

Module 1: Understanding bullying and developmental needs of adolescents

Objectives:

- Help parents understand what bullying is and what are the different types of bullying (physical, verbal, relational, cyberbullying).
- Give factual information regarding bullying worldwide.
- Educate parents on the psychological, social, and emotional needs of adolescents.
- Help parents understand the link between unmet developmental needs and bullying behavior.

Summary of content:

- Define and give examples of each type of bullying, showing how bullying can manifest in both physical and online settings.
- The role of the bullying triangle.
- Overview of adolescent development and its connection to bullying.
- Discussion circle: Parents share their experiences with their child's developmental changes and discuss how to meet emotional and psychological needs.
- The role of peer influence and self-esteem in shaping behavior. Parents will be encouraged to talk to their children about healthy friendships and "fake friends".

Lesson 1. What is bullying?

Bullying in schools is a widespread issue that affects millions of students globally. It can have profound and long-lasting effects on both the children who are targeted and those who engage in bullying behaviors. As parents, understanding what bullying is and how it manifests is the first step in supporting your child.

According to UNESCO (2019), bullying is defined as "unwanted, aggressive behavior among school-aged children that involves a real or perceived power imbalance." This behavior is often repeated, or has the potential to be repeated, over time, increasing the harm to those involved.

Dr. Dan Olweus, a renowned researcher, identified three key components of bullying:

- **Aggression:** The intention to cause harm.
- **Repetition:** The behavior is repeated over time.
- **Power imbalance:** The aggressor holds more power, whether physical, social, or emotional.

Four types of bullying

1. Physical bullying

Physical bullying involves harming a child's body or possessions. It is one of the most visible forms of bullying and includes actions such as hitting, kicking, pushing, or damaging belongings.

○ Examples:

- A student repeatedly pushes another into lockers, making them feel unsafe.
- A child trips another intentionally in the hallway every day, escalating to physical aggression during recess.
- A group of students gangs up on a child, hitting and intimidating them while taking their belongings.

Parents: Look for unexplained injuries, torn or damaged belongings, or reluctance to attend school. Younger children are more likely to experience physical bullying, but its visibility can make it easier to detect and address.

2. Verbal bullying

Verbal bullying uses words to demean or hurt others. It includes name-calling, taunting, threatening, or making inappropriate comments.

○ Examples:

- A group of students repeatedly calls your child derogatory names, damaging their self-esteem.
- A child is taunted for their academic struggles, being called "stupid" or "dumb" in front of peers.
- During recess, a child is mocked for their accent or cultural background, with classmates making offensive remarks.

Parents, verbal bullying can be as damaging as physical bullying. Watch for changes in your child's mood or self-esteem and listen for mentions of repeated teasing. Encourage open communication to help your child express their feelings.

3. Relational (social) bullying

Relational bullying, also called social bullying, focuses on harming a child's relationships or reputation. It can be subtle but deeply hurtful.

○ Examples:

- A child is excluded from social events, while false rumors about them spread among their peers.

- A student manipulates friendships, warning others not to associate with a particular classmate, causing social isolation.
- Embarrassing or untrue gossip damages a child's standing among friends and classmates.

Parents: Relational bullying is harder to detect because it often occurs in subtle ways. Signs to watch for include social withdrawal, a sudden lack of invitations to events, or frequent complaints of feeling left out.

4. **Cyberbullying**

Cyberbullying occurs through digital devices and platforms, such as smartphones, computers, and social media. It can be relentless, following children into their homes and making it harder to escape.

○ **Examples:**

- A child receives threatening messages on social media, making them feel unsafe.
- Someone creates a fake profile to impersonate and embarrass your child, leading to humiliation and stress.
- Harassing messages containing threats or insults are sent via text or online, targeting a child's race, appearance, or background.

Parents, cyberbullying can be emotionally devastating because it's often anonymous and difficult to trace. Signs include anxiety about being online, changes in behavior after using devices, or withdrawing from activities they used to enjoy.

According to the 2021/2022 HBSC survey, around 11% of adolescents in Europe reported being bullied at least two or three times a month. The survey showed significant variation between countries, with bullying rates ranging from as low as 2% in some regions to over 30% in others.

With the rise of technology, cyberbullying has emerged as a critical issue globally. The European Union's Joint Research Centre found that over 20% of students have been victims of cyberbullying at least once in their lives. This form of bullying, which occurs through digital platforms, is particularly challenging because it can occur at any time and often involves anonymity, making it harder to track and address.

Lesson 2. The bullying triangle

Bullying isn't just about occasional conflicts or teasing; it's an intentional and harmful behavior that can leave lasting scars. Recognizing the signs of bullying—whether your child is a victim, a perpetrator, or a bystander—is critical.

The bullying triangle includes the following 3 roles a person can play in a bullying incident:

- **Bully:** The person initiating the harmful behavior.
- **Victim:** The individual on the receiving end of the bullying.
- **Bystanders:** People who witness bullying but may not intervene.

The role of bystanders is critical because their reaction can either discourage or empower the bully. Educators should teach students how to safely intervene or report bullying to a trusted adult.

Example:

During recess, a student named Alex is being bullied by another student, Jake, in front of their classmates. Jake often targets Alex by making fun of his clothes and mocking his speech in front of others. Today, Jake goes further by shoving Alex to the ground and calling him names like "loser" and "weak." Several classmates witness the incident but react in different ways.

Roles:

- **Bully (Jake):** Jake is the individual initiating the harmful behavior. Over the past few weeks, he has been consistently mocking and physically intimidating Alex in front of other students, reinforcing his power over Alex by belittling him publicly. Today, Jake escalates his behavior by physically pushing Alex, knowing that others are watching, which makes Alex feel even more vulnerable and humiliated.
- **Victim (Alex):** Alex is the student being targeted by Jake. He has been subjected to verbal harassment in the past, but today's physical bullying leaves him even more embarrassed and afraid. He feels powerless and unsure of how to stop the bullying. He doesn't want to report the incident for fear of being labeled a "snitch" and worries that Jake will retaliate if he does. The bullying makes Alex feel increasingly isolated and anxious, affecting both his social life and academic performance.
- **Bystanders (Classmates):** Several students witness the bullying incident, but they respond differently:
 - *Passive bystanders:* Some students, although uncomfortable with what's happening, don't do anything to stop Jake's behavior. They stay silent, avoiding involvement, fearing they might become Jake's next target if they intervene.
 - *Reinforcing bystanders:* A few classmates laugh or smile during the incident, which Jake interprets as encouragement. These students, although not actively bullying Alex, are indirectly contributing to the problem by validating Jake's behavior with their reactions.
 - *Active bystanders:* One student, Emma, feels disturbed by what she sees and decides to stand up for Alex. She tells Jake to stop and reports the incident to a nearby teacher. Emma's intervention helps de-escalate the situation, and her actions make Jake stop, at least temporarily. Emma's support also helps Alex feel less isolated, and the teacher later addresses the issue with both Alex and Jake.

Lesson 3. Short- and long-term effects on victims, perpetrators, and bystanders

Bullying in school settings can have serious, long-lasting consequences not only for the victim but also for the bully and even the bystanders who witness bullying incidents. These effects range from immediate psychological impacts to long-term behavioral, emotional, and health-related consequences that can persist into adulthood.

Bullying effects on victims:

Victims of bullying often experience anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem in the short term. A study by Gini and Pozzoli (2009) found that bullying victims report increased levels of psychosomatic problems, such as headaches, sleep disturbances, and stomachaches. These symptoms can develop quickly after the onset of bullying and interfere with daily functioning (Wolke & Lereya, 2015).

Victims tend to struggle academically. They may experience concentration difficulties, frequent absences from school, and a drop in academic performance due to the stress and anxiety caused by bullying. A longitudinal study by Nakamoto and Schwartz (2010) confirmed that bullying has a significant negative impact on victims' academic achievements.

Research shows that victims of bullying are at an increased risk of developing long-term mental health issues, including anxiety disorders, depression, and suicidal thoughts. A cohort study by Copeland et al. (2013) found that individuals who were bullied in childhood had higher rates of anxiety, depression, and suicidal tendencies in adulthood. Longitudinal studies suggest that bullied individuals are more likely to experience difficulties in social adjustment, such as forming lasting friendships and stable romantic relationships (Rivara & Le Menestrel, 2016).

Bullying effects and the bully:

Bullies often exhibit aggressive and antisocial behaviors, which can escalate if not addressed early. They tend to engage in other forms of antisocial behavior, such as vandalism, theft, and physical fights (Wolke & Lereya, 2015). These aggressive behaviors often spill over into other areas of their lives, reinforcing their negative actions.

Studies show that bullying can serve as a predictor of delinquency and criminal behavior in adolescence and adulthood (Ttofi et al., 2011). Bullies may enjoy a temporary boost in social status, especially among peers who see aggression as a sign of dominance. However, this is often short-lived and can result in isolation once their behavior becomes unacceptable in social settings (Rivara & Le Menestrel, 2016).

Adult bullies tend to face challenges in personal relationships and employment. A longitudinal study by Farrington et al. (1998) found that childhood bullies were more likely to struggle with stable employment and maintaining healthy relationships in adulthood. While less studied, some research has linked bullying perpetration to an increased risk of depression and substance abuse

later in life. However, bullies tend to report fewer mental health problems compared to victims and bully-victims (Wolke & Lereya, 2015).

Bullying effects on bystanders:

Bystanders often experience feelings of guilt, anxiety, and fear. Witnessing bullying without intervening can lead to increased feelings of helplessness and fear of becoming the next target. A study by Rivers et al. (2009) found that students who witness bullying are at a higher risk of experiencing symptoms of stress and anxiety. They may feel pressure to either join in or remain silent to avoid becoming targets themselves. This can contribute to a culture of fear and silence within the school environment, reinforcing the bullying behavior.

Over time, bystanders may become desensitized to violence and aggression, making them less likely to intervene in bullying situations or in other instances of wrongdoing later in life (O'Connell et al., 1999; Rivara & Le Menestrel, 2016).

Lesson 4. How your adolescent's development connects 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 help you recognize the causes and symptoms of bullying and support your child.

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.

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).

This period is marked by an increased sensitivity to both positive and negative stimuli, leading to emotional volatility. 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, adolescents 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, even stronger than the family. 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.

Activity for parents: Reflect on where your child stands regarding the cognitive, emotional, and social characteristics described above. Based on them, identify what are the vulnerabilities of your child.

Bullying is different than normal teen conflict

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 teenagers disagree about where to go with the group of friends. They argue, but after a discussion with the group, they find a solution that works for both of them.

Example 2: Two teenagers, Lisa and Maria, are close friends but disagree on which mall to go shopping. They argue about which location 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.

Parents can help teenagers navigate normal conflicts by:

- Encouraging open communication and active listening: "If you're upset with your friend, try starting the conversation by saying, 'I feel hurt when you...' rather than blaming them."
- Teaching conflict resolution skills, such as negotiation and compromise. You can role-play a disagreement scenario with your child, modeling calm and constructive dialogue.
- Encourage your child to have empathy and take into consideration the other person's perspective: "I understand why you're upset, and I want to find a way that works for both of us."
- Model healthy disagreement - demonstrate effective conflict resolution in your interactions with others, especially in front of your child.
- Encourage reflection after a conflict: "How did you feel during the argument, and what could you have done differently?"

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 peer repeatedly mocks your child for their appearance in front of others, deliberately embarrassing them over time, with the goal of making them feel excluded and powerless.

Example 2: A student named Alex repeatedly spreads false rumors about your son, 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.

Lesson 5. Discussion circle

This lesson is appropriate in a group setting and it aims to help parents share their experiences, concerns about their child's development. Also, it will help parents to better understand their child's needs.

Introduction

Adolescence is a time of rapid growth in physical, emotional, and social domains. These changes can lead to heightened emotions, a desire for independence, and sensitivity to peer influence. Emotional and psychological needs during adolescence include:

- Adolescents may struggle with controlling intense feelings.
- Acceptance by peers becomes critical, and rejection can be deeply impactful.
- Teens explore their sense of self and may feel confused or insecure.

Let's start a discussion on "What emotional or behavioral changes have you noticed in your child as they've grown older? How do you think these changes reflect their developmental needs?"

Discussion circle

All the parents are invited to seat in a circle and take turns responding.

Discussion questions:

- How does your child typically express stress or unmet emotional needs?
- Have you ever misunderstood their behavior or emotional cues? What did you learn from that experience?
- What strategies have you found helpful in supporting your child emotionally?

At the end of the discussion, each parent can summarise or write what they took useful from other parents' answers.

Lesson 6. Peer influence and healthy relationships

Peers often become one of the most influential groups in a teenager's life as they seek independence from their families. Adolescents are highly attuned to the opinions and behaviors of their friends, with peer approval becoming a strong motivator (Bukowski & Sippola, 2001). This influence can shape behavior in both positive and negative ways:

Positive influences:

- Friends who model healthy behaviors, such as prioritizing academics or treating others with kindness, can encourage similar behaviors in their peers.
- Teens who form friendships with supportive and empathetic individuals are more likely to develop resilience and emotional well-being.

Negative influences:

- ☐ Peer pressure can lead teens to engage in risky or harmful behaviors, such as substance use or bullying, in an effort to fit in (Espelage & Swearer, 2003).
- ☐ Adolescents may compromise their values or personal goals to avoid rejection or gain social acceptance.

Teenagers with high self-esteem are more likely to resist negative peer pressure and make independent decisions (Steinberg, 2014). On the other hand, those with low self-esteem may seek validation from peers, making them more vulnerable to unhealthy relationships or risky behaviors.

What influences self-esteem?

Body image and social comparison: Adolescents often compare themselves to peers, which can impact their self-confidence.

Parent tips:

- Be mindful of how you speak about your own body and appearance. Teens often mimic their parents' attitudes. Instead of saying, "I need to lose weight to look better," try saying, "I'm exercising to feel stronger and healthier." Emphasize what the body can do rather than how it looks.
- Talk to your teen about how social media, advertisements, and movies often promote unrealistic and heavily edited image: "What do you think about the filters or editing people use on their photos? How do you think that affects how we see ourselves?" Encourage them to engage with content creators or influencers who promote a healthy living lifestyle.
- Highlight your teen's talents, skills, and character traits over their appearance. "I'm so proud of how kind you were to your friend today" or "Your creativity in solving that problem was impressive."

Parental support: A strong, supportive relationship with parents can buffer the effects of negative peer influence.

Parent tips:

- Learn about their hobbies, friends, and interests. Being present in their world demonstrates your care and builds trust.
- Gently inquire about their friendships to gain insight into their social dynamics: "What do you like most about your friends? How do they support you?"
- Teens are more likely to adopt healthy behaviors when they see their parents modeling them. Handle conflicts calmly, show kindness to others, and maintain healthy relationships.
- Show them that it's okay to make mistakes and learn from them: "I didn't handle that situation well, but here's what I learned for next time."
- Follow through on commitments to show reliability and respect for your child. If you promise to attend their event or discuss an issue later, ensure you do so.
- Clearly communicate family values and rules, while remaining open to discussion. "We value honesty in our family, and I trust you to make decisions that reflect that."

Success and recognition: Achieving personal goals and receiving praise from peers and adults can boost self-esteem.

Parent tips:

- Encourage your teen to set realistic and meaningful goals that align with their interests and abilities. Help them break big goals into smaller, manageable steps, such as completing a project, improving a skill, or joining a club.
- Acknowledge the hard work and determination they put into tasks, regardless of the outcome. "I'm so proud of how much effort you put into preparing for that presentation. Your dedication really shows."
- Recognize incremental achievements along the way, not just the final result.
- Avoid generic compliments and focus on specific behaviors or accomplishments: "The way you handled that group project showed great leadership and teamwork."
- Help your teen explore activities they're passionate about, whether it's sports, art, academics, or volunteering.
- Attend their performances, games, or exhibitions to demonstrate your support.
- Help your teen understand that setbacks are part of learning: "Everyone faces challenges, but what matters is how you keep going. I know you'll figure this out."
- Encourage them to reflect on what they can improve and try again: "What did you learn from this experience that you can use next time?"

Healthy friendships vs "fake friends"

By teaching children how to identify true friends and recognize the signs of fake friends, parents can help them develop stronger, healthier connections.

A true friend is someone who values, respects, and supports your teen for who they are. True friends create a positive impact on each other's lives and help one another learn and grow. Parents can use the following explanations to help teens understand what a true friend looks like:

- **Trustworthy and reliable:**

"A true friend keeps your secrets and doesn't spread gossip about you. If you tell them something personal, you can trust that it stays between you."

If your teen shares a personal problem, a true friend listens without judgment and offers support, rather than using it against them later.

- **Empathetic and supportive:**

"A good friend understands your feelings and is there for you when you're going through a tough time. They celebrate your successes and comfort you in your failures."

After failing an exam, a true friend encourages your teen by saying, "You'll do better next time. Let me help you study."

- **Mutual respect:**

"True friends respect your boundaries and accept your decisions, even if they don't always agree with you."

If your teen doesn't want to skip class, a real friend won't pressure them or make them feel guilty about their choice.

- **Encourages growth:**

"A good friend inspires you to be the best version of yourself. They don't hold you back or make you doubt your worth."

A friend notices your teen's talent in art and encourages them to join an art club or participate in a contest.

Fake friends often appear supportive initially but behave in ways that undermine trust, self-esteem, and well-being. Help teens recognize fake friends by discussing these behaviors and providing concrete examples:

- **Gossiping and betraying trust:**

"If someone shares your secrets or talks about you behind your back, they're not respecting your trust. A real friend doesn't spread rumors."

A classmate who acts friendly in person but tells others embarrassing things about your teen is a "fake" friend.

- **Only interested when it benefits them:**

"Fake friends are only around when they need something, like homework answers or a favor, but disappear when you need support."

A friend regularly asks for help with assignments but ignores your teen's messages when they want to hang out – that's a fake friend.

- **Manipulative or controlling:**

"If someone tries to control what you do or who you hang out with, that's not a healthy friendship. True friends respect your choices."

A friend tells you "If you don't come to this party, we're not friends anymore."

- Pressure to engage in harmful behaviors:

"Fake friends might pressure you to do things you're uncomfortable with, like lying, breaking rules, or hurting others."

A friend insists your teen join them in teasing another classmate, saying, "If you don't, you're no fun."

- Jealous or competitive:

"A fake friend might act jealous of your successes and try to bring you down instead of celebrating your achievements."

Instead of congratulating your teen for getting a high grade, the fake friend dismisses it by saying, "It's not a big deal."

How to deal with reluctant teens?

Teens can sometimes be reluctant to discuss their friendships, especially if they're dealing with peer pressure or conflicts. Here's how parents can approach the topic sensitively:

- Start with light, indirect questions to avoid making your teen feel pressured.

"How was your day? Did you and your friends do anything fun?"

"I noticed you were laughing on the phone earlier. That sounded like a fun conversation!"

- Let your teen know you're asking because you care, not because you want to intrude.

"I don't want to pry, but I'm always here if you want to share anything about your friends."

- Share stories about your own friendships during your teen years. This can help normalize their experiences and make them feel less defensive.

"When I was your age, I had a best friend who was always there for me. We sometimes argued, but I learned so much from that friendship. Do you feel like you have someone like that?"

- If your teen mentions a name or situation, follow up gently with open-ended questions.

"You've been hanging out with Alex a lot—what do you like most about your friendship?"

"It seems like your friends are really important to you. How do you support each other?"

- Use movies, shows, or stories in the news to discuss friendships indirectly.

"I saw this show where the main character had a hard time deciding if her friends were really supportive. Do you think friendships like that happen in real life?"

- If your teen seems upset after spending time with friends, gently bring it up.

"You seemed a bit quiet after hanging out with your friends earlier. Is everything okay?"

- If your teen resists talking about specific people, discuss broader friendship dynamics instead.

"What do you think makes a good friend?"

"Have you ever felt pressured by your friends to do something you didn't want to do? How did you handle it?"

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