

# Module 2. Developmental Characteristics of Adolescents and Identifying Bullying Behaviors

This module explores the complex relationship between adolescent development and bullying behaviors in high school settings. Designed for educators, it provides insights into the psychological, emotional, and social development of teenagers and how these factors influence bullying dynamics. The document equips teachers with practical skills to recognize both obvious and subtle signs of bullying, understand the psychological profiles of victims and aggressors, and implement effective intervention strategies.



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# Developmental Characteristics of Adolescents and Their Relationship with Bullying

Adolescence represents a critical developmental period characterized by significant changes in brain development, cognitive functioning, and social dynamics.

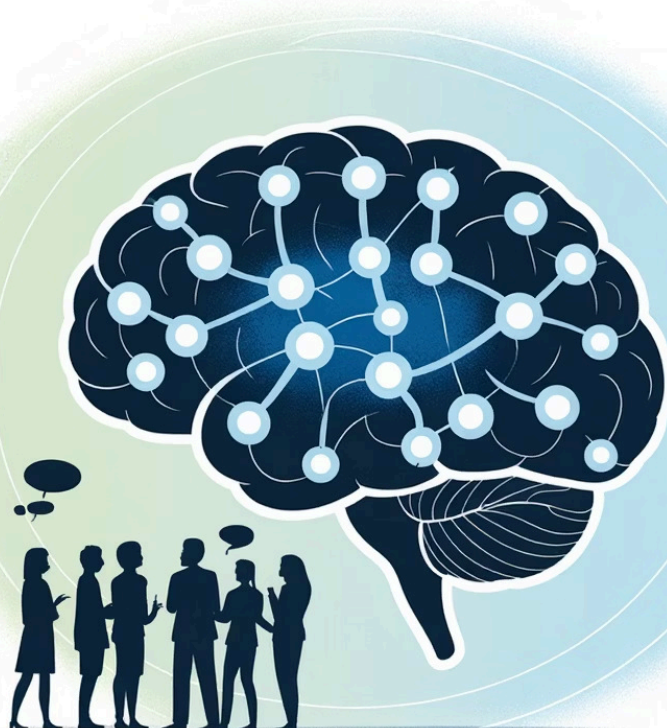
These transformations profoundly influence how teenagers perceive themselves and others, while simultaneously affecting their behavioral tendencies, including vulnerability to bullying and propensity to bully others.

Understanding these developmental factors provides educators with valuable insights into the causes and symptoms of bullying, enabling more effective intervention.

## Cognitive Development

Adolescents experience enhanced cognitive abilities, including improved critical thinking, emotion regulation, and problem-solving skills. The ongoing development of the prefrontal cortex, responsible for decision-making and impulse control, contributes to these advances. However, these abilities remain incomplete, making teenagers more susceptible to impulsive behaviors, especially among peers (Crone & Dahl, 2012).

As adolescents seek to establish their identity, peer influence becomes crucial in shaping self-perception. Social comparison and the need for peer approval can trigger aggressive behavior or feelings of inadequacy, both of which may precede bullying behaviors. According to Erikson's theory, failure to develop a sense of self can result in role confusion, potentially manifesting as aggression toward others (Erikson, 1968).



# Developmental Characteristics of Adolescents and Their Relationship with Bullying (Continued)

## Emotional Development and Regulation

The adolescent brain experiences heightened emotional reactivity due to changes in the limbic system. Research indicates that poor emotional regulation correlates with increased likelihood of becoming either a bully or victim (Garner, 2017). Teenagers struggling to control their emotions are more prone to impulsive behaviors, including aggression and bullying (Murray-Close et al., 2007).

This period is characterized by increased sensitivity to both positive and negative stimuli, resulting in emotional volatility. As adolescents navigate this complex emotional landscape, they become more vulnerable to feelings of rejection and social exclusion, which can intensify peer conflicts (Steinberg, 2014). These factors help explain why bullied adolescents often experience higher rates of anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal.

## Social Development

During adolescence, social belonging becomes paramount, with peer groups exerting strong influence over behavior. Popularity and social status emerge as sources of power, potentially leading to bullying behaviors as some teenagers attempt to assert dominance or maintain their position within social hierarchies (Bukowski & Sippola, 2001; Crone & Steinbeis, 2017).

Adolescents commonly form cliques, and those who are marginalized or perceived as different may become bullying targets (Espelage & Swearer, 2003). Popular students sometimes use bullying to maintain social dominance, while those from marginalized groups face higher risk of victimization. Social dynamics like exclusion, rumor-spreading, and public humiliation represent common tactics in relational bullying, which often remains invisible to adults due to its operation under implicit social codes.

# Differences Between Normal Teen Conflicts and Bullying

While conflict represents a natural component of adolescent social interactions, educators must distinguish between normal disagreements and bullying behaviors to respond appropriately.

## Normal Conflicts

- Equal power between parties with relatively balanced social or emotional standing
- Spontaneous incidents rather than established patterns of behavior
- No deliberate intent to harm; conflicts arise from disagreements or misunderstandings
- Resolution possible through communication, negotiation, and compromise

**Example:** Lisa and Maria are close friends who disagree about which after-school activity to join. They argue about which activity is better and become temporarily upset with each other. After cooling down, they decide to pursue their separate interests while maintaining their friendship. This conflict involves equal power, situational disagreement, and can be resolved through communication without lasting harm.

## Bullying Behaviors

- Clear imbalance of power (social, emotional, or physical)
- Deliberate intent to cause emotional, physical, or social harm
- Repeated pattern of behavior rather than isolated incidents
- Victim feels powerless to resolve the situation; aggressor shows no interest in resolution

**Example:** Alex repeatedly spreads false rumors about Ben, claiming he cheats on exams. This causes Ben to become socially isolated, with classmates refusing to work with him or sit with him at lunch. Despite Ben's attempts to clear his name, Alex continues spreading rumors, causing ongoing distress and exclusion. This represents bullying due to the deliberate, repeated action with intent to harm, clear power imbalance, and persistent behavior causing emotional damage.

## Teacher Responses to Different Situations



### For Normal Conflicts

- Encourage open communication and active listening between students
- Teach conflict resolution skills including negotiation and compromise
- Mediate discussions to ensure both parties feel heard
- Promote empathy by helping students understand different perspectives



### For Bullying Situations

- Intervene immediately to stop the bullying and separate involved individuals
- Address power imbalances by supporting victims and enforcing consequences
- Monitor the situation over time to prevent recurrence
- Involve parents, counselors, and administrators when necessary

# Classroom Activity: Identifying Bullying Scenarios

The following scenarios provide practical examples to help educators distinguish between normal conflicts and bullying situations. For each scenario, consider the key characteristics that define the interaction and appropriate teacher responses.



## Scenario 1: Normal Conflict

Emma and Jake both want the leadership role in a group project. They have different ideas about project structure and argue heatedly, with both raising their voices. The disagreement focuses on the task itself. When the teacher intervenes, they help the students find a compromise where Emma handles research while Jake coordinates the presentation. Afterward, both students return to collaborative work without lingering tension.

**Key indicators:** Equal power dynamic, task-centered disagreement, one-time incident, resolution achieved through compromise.

**Teacher action:** Mediate the discussion, help students find a compromise that leverages both students' strengths, and monitor to ensure the resolution holds.



## Scenario 2: Bullying Situation

During recess, Sam repeatedly calls James derogatory names like "loser" and "weakling" in front of classmates. Sam mocks James's appearance and athletic abilities almost daily. James initially tries to ignore the comments but becomes increasingly withdrawn and eventually stops participating in recess activities. He begins avoiding recess entirely by staying in the classroom or feigning illness. Sam continues the harassment without remorse, leaving James feeling humiliated and powerless.

**Key indicators:** Power imbalance, intent to harm, repeated behavior, victim's increasing distress, no resolution.

**Teacher action:** Intervene immediately, separate the students, provide support to James, implement consequences for Sam, monitor the situation closely, and involve counselors and parents.



## Scenario 3: Normal Conflict

During math class, Sarah and Lucas disagree on the solution to a problem. Both are confident in their methods and insist they're correct. The disagreement escalates into a brief shouting match that disrupts the lesson. After class, both students realize they overreacted, apologize to each other, and resolve the matter with no lingering resentment between them.

**Key indicators:** Equal power dynamic, academic disagreement, one-time incident, mutual recognition of overreaction, resolution through apology.

**Teacher action:** Address the classroom disruption, facilitate post-class reflection, acknowledge their maturity in resolving the conflict, and use the incident as a teaching moment about constructive disagreement.



# The Role of Gender and Stereotypes in Bullying Behavior

Bullying behavior frequently reflects and reinforces societal gender norms and expectations. Boys and girls often engage in different forms of bullying based on cultural stereotypes about masculinity and femininity, which influences both the expression of bullying behaviors and how these behaviors are perceived and addressed by adults.

## Boys and Physical Bullying

Boys are more likely to engage in physical bullying, such as hitting, pushing, or other forms of overt 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 mocking his physical appearance. The aggressive behavior is meant to display dominance in front of peers.

Boys are often socialized to be tough and competitive, which can lead to more overt forms of aggression. Those who don't conform to masculine norms, such as boys perceived as weaker or more emotional, may face increased vulnerability to bullying (Espelage & Swearer, 2003).

**Impact on victims:** Boys who experience bullying may struggle to seek help due to fear of being perceived as weak or unmanly. This reluctance can lead to internalized emotional distress and elevated risk of depression.

## Girls and Relational Bullying

Girls more frequently engage in relational bullying, which involves manipulating social relationships to harm others. This form of bullying includes 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 social ostracism. The goal is to isolate the target without direct physical aggression.

Girls often participate in more covert forms of bullying, such as gossiping or exclusion, which align with societal expectations of girls being less physically aggressive. These behaviors can be equally damaging as physical bullying but are typically harder to detect (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995).

**Impact on victims:** Victims of relational bullying frequently experience long-term emotional distress, including anxiety and depression. Because relational bullying is less visible, victims often feel isolated and unsupported.

Gender stereotypes shape how boys and girls express aggression and respond to bullying. These stereotypes also influence how bullying is perceived by others, including teachers and parents. Physical bullying by boys may be viewed as more serious or concerning, while relational bullying by girls might be dismissed as typical "drama," despite its significant harmful effects.

# Breaking Down Gender Stereotypes in Bullying – Strategies for Teachers



## Encourage Empathy and Emotional Expression

Teaching both boys and girls to express their emotions in healthy ways can reduce aggressive behaviors caused by frustration or unmet emotional needs. By normalizing emotional expression across genders, teachers can help break down stereotypes that contribute to bullying.

### **Classroom Activity: Emotion Charades**

Students act out various emotions (anger, sadness, excitement, frustration) in small groups without using words. After guessing the emotions, students discuss how emotions feel and how they can be expressed constructively. The activity emphasizes how empathy helps prevent conflict and bullying by understanding others' emotions.



## Recognize All Forms of Bullying

Teach students to recognize that bullying takes many forms, including physical, verbal, relational aggression, and cyberbullying, emphasizing that all forms are harmful regardless of which gender typically engages in them.

### **Classroom Activity: The Bullying Reflection Exercise**

Students anonymously write about bullying experiences they witnessed or experienced, focusing on feelings and bullying type. The teacher reads selected examples, categorizing them into physical, verbal, relational, and cyberbullying. Students reflect on how different forms can be equally hurtful and discuss strategies for addressing all types of bullying.



## Challenge Gender Stereotypes

Actively challenge stereotypes that promote aggressive behaviors in boys or encourage passive-aggressive behaviors in girls. Help students recognize how these stereotypes limit their expression and can lead to harmful behaviors.

### **Classroom Activity: Role Reversals**

Students brainstorm common gender stereotypes, then divide into groups to examine negative effects of stereotypes on boys (e.g., "Boys don't cry") and girls (e.g., "Girls should be quiet"). Students role-play scenarios breaking these stereotypes, such as boys expressing vulnerability or girls assertively standing up for themselves. Follow with discussion on how stereotypes influence bullying and how they can be challenged.



## Promote Peer Support

Encourage students to act as proactive bystanders by standing up for peers who are being bullied, regardless of gender. Create systems where students feel empowered to support each other.

### **Classroom Activity: Stand Up, Speak Out**

Create a peer support program where students learn to recognize bullying behaviors and safely intervene. Students role-play bullying scenarios and practice different intervention methods (confronting bullies, reporting incidents, supporting victims). Debrief with discussion on effective approaches and building a supportive school community. Encourage students to share experiences of standing up for others.

# Socio-Cultural Aspects and Bullying

Cultural factors, including ethnic diversity, societal values, and historical context, significantly influence bullying behaviors.

## Ethnic Diversity and Bullying

Ethnic diversity in schools influences bullying behavior in complex ways. In ethnically diverse classrooms, bullying may either increase due to intergroup conflict or decrease as students learn to interact with people from different backgrounds. Basilici et al. (2022) found that in North America, ethnic diversity often served as a protective factor against bullying by reducing power imbalances that fuel such behaviors.

However, in Europe, where immigrant status more closely correlates with ethnicity, ethnic diversity more frequently emerged as a risk factor for bullying, especially among younger students. Ethnic bullying specifically targets individuals based on their ethnic or cultural background, potentially involving racial slurs, exclusion, or other discriminatory behaviors. This form of bullying profoundly impacts victims' mental health and sense of identity.

## Educational Systems and Bullying

Differences in education systems contribute significantly to bullying prevalence. Countries with more hierarchical school structures or less supervision during breaks often report higher bullying rates. Akiba et al. (2002) discovered that education systems creating substantial achievement gaps between students frequently experience higher bullying incidence.

These findings highlight how institutional structures can either mitigate or exacerbate bullying behaviors. Educational approaches that emphasize cooperation rather than competition, provide adequate supervision, and actively promote inclusive environments tend to experience lower bullying rates.





# Strategies for Addressing Socio-Cultural Aspects Related to Bullying

## Foster Inclusive Classroom Environments

Teachers can prevent ethnic bullying by creating classroom cultures that celebrate diversity. This includes encouraging students to learn about each other's cultural backgrounds and actively promoting respect for differences. Activities that facilitate cultural exchange and open discussions about diversity help reduce prejudice and build empathy among students.

**Example Activity:** Organize a "Cultural Day" where students present aspects of their cultural heritage, including food, music, traditions, and customs. This interactive experience helps students appreciate diversity and reduces the likelihood of bullying based on cultural differences. The event can include displays, performances, and opportunities for students to share personal stories about their cultural identities.

By normalizing cultural differences and highlighting the value of diverse perspectives, teachers create environments where ethnic bullying becomes less socially acceptable. This approach addresses the root causes of ethnic bullying by challenging stereotypes and building cross-cultural understanding.

## Train Students to Recognize and Report Ethnic-Based Harassment

Effective anti-bullying programs must specifically address ethnic bullying by teaching students to recognize discriminatory behavior and establishing clear reporting mechanisms. When students understand what constitutes ethnic bullying and know how to report it, they become active participants in creating safer school environments.

### Example Activity: United Against Hate

- **Objective:** Help students understand ethnic bullying and empower them to recognize and report it safely
- **Process:** Explain that ethnic bullying targets someone based on ethnicity, nationality, or cultural background
- **Activity:** Groups analyze scenario cards depicting both ethnic and general bullying, identifying bullying types and appropriate responses
- **Discussion:** Groups share their analyses, focusing on why addressing ethnic bullying matters and how to create inclusive environments

This activity helps students distinguish between different forms of bullying while emphasizing the particular harm caused by ethnic-based harassment. By practicing identification and response strategies, students develop the skills needed to intervene effectively when they witness ethnic bullying.

# Connect Families with Socio-Economic Support Systems

Socio-economic factors often intersect with ethnic and cultural backgrounds to create additional vulnerabilities to bullying. Teachers can play a crucial role in identifying when families might benefit from local or national support programs and guiding them toward appropriate resources. This holistic approach recognizes that addressing bullying sometimes requires addressing underlying socio-economic challenges.

## Identify Needs

Observe students for signs that may indicate socio-economic challenges, such as consistent hunger, inadequate clothing, or inability to participate in school activities due to financial constraints.

## Approach With Sensitivity

When connecting with families, communicate with empathy and respect, focusing on available resources rather than perceived deficiencies. Maintain confidentiality throughout the process.

## Research Available Resources

Maintain an updated database of community resources, including food assistance programs, healthcare services, housing support, and educational subsidies that families might qualify for.

## Facilitate Connections

Help families navigate application processes, provide necessary documentation from the school when appropriate, and follow up to ensure they successfully accessed needed services.

# Recognizing Signs of Bullying: Visible and Subtle Indicators

## Emotional Signs in Victims

- Sudden mood changes or emotional volatility
- Increased anxiety, particularly before school or social events
- Expressions of sadness, hopelessness, or worthlessness
- Loss of interest in previously enjoyed activities
- Unexplained anger or irritability

## Behavioral Signs in Aggressors

- Increased aggression or dominance toward peers
- Need for control in social situations
- Lack of empathy for others' feelings
- Blaming victims for provoking them
- History of disciplinary problems



## Social Signs in Victims

- Sudden loss of friends or avoidance of social situations
- Reluctance to participate in group activities
- Isolation during lunch or free periods
- Seeking adult company instead of peer interaction
- Being excluded or rejected by peers

## Academic Signs in Victims

- Declining grades or academic performance
- Decreased participation in class discussions
- Difficulty concentrating during lessons
- Increased absenteeism or tardiness
- Avoidance of specific classes or activities

# Physical and Material Signs

## Physical Indicators

- Unexplained injuries, bruises, or scratches
- Torn, damaged, or missing belongings
- Frequent complaints of headaches, stomachaches, or other physical ailments
- Changes in eating habits (skipping meals or binge eating)
- Sleep disturbances, including nightmares or insomnia

## Subtle Material Signs

- Missing or damaged personal items or school supplies
- "Lost" lunch money or possessions
- Sudden requests for extra money without reasonable explanation
- Belongings repeatedly "misplaced" or "forgotten"
- Reluctance to bring valuable items to school

## Classroom Dynamics That May Indicate Bullying

Beyond individual signs, certain classroom dynamics can signal that bullying is occurring:

- **Power imbalances:** Consistent dominance of certain students over others in social interactions
- **Laughter at inappropriate times:** Students laughing when another student speaks or participates
- **Exclusionary behaviors:** Students consistently left out of group activities or seated alone
- **Tension between specific students:** Visible discomfort when certain students interact
- **Sudden changes in social groupings:** Previously friendly students suddenly avoiding each other

Teachers should be particularly attentive to these signs in students who may be more vulnerable to bullying, including those who are perceived as different due to appearance, abilities, socioeconomic status, or cultural background. Early recognition of these indicators allows for timely intervention before the bullying escalates and causes more significant harm.



# Implementing Effective Bullying Prevention and Intervention Strategies





# Evidence-Based Prevention Strategies

## Develop Clear Anti-Bullying Policies

Establish comprehensive policies that clearly define all forms of bullying, outline reporting procedures, and specify consequences.

These policies should be developed with input from students, staff, and parents to ensure broad buy-in and should be regularly communicated to the entire school community.

## Build Social-Emotional Skills

Integrate social-emotional learning into the curriculum to help students develop empathy, emotional regulation, conflict resolution, and healthy relationship skills.

These foundational competencies reduce bullying by addressing the underlying social and emotional factors that contribute to aggressive behaviors.

## Create Inclusive Environments

Actively promote respect for diversity by celebrating differences, challenging stereotypes, and ensuring all students feel valued.

Inclusive classrooms reduce the power imbalances that often fuel bullying and help students develop appreciation for diverse perspectives and experiences.

## Empower Bystanders

Train students to recognize bullying and intervene safely when they witness it.

Research shows that peer intervention is highly effective in stopping bullying episodes, so equipping students with specific strategies for supporting victims can significantly reduce bullying incidents.

# Effective Intervention Approaches

3-5

Minutes

The critical window for effective intervention when bullying is observed. Immediate response prevents escalation and sends a clear message that bullying is unacceptable.

57%

Reduction

The average decrease in bullying incidents when schools implement comprehensive prevention programs that address multiple levels of the school environment.

2x

More Effective

Interventions that address both victims and aggressors are twice as effective as those focusing solely on punishing aggressors or protecting victims.