Module 1. Understanding Bullying in Schools

This module explores the complex issue of bullying in educational settings, providing educators with knowledge. From defining different types of bullying to understanding its prevalence and impact, this document equips teachers with the tools to identify, intervene, and prevent bullying behaviors. Through evidence-based approaches, case studies, and reflection questions, we'll examine the roles of bullies, victims, and bystanders while dispelling common myths that hinder effective intervention.

What is Bullying?

Bullying in schools is a widespread issue affecting millions of students globally with profound and long-lasting effects. 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 repeated, or has the potential to be repeated, over time.

1 Aggression

An intent to cause harm to another student.

2 Repetition

The behavior occurs repeatedly over time, not just a one-time incident.

3 Power Imbalance

The aggressor holds more power, whether physical, social, or emotional.

These three key components, identified by pioneering researcher Olweus (1993), are essential for understanding and identifying true bullying situations versus isolated conflicts. Recognizing these elements helps educators distinguish bullying from other forms of peer conflict and develop appropriate interventions.

Types of Bullying: Physical and Verbal

Physical Bullying

Physical bullying involves harming a person's body or possessions. This includes hitting, kicking, pushing, or damaging belongings. According to UNESCO (2019), this form is more common among younger children but declines as students age.

- Repeatedly pushing a classmate into lockers
- Tripping students in hallways causing injury
- Group intimidation with shoving and taking belongings

Verbal Bullying

Verbal bullying uses words to hurt or demean someone through name-calling, taunting, threatening, or inappropriate comments. The WHO indicates this is one of the most prevalent forms in both primary and secondary schools.

- Calling students derogatory names affecting self-esteem
- Taunting peers about academic performance
- Making derogatory remarks about cultural background

Types of Bullying: Relational and Cyber

Relational (Social) Bullying

Relational bullying involves harming someone's reputation or relationships through spreading rumors, social exclusion, or public embarrassment. It tends to be more covert than physical or verbal bullying, making it harder to detect, and is more common among female students (Crothers & Levinson, 2004).

- Deliberate exclusion from social events
- Spreading false rumors damaging reputation
- Manipulating friendships to isolate victims

Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying occurs over digital devices through text messages, social media, or other online channels. The European Union's Joint Research Centre (2020) reports that over 20% of students globally have experienced it, with its prevalence rising due to increased digital connectivity.

- Threatening messages or embarrassing photos shared online
- Creating fake profiles to impersonate and humiliate
- Sending harassing messages with threats of violence

Global Prevalence of Bullying

Worldwide Impact

Bullying affects students in nearly every country worldwide, with varying rates across regions. According to UNESCO's comprehensive report analyzing data from 144 countries, approximately 1 in 3 students globally has experienced some form of bullying.

European Studies

The **2021/2022 HBSC survey** found around 11% of European adolescents reported being bullied at least two or three times a month, with rates varying from as low as 2% to over 30% depending on the region. **Cyberbullying** has emerged as a critical issue, with the EU's Joint Research Centre finding over 20% of students have been victims at least once.

Macedonia Statistics

In **Macedonia**, registered cases of peer violence in schools have increased dramatically from 27 in 2021 to 102 in 2023, with the rise most notable in secondary schools and regions like Skopje and Tetovo. Between 2012 and mid-2023, the Ministry recorded 1,189 total incidents, peaking in 2013, dipping during COVID years, and rising again through 2023.

Socioeconomic Factors

Socioeconomic factors also influence bullying prevalence. Students from low-affluence families are generally more likely to be bullied than peers from higher-affluence backgrounds, though bullying behaviors are not confined to any single socioeconomic group.

Understanding the Roles in Bullying

The Bully

The person initiating the harmful behavior, often seeking to establish power or dominance over others. Bullies consistently target victims through verbal, physical, or social aggression, reinforcing their perceived power through public humiliation.

The Victim

The individual receiving the bullying behavior. Victims often feel powerless, isolated, and afraid to report incidents for fear of retaliation or being labeled a "snitch." The ongoing harassment affects their social life and academic performance.

The Bystanders

Those who witness bullying incidents but may not intervene. Bystanders can be passive (staying silent), reinforcing (laughing or encouraging), or active (standing up for the victim and reporting the incident).

The role of bystanders is critical because their reaction can either discourage or empower the bully.

Active bystanders who intervene can help de-escalate situations and provide crucial support to victims, while passive or reinforcing bystanders may inadvertently contribute to the problem.

Stop Bullying

Effects of Bullying on Victims

Short-Term Effects

- Anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem
- Psychosomatic problems (headaches, sleep disturbances, stomachaches)
- Academic struggles, concentration difficulties, and school absences
- Social withdrawal and isolation from peers

According to Gini and Pozzoli (2009), victims report increased levels of psychosomatic problems that develop quickly after bullying begins and interfere with daily functioning.

Long-Term Effects

- Increased risk of anxiety disorders, depression, and suicidal thoughts
- Difficulties in social adjustment and forming relationships
- Persistent low self-esteem and trust issues
- Higher likelihood of academic underachievement

Copeland et al. (2013) found that individuals bullied in childhood had higher rates of anxiety, depression, and suicidal tendencies in adulthood.

Effects on Bullies and Bystanders

Effects on Bullies

- Short-term: Aggressive behaviors, antisocial tendencies, temporary social status boost
- Long-term: Higher risk of delinquency and criminal behavior (Ttofi et al., 2011)
- Challenges in personal relationships and employment stability (Farrington et al., 1998)
- Potential for depression and substance abuse later in life

Effects on Bystanders

- Feelings of guilt, anxiety, and helplessness
- Fear of becoming the next target
- Higher risk of stress and anxiety symptoms (Rivers et al., 2009)
- Potential desensitization to violence and aggression over time
- Reduced likelihood to intervene in future wrongdoing

Research shows that the negative effects of bullying extend beyond just the victim.

Bullies may face significant challenges in adulthood, while bystanders can experience psychological distress from witnessing bullying incidents.
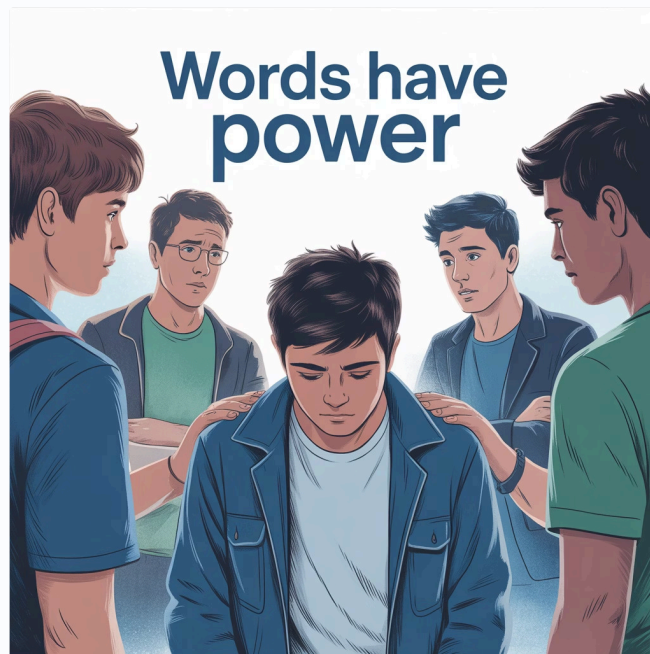
Common Myths About Bullying

"Bullying is a natural part of growing up"

Reality: There is nothing "natural" about bullying. According to the American Psychological Association and UNESCO (2020), bullying can result in long-term emotional, psychological, and academic difficulties. Viewing it as "normal" diminishes victims' experiences and discourages intervention.

"Words will never hurt you"

Reality: Verbal bullying can leave deep emotional scars. Research shows it can lead to long-term psychological consequences, including reduced self-esteem and increased risk for mental health disorders like anxiety and depression.

"Bullying makes children tougher"

Reality: Bullying does not build resilience; it destroys confidence and self-worth. Victims frequently report increased feelings of anxiety, fear, and vulnerability, which lower their confidence and ability to cope in social situations (Psy-ed, 2023).

Misconception

- "Telling a teacher is tattling"
- "It's only teasing"
- "Bullying is easy to recognize"
- "Children who are bullied will always tell an adult"

Reality

- There's a crucial difference between tattling (to get someone in trouble) and telling (to protect someone from harm)
- Teasing becomes bullying when it's repetitive, malicious, and intended to hurt
- Many forms of bullying, especially relational, are covert and difficult to identify
- Only about 33% of bullied students report it to adults, often fearing retaliation

"Boys bully, girls don't"

Reality: Girls bully too, but often engage in different types like relational aggression rather than physical violence. This misconception underestimates the prevalence and harm of bullying among girls.

"Cyberbullying is less harmful than face-to-face bullying"

Reality: Cyberbullying can be even more damaging as it occurs 24/7, follows victims home, and harmful content can be shared widely and quickly, leaving victims feeling constantly vulnerable.

"Ignoring bullying will make it go away"

Reality: Ignoring bullying usually makes it worse. When not addressed, it can escalate with more severe consequences. Silence often enables bullies by suggesting their actions are acceptable.

Teacher's Role in Identifying Bullying

Teachers play a crucial role in preventing, identifying, and intervening in bullying situations. The first step is accurate identification of all forms of bullying, from obvious physical aggression to more subtle relational or cyberbullying.

Physical Bullying Indicators

- Visible injuries or unexplained bruises
- Damaged or missing personal belongings
- Students exhibiting fear of particular peers
- Reluctance to participate in physical activities

Verbal Bullying Indicators

- Changes in mood after verbal exchanges
- Overhearing repeated insults or name-calling
- Students becoming withdrawn after interactions
- Reluctance to speak up in class

Relational Bullying Indicators

- Social exclusion during group activities
- Avoidance of particular social circles
- Spreading of rumors about specific students
- Sudden loss of friendships

Cyberbullying Indicators

- Increased emotional distress after using devices
- Reluctance to use digital devices or social media
- Anxiety when receiving notifications
- Withdrawal from online activities

Nurturing growth, inspiring futures

Teacher's Role in Intervention

Studies indicate that the most successful interventions are immediate, direct, and aimed at stopping the bullying behavior while supporting the victim. Teachers must take decisive action when bullying occurs.

Immediate Intervention

Issue clear, firm reprimands when bullying occurs, specifying the behavior and its violation of school policy.

Example: "This behavior is against our school rules, and it must stop immediately."

Support the Victim

Provide emotional support by listening, acknowledging feelings, and ensuring the situation will be addressed. Establish daily or weekly check-ins to help the victim feel safe and supported.

Documentation

Maintain a "bully book" or incident log noting the type of bullying, students involved, and steps taken. Complete a bullying situation report after every incident and share with school counselors and principals.

Engage Bystanders

Reinforce positive behavior in those who stood up against bullying. For passive bystanders, explain how they could have acted differently, helping them understand their role in prevention.

Collaborate with Parents

Schedule meetings with parents of both victims and bullies. Share intervention plans, discuss implementation at home, and offer resources like counseling services and support groups.

Increased supervision in bullying hotspots such as hallways, cafeterias, or playgrounds can prevent further incidents.

Documentation is critical for identifying patterns of behavior and escalating issues when necessary.

Case Study: Maria's Experience

The Bullying Situation

Maria, a once outgoing 15-year-old, became the target of cyberbullying and verbal harassment in high school. What began as minor teasing escalated when classmates created anonymous social media accounts to mock her publicly, posting edited photos with hurtful captions and spreading false rumors. In school, the same group verbally harassed her during breaks, calling her names like "loser" and "ugly" in front of others.

Consequences for Maria

Maria developed anxiety about school, her grades dropped, and she withdrew from activities she once enjoyed. Her self-esteem plummeted, she became isolated, and had difficulty sleeping. She even began questioning her worth and had fleeting thoughts of self-harm.

School's Intervention

The school implemented a two-pronged approach:

- Classroom discussions on bullying as part of a broader social-emotional learning program
- A peer mediation program where students were trained to mediate conflicts

Over time, these efforts showed results. Maria's classmates became more aware of their actions' consequences, and some apologized. The school also implemented stricter policies around social media use and immediately addressed online harassment.

Reflection Questions

Case Study Reflections

- What signs of bullying did Maria exhibit, and how can teachers identify similar signs in students who might not report being bullied?
- How effective was the school's intervention? What other approaches might have helped?
- How can schools build environments where students feel safe reporting bullying incidents?
- What long-term support might Maria need even after the bullying stopped?