

Addressing the Mental Health Impacts of Bullying and Cyberbullying: Strategies and Resources for K-12 Schools



Bullying and cyberbullying are significant and widespread issues in kindergarten through grade 12 (K-12) schools across the United States. Bullying harms all youth involved including those who are bullied, those who bully others, and bystanders who witness bullying. [Negative impacts](#) can include physical, psychological, social, or educational harm, as well as increased risks of substance use, violence, and suicide.

Common types of bullying include:

- Physical such as hitting, kicking, and tripping.
- Verbal such as name-calling and teasing.
- Relational or social such as spreading rumors and leaving someone out of the group.

Bullying can also occur through technology, called cyberbullying.

Impacts of Bullying and Cyberbullying on Student Mental Health

<p>Students who are bullied are more likely to:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feel depressed, anxious, or hopeless • Experience low self-esteem • Engage in substance use • Lose interest in activities • Miss, skip, or drop out of school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experience somatic responses such as stomach pain or difficulty sleeping • Develop a decreased sense of belonging at school • Have suicidal thoughts or behaviors
<p>Students who bully others are more likely to:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feel depressed, anxious, or lonely • Engage in substance use 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have suicidal thoughts or behaviors • Engage in violent and risky behaviors
<p>Bystanders to bullying are more likely to:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feel depressed or anxious • Have feelings of helplessness and fear 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage in substance use

The severity of negative outcomes on student mental health increases as the frequency and intensity of the bullying increases, and there is a compounding effect of these impacts over time. For example, substance use, an impact seen among all students involved with bullying, can put youth at an elevated risk of suicidal behaviors. When a student does not feel safe at school because of bullying, they might isolate or engage in destructive or violent behaviors. Children who bully others and children who are bullied are also more likely to experience depression, anxiety, and thoughts of suicide into adulthood.

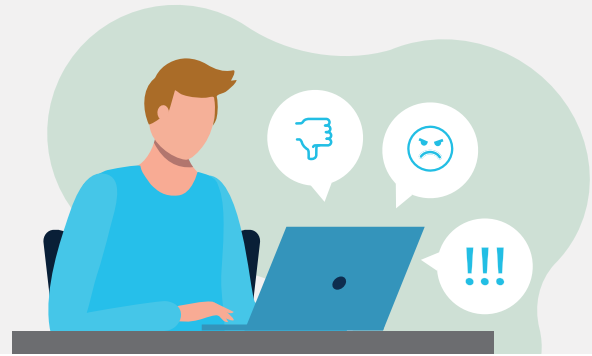
Effects of Cyberbullying

Youth spend more time online than ever before, increasing the likelihood that they may be exposed to cyberbullying. [Some research](#) suggests that the impacts of cyberbullying, such as suicidal behavior, depression, and low self-esteem, may be more detrimental than traditional bullying. Because technology allows students to communicate 24 hours a day, the effects of cyberbullying can be persistent, and those experiencing cyberbullying may find it hard to get relief. The anonymity of the internet can also make the student being bullied feel more defenseless, and the permanence and public nature of online content can compound and lengthen the detrimental effects of cyberbullying.



What K-12 School Communities Can Do

K-12 school communities can take a range of actions to prevent and address bullying and cyberbullying. A multi-faceted and community-based school program that includes strategies to support student mental health can also help mitigate the impacts of bullying behavior and bolster bullying prevention-related activities.



Preventing Bullying and Cyberbullying



Establish and communicate school rules and policies for how students should treat each other and ensure all members of the school community understand the consequences for when these expectations are not met. School staff can respond more effectively to incidents of bullying or cyberbullying when they can point to established behavior guidelines. These can include formal bullying prevention policies or the integration of anti-bullying strategies or behaviors into other types of documents, such as a code of conduct, a student bill of rights, or a school mission statement.



Create environments that foster safety and positive interaction at school. Consider how elements of the school building and classroom routines can affect student interactions, and actively monitor areas where bullying is more likely to occur, such as bathrooms, playgrounds, and cafeterias. Provide opportunities for active student participation and family engagement, and encourage school staff to model behaviors for treating people with kindness and respect to give students a positive example of how to interact with others. Consistent routines at school, such as daily greetings or class meetings, can also help foster a sense of safety and belonging among students.



Educate staff, students, and families about how they can prevent bullying and cyberbullying by identifying the warning signs and taking the appropriate actions. Provide an overview of the school's bullying prevention policies in required learning opportunities for staff. Incorporate lessons or activities about bullying and cyberbullying into school curricula and include strategies to help students know how to stand up to bullying, stay safe, and help others who have been bullied online or in person. Peers can show support for a student experiencing cyberbullying by posting positive comments about the student to shift the conversation in a positive direction.



Encourage and enable students to report bullying or cyberbullying concerns. This can be to a trusted adult or through a more formalized mechanism such as an anonymous reporting system. Help students and other members of the school community understand the process for following up on reports of bullying so that they know these tips are taken seriously.

Preventing Cyberbullying in K-12 Schools

Because cyberbullying takes place over devices or in digital spaces, it can be harder for parents, caregivers, and teachers to identify or address the behavior. Recognizing the [warning signs of cyberbullying](#), such as sudden changes in social and digital behavior or shifts in classroom dynamics, can be especially critical. Teachers can also help prevent cyberbullying by reinforcing and rewarding positive behavior toward others, increasing their own digital awareness, and developing activities that encourage self-regulation, awareness, and empathy.



Supporting Student Mental Health



Provide a safe, reassuring space for students to talk to a trusted adult. Model calm, respectful behavior when intervening and talk to the students involved separately. Listen without blaming the student(s) and assure them that bullying is not their fault. Focus on the child and show them you want to help; this can help students feel heard, acknowledged, and supported.



Involve affected students and families in developing a plan for responding to the situation. Ask the child being bullied what can be done to make him/her feel safe at school. Support may look different for different students, and what works for one student or situation may not work for another. Help students build confidence in standing up to bullying by leading them in a role-play activity to understand how to react if they experience bullying again.



Connect students with mental health services in the school or community. It may be hard for a student to talk about bullying, and a school counselor or mental health professional may be helpful in leading that discussion. [Comprehensive school-based mental health systems](#) collaborate with health professionals in the community to help meet the needs of students, including those that may benefit from more specialized or targeted mental health support.



Institute everyday practices in the school environment that support student mental health. Dedicated spaces and techniques, especially in the classroom, can help students de-escalate safely from intense emotions or situations. Ensure students have direct access to trusted adults, such as a school counselor, who can help during a mental health crisis.

Resources

SchoolSafety.gov provides a range of resources to prevent and address bullying and cyberbullying and promote student mental health.

Bullying and Cyberbullying Resources

✔ [About Bullying](#)

This website provides information on what bullying is, facts and statistics related to bullying, and prevention strategies and resources for schools.

✔ [Bullying and Cyberbullying: Literature Review](#)

The review summarizes research related to the scope of bullying in the United States; different types of bullying; predictors, risk factors, protective factors, and consequences of bullying; and interventions focused on prevention and/or reduction.

✔ [Bullying Prevention and Preparedness Modelling](#)

This recorded webinar shares upstream practices to reduce instances of bullying, best practices for involving school staff and broaching conversations with students, and examples of bullying responses and ways to act on anonymous reporting system tips.

✔ [Creating a Safe and Respectful Environment in Our Nation's Classrooms](#)

This training is designed to support classroom teachers and other school staff to reduce instances of bullying behavior and create a classroom environment in which bullying is less likely to occur.

✔ [How to Prevent Cyberbullying: A Guide for Parents, Caregivers, and Youth](#)

This guide helps parents, caregivers, and youth learn ways to identify, prevent, and address cyberbullying.

✔ [Improving School Safety Through Bystander Reporting: A Toolkit for Strengthening K-12 Reporting Programs](#)

This toolkit offers simple strategies and guidance K-12 schools and school districts can use to implement and enhance safety reporting programs and encourage bystander reporting among students.

✔ [StopBullying.gov](#)

This interagency website provides information on what bullying is, what cyberbullying is, who is at risk, and how schools and individuals can prevent and respond to bullying.

✔ [Tips for Teachers](#)

This resource can help teachers, school personnel, and staff identify warning signs a child is being cyberbullied or is cyberbullying, as well as strategies to prevent and address cyberbullying.



Student Mental Health Resources

✔ [988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline](#)

This program offers 24/7 call, text, and chat access to trained crisis counselors who can help people experiencing a suicidal, substance use, and/or mental health crisis, or any other kind of emotional distress. The corresponding webpage provides additional resources and information for strengthening suicide prevention and mental health crisis services.

✔ [Advancing Comprehensive School Mental Health Systems: Guidance from the Field](#)

This resource synthesizes the knowledge and guidance of experts to assist K-12 communities in developing high-quality, comprehensive school mental health systems to support students.

✔ [How to Talk About Mental Health: For Educators](#)

This webpage provides general information for educators on student mental health, including what to look for in student behavior and ways to support students and their families.

✔ [School and Campus Health](#)

This webpage provides information and resources to assist efforts to promote mental health and substance use prevention in schools and to provide safe learning environments.

✔ [School Health Assessment and Performance Evaluation System](#)

This web-based platform offers schools, districts, states, and territories a workspace and targeted resources to support school mental health quality improvement.

✔ [Supporting Mental Health via Technology](#)

This information sheet highlights the value of focusing on mental health in schools and provides recommendations on the use of technology to promote mental health strategies and skills.



Learn more and find additional [bullying and cyberbullying](#) and [mental health](#) resources on [SchoolSafety.gov](#).

Sources: [About Bullying](#) | [Advancing Comprehensive School Mental Health Systems](#) | [Bullying and Trauma](#) | [Bullying, Cyberbullying and Mental Health: The Role of Student Connectedness as a School Protective Factor](#) | [Bullying in Children: Impact on Child Health](#) | [Bullying Prevention Guide and Resources](#) | [Child Trauma Toolkit for Educators](#) | [Effect of School Bullying on Students' Peer Cooperation: A Moderated Mediation Model](#) | [How to Prevent Bullying](#) | [Key Considerations for Bullying Prevention](#) | [Long-Term Effects of Bullying](#) | [Model School District Policy on Suicide Prevention: Model Language, Commentary, and Resources](#) | [Prevent Cyberbullying](#) | [Respond to Bullying](#) | [School Threat Assessment Toolkit](#) | [Set Policies & Rules](#) | [Support the Kids Involved](#) | [Trauma-Informed, Resilience Oriented Schools Toolkit](#) | [What is Cyberbullying](#) | [Witnessing Bullying at School: The Association between Being a Bystander and Anxiety and Depressive Symptoms](#)

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