goal of making the classmate feel excluded and powerless.
Example 2: A student named Alex repeatedly spreads false rumors about a classmate, Ben, claiming that Ben cheats on exams. This rumor circulates throughout the school, and Ben becomes socially isolated, with other students refusing to work with him on group projects or sit with him at lunch. Despite Ben's attempts to clear his name, Alex continues to spread the rumors, causing Ben ongoing distress and exclusion. This is an example of bullying because it involves a deliberate and repeated action (spreading false rumors) with the intent to harm Ben socially and emotionally. There is a clear power imbalance, as Alex's actions lead to Ben's isolation, and the bullying behavior persists over time, causing emotional harm.

In bullying situations, teachers should:
- Act immediately to stop the bullying and separate the individuals involved.
- Address the power imbalance by providing support to the victim and enforcing consequences for the bully.
- Monitor the situation over time to ensure that the bullying does not continue.
- Involve parents, counselors, and administrators when necessary to provide additional support.

In some situations, a normal conflict can escalate into bullying and teachers need to be aware of the signs. Signs that a conflict has turned into bullying include:
- One student consistently dominates the interaction, leaving the other powerless.
- The conflict repeats, with one student repeatedly targeting the other.
- The targeted student shows signs of fear, withdrawal, or avoidance.
- The aggressor continues their behavior despite attempts to resolve the conflict.

Classroom tip: Teachers can intervene early by paying attention to student interactions during classes and breaks. If conflicts are unresolved or escalate over time, if the same student spends time alone or colleagues pick on a certain colleague during classes, this could be a sign that bullying is taking place.

Activity after Lesson 2: Read the following scenarios and decide whether they describe a normal conflict or a bullying situation. For each scenario, discuss/think about how the teacher should act.

Scenario 1:

Two students, Emma and Jake, are working on a group project together. Both want to take on the leadership role, and they have different ideas about how the project should be structured. Emma believes her experience with similar projects makes her the best candidate, while Jake feels his organizational skills would benefit the group. The disagreement becomes heated, with both students raising their voices, but the argument is centered around the task at hand. The teacher intervenes, listens to both sides, and helps them find a compromise where they can share leadership responsibilities—Emma will handle the research, and Jake will coordinate the presentation. After the compromise, both students return to working collaboratively without any lingering tension.

Scenario 2:

During recess, a student named Sam repeatedly calls another student, James, derogatory names like "loser" and "weakling" in front of other classmates. Sam mocks James's physical appearance and athletic abilities, and the name-calling occurs almost every day. James initially tries to ignore the comments, but as the bullying continues, he becomes more withdrawn and stops participating in recess activities altogether. Eventually, James starts avoiding recess entirely by staying in the classroom or feigning illness to avoid the daily harassment. Sam's behavior continues without any remorse, leaving James feeling humiliated and powerless.

Scenario 3:

During a math class, two students, Sarah and Lucas, disagree on the solution to a problem. Sarah is confident that her method is correct, while Lucas insists that his approach is the right one. As they debate, the disagreement escalates, and both students begin to raise their voices, leading to a brief shouting match in front of the class. The argument disrupts the lesson, but after class, both Sarah and Lucas realize that they overreacted. They apologize to each other, and the matter is resolved with no lingering resentment or issues between them.

Lesson 3. The role of gender and stereotypes in bullying behavior

Bullying behavior often reflects societal gender norms and expectations. Boys and girls may engage in different forms of bullying based on cultural stereotypes about masculinity and femininity.

Boys and physical bullying: Boys are more likely to engage in physical bullying, such as hitting, pushing, or other forms of aggression. These behaviors align with traditional views of masculinity, which often emphasize physical strength and dominance. Boys may use bullying to assert power, prove toughness, or gain social status within their peer group (Olweus, 1993).

Example: A group of boys targets a smaller boy during recess, repeatedly pushing him into lockers and making fun of his physical appearance. The aggressive behavior is meant to display dominance in front of other peers.

Boys are often encouraged to be tough and competitive, which can lead to more overt forms of aggression. They may bully others to assert dominance or to protect their social standing. Boys who do not conform to these masculine norms, such as those perceived as weaker or more emotional, may be more vulnerable to bullying (Espelage & Swearer, 2003).
Impact on victims: Boys who are victims of bullying may struggle to seek help due to fear of being seen as weak or unmanly. This can lead to internalized emotional distress and an increased risk of depression.

Girls and relational bullying: Girls, on the other hand, are more likely to engage in relational bullying, which involves manipulating social relationships to harm others. This form of bullying may include spreading rumors, excluding others from social groups, or damaging reputations. Relational bullying aligns with societal expectations of girls being more socially oriented and emotionally driven (Crothers & Levinson, 2004).

Example: A group of girls spreads false rumors about another girl, leading to her being ostracized by her peers. The goal is to socially isolate the target without any direct physical aggression.

Girls may engage in more covert forms of bullying, such as gossiping or excluding others, which align with societal expectations of girls being less physically aggressive. These behaviors can be just as damaging as physical bullying but are often harder to detect (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995).
Impact on victims: Victims of relational bullying often experience long-term emotional distress, including anxiety and depression. Because relational bullying is less visible, victims may feel isolated and unsupported.

Gender stereotypes shape the way boys and girls express aggression and respond to bullying. These stereotypes can also affect how bullying is perceived by others, including teachers and parents. For example, physical bullying by boys may be seen as more serious or concerning, while relational bullying by girls might be dismissed as typical "drama."

Breaking down gender stereotypes in bullying – strategies for teachers

1. *Encourage empathy and emotional expression:* By teaching both boys and girls to express their emotions in healthy ways, teachers can reduce aggressive behaviors caused by frustration or unmet emotional needs.

Example of classroom activity: Emotion Charades

Objective: Encourage students to recognize and express different emotions in a non-judgmental environment.

Instructions:
Write various emotions (e.g., anger, sadness, excitement, frustration) on slips of paper.
Divide students into small groups. Each group will act out an emotion without using words, and the other students will guess the emotion.
After the charades session, engage students in a discussion about how emotions feel and how they can be expressed in constructive ways.
Highlight how empathy can help prevent conflict and bullying by understanding the emotions of others.

2. *Challenge gender stereotypes in the classroom:* Challenge stereotypes that promote aggressive behaviors in boys or encourage passive-aggressive behaviors in girls.

Example of classroom activity: Role reversals

Objective: Encourage students to critically think about how societal expectations shape behaviors and lead to bullying.

Instructions:
Start a discussion by asking students to brainstorm common stereotypes about boys and girls. Write their responses on the board.
Divide the class into two groups. Assign one group to think about the negative effects of stereotypes on boys (e.g., "Boys don't cry") and the other group to consider stereotypes about girls (e.g., "Girls should be quiet").
Have students role-play scenarios where they act out breaking these stereotypes. For example, boys can role-play a scenario where they openly express vulnerability, and girls can role-play a situation where they assertively stand up for themselves or others.
Follow up with a discussion on how these stereotypes influence bullying and how they can be challenged.

3. *Recognize all forms of bullying:* Teach students to recognize that bullying takes many forms, including physical, verbal, relational aggression, cyberbullying and that all forms are harmful.

Example of classroom activity: The bullying reflection exercise

Objective: Help students understand the different forms of bullying, including physical, verbal, and relational.
Instructions:
Ask students to write down a bullying experience they witnessed or experienced, without naming any individuals involved. They should focus on how it made them feel and what type of bullying it was (physical, verbal, relational, cyberbullying).
Collect and read a few (anonymously) to the class, categorizing the examples into the 4 types of bullying.
Have students reflect on how different forms of bullying (especially relational) can be just as hurtful as physical bullying.
Encourage students to discuss strategies for addressing relational bullying and emphasize the importance of standing up against all types of bullying.

4. *Promote peer support:* Encourage students to act as proactive bystanders by standing up for peers who are being bullied, regardless of gender.

Example of classroom activity: Stand Up, Speak Out

Objective: Teach students how to be active bystanders and support peers who are being bullied.
Instructions:
Create a peer support program where students are trained to recognize bullying behaviors and safely intervene or report the incident to an adult.
Role-play scenarios where a student is being bullied, and other students practice different ways of standing up for the victim (e.g., confronting the bully, reporting the incident to a teacher, offering emotional support to the victim).
At the end of the role-play, debrief with a discussion on what worked, what didn't, and how to build a supportive school community.
Encourage students to share their experiences of standing up for others and how it felt.

Lesson 4. Socio-cultural aspects and bullying

Cultural factors, including ethnic diversity, societal values, and historical context, play a role in shaping bullying behaviors. This lesson will explore how different cultures experience and respond to bullying, with a focus on ethnic bullying and the role of socio-cultural factors in bullying dynamics.

The prevalence of bullying varies widely across countries, partly due to cultural and socio-economic factors. According to Görzig, Wachs, and Wright (2020), bullying research began in Scandinavia in the 1970s, but in recent decades, countries worldwide have increasingly explored this issue. For instance, the EU Kids Online survey found that bullying victimization rates ranged from 2% in Italy to 43% in Estonia (Livingstone et al., 2011). These variations can be attributed to different cultural attitudes towards aggression and social hierarchies, as well as the educational and regulatory systems in place.

Cultural values, such as individualism and collectivism, also shape how bullying occurs. In more individualistic societies, bullying may be more overt and focused on asserting individual dominance. In contrast, in collectivist cultures, bullying is often subtler and related to social exclusion or group-based behaviors (Smith et al., 2016). For example, in collectivist cultures such as Japan and South Korea, bullying often revolves around social exclusion within peer groups, known as "ijime" or "wang-ta".

Ethnic diversity in schools can influence bullying behavior in various ways. In ethnically diverse classrooms, bullying can either increase due to intergroup conflict or decrease as students learn to interact with people from different backgrounds. A systematic review by Basilici et al. (2022) found that, in North America, ethnic diversity often served as a protective factor against bullying, as it reduced the power imbalances that fuel such behaviors. However, in Europe, where immigrant status is more closely associated with ethnicity, ethnic diversity was more likely to be a risk factor for bullying, especially in younger students. Ethnic bullying refers to the targeting of individuals based on their ethnic or cultural background. This form of bullying may involve racial slurs, exclusion, or other discriminatory behaviors. Ethnic bullying has profound negative effects on both the victims' mental health and their sense of identity.

Differences in education systems can further contribute to the prevalence of bullying. For instance, in countries with more hierarchical school systems or less supervision during break times, bullying may be more prevalent. Akiba et al. (2002) found that countries with education systems that create significant achievement gaps between students often have higher rates of bullying.

Strategies for addressing socio-cultural aspects related to bullying

1.Teachers can help prevent ethnic bullying by fostering an inclusive classroom environment. This includes encouraging students to learn about each other's cultural backgrounds and promoting respect for diversity. Activities like cultural exchange programs or class discussions on diversity can help reduce prejudice and increase empathy.

Example of activity: Hold a "Cultural Day" where students present aspects of their cultural heritage, such as food, music, and traditions. This helps students appreciate diversity and reduces the likelihood of bullying based on cultural differences.

2.*Train students to recognize and report ethnic-based harassment* and ensuring that there are clear consequences for discriminatory behavior.

Example of activity: United against hate
Objective:
To help students understand what constitutes ethnic bullying and empower them to recognize and report it in a safe and supportive manner.

Materials:
Whiteboard or projector
Scenario cards with examples of ethnic bullying and other types of bullying
Handouts or a poster on how to report bullying

Instructions:
Start by explaining that ethnic bullying targets someone based on their ethnicity, nationality, or cultural background. It can take the form of verbal abuse, social exclusion, or physical harassment. Teacher Prompt: "Ethnic bullying involves making fun of someone's accent, culture, or background. Today, we'll learn how to recognize it and respond."

Divide students into groups and give them scenario cards. Some scenarios depict ethnic bullying, others show general bullying. Groups will identify the type of bullying and discuss how to respond as bystanders.

Scenarios:

- Ethnic bullying: A student mocks another's accent and tells them to "go back to their country."
- General bullying: A student teases another about their appearance.
- Ethnic bullying: A student repeatedly refuses to sit next to a classmate during group work, saying, "I don't want to sit next to someone from your country," and openly tells others that they should avoid the student because of their ethnicity.
- Ethnic bullying: During lunch, a group of students mocks another student's traditional food, making jokes about how "weird" and "disgusting" it looks and smells. This continues every day, causing the targeted student to eat alone and feel ashamed of their cultural background.

- General bullying: A student spreads false rumors about another student, claiming they cheated on a test. The rumors lead to the student being excluded from group activities and feeling isolated from their peers.

In these scenarios, the groups will discuss:
- Whether the situation is ethnic bullying or general bullying.
- How bystanders can step in to support the victim.
- How to report the incident to a teacher or school official.

Each group shares their scenario with the class and explains why it is or isn't ethnic bullying, along with their proposed response. End the activity with a discussion on reporting incidents and confidentiality, on why addressing ethnic bullying is important and how students can help create an inclusive environment.
Teacher Prompt: "It's up to all of us to ensure everyone feels respected."

3. *Refer to socio-economic support systems.* See whether certain students might benefit from local/ national socio-economic programs and guide the family towards such support systems.

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