SOCIAL BULLYING: Correlates, Consequences, and Prevention

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Bullying is considered one of the most prevalent and potentially damaging forms of school violence (Elinoff, Chafouleas, & Sassu, 2004). Each year, more than a quarter of middle and high school students are subjected to some form of bullying in their school environments (Neiman, 2011). Research has identified potentially harmful immediate and long-term consequences for bullying-involved youth and has linked bullying to the quality of school environments and to unsafe conditions for learning in schools (Copeland, Wolke, Angold, & Costello, 2013; DeVoe & Kaffenberger, 2005).

This *In Brief* focuses on social bullying, a form of emotionally aggressive bullying behavior. The brief includes discussion of how social bullying is defined, what distinguishes it from other types of aggression, how commonly it occurs in schools, and what factors contribute to social bullying involvement. The brief summarizes research findings concerning the impacts of social bullying on individual social development and adjustment and identifies implications for school learning environments. The last section describes school-based approaches for preventing and reducing social bullying.

What Is Social Bullying?

Bullying is generally defined as a form of unwanted, aggressive behavior among school-age children that involves a real or perceived power imbalance and that is repeated, or has the potential to be repeated, over time (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in press; http://www.stopbullying.gov).There are three broad forms of bullying, including physical, verbal, and social bullying.

Research and school-based prevention practices have generally focused on the more visible and widely recognized forms of physical and verbal bullying. However, as public understanding of youth bullying behavior continues to evolve, definitions have been expanded to recognize social bullying as an important form of youth aggression.

> **Social bullying,** sometimes referred to as relational bullying, involves hurting someone's reputation or relationships. Social bullying includes:
> - Leaving someone out on purpose
> - Telling other children not to be friends with someone
> - Spreading rumors about someone
> - Embarassing someone in public (http://www.stopbullying.gov)

Relational aggression, indirect aggression, and social aggression are terms used to describe different dimensions of social bullying. Although the terms convey subtle differences in meaning, they describe a set of closely related, often overlapping behaviors that share the effect of undermining social status and threatening feelings of support, security, and closeness in youth relationships.

Social bullying can occur within the context of large social groups as well as within small social networks, close friendships, or romantic relationships. It can involve *direct* social interactions or confrontations between a student who bullies and a student who is targeted as well as *indirect* acts that engage other members of the social group or network in the bullying interaction (see Exhibit 1).

Social bullying can be *proactive*, or used to achieve or maintain social position, gain attention, or alleviate boredom, or it can be *reactive*, or retaliatory, in nature, in response to a perceived threat or to feelings of anger, jealousy, or betrayal (Young, Boye, & Nelson, 2006). Understanding the range of social bullying behaviors and the different contexts that motivate students' actions can help to appropriately identify social bullying incidents and can inform strategies for how to effectively intervene (http://www.stopbullying.gov).

Exhibit 1. Examples of Direct and Indirect Forms of Social Bullying

Leaving someone out on purpose
- *Direct verbal:* Telling other children that they are not wanted in the group
- *Indirect verbal:* Telling other children to exclude a particular person from games or other group activities
- *Indirect nonverbal:* Walking away or ignoring particular children when they attempt to join the group

Telling other children not to be friends with someone
- *Indirect:* Telling other children that you do not understand why they are friends with a particular person
- *Direct:* Telling other children that you or your friends do not want to be friends with them anymore

Spreading rumors about someone
- *Indirect:* Telling others negative things about a particular person in order to damage or sabotage that person's close relationships or social reputation (e.g., writing rumors or insults about someone on a bathroom wall or spray painting an insult or slur on someone's locker)

Embarrassing someone in public
- *Direct:* Embarrassing or insulting other children over the Internet or making embarrassing comments about others when they attempt to approach the group

Cyberbullying

With growing access to technology, acts of social bullying are increasingly likely to take the form of electronic aggression, often referred to as cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is defined as bullying using electronic devices, such as cell phones, computers, and tablets, or other communication tools, including social media sites, text messages, chat rooms, and websites (http://www.stopbullying.gov).

Cyberbullying can be extremely damaging to targeted students because of the opportunity for hurtful content to be broadcast to large audiences. Furthermore, the physical and emotional distance between youth who bully online and youth who are targeted can make cyberbullying attacks more malicious in nature (Smith et al., 2008). Although most incidents of cyberbullying occur off school grounds and during nonschool hours, schools are increasingly called upon to respond within the limitations of their school policies, particularly when the effects of cyberbullying disrupt the learning environment.

How Common Is Social Bullying?

According to the U.S. Department of Education's national survey of student safety in secondary schools, 16 percent of all students reported being the subject of rumors, and 5 percent reported being excluded from activities on purpose within the past school year. Approximately 4 percent of students reported being the targets of cyberbullying, including acts intended to damage social relationships or status. Specifically, 2 percent reported that hurtful information had been posted about them online, and 9 percent reported that they had been deliberately excluded from online activities (Nieman, 2011).

The national survey also indicated differences in prevalence of social bullying across gender groups and grade levels. Females reported higher rates of social bullying victimization than male students, with 20 percent of females experiencing exclusion by peers, compared with 13 percent of males. Similarly, 6 percent of female students reported being the subjects of rumor spreading, compared with 4 percent of males. Across grade levels, sixth-grade students reported the highest prevalence of bullying of any form (39 percent) as well as the highest rates of social bullying victimization—21 percent of all sixth-grade students reported being the subject of rumors, compared with 17 percent of ninth-grade students and 13 percent of 12th-grade students (Nieman, 2011).

Other large-scale surveys of students in Grades 3–8 reveal even higher rates of social bullying victimization among upper elementary and middle school-age youth. Specifically, between 41–48 percent of girls and 31–42 percent of boys reported being the targets of social bullying within a 30-day period. Even more striking, 20–28 percent of girls and 20–24 percent of boys reported engaging in socially aggressive behavior themselves, most commonly by ignoring someone on purpose (Nishioka, Coe, Burke, Hanita, & Sprague, 2011).

These data indicate that social bullying is relatively common across many school settings. However, because social bullying is often subtle, indirect, and not easily observed, school personnel may be unaware of when it occurs or may have difficulty determining the source of the conflict (Bradshaw, Sawyer, & O'Brennan, 2007; Elinoff et al., 2004). School personnel may also fail to acknowledge and respond to incidents of social bullying because adults often view these hurtful social interactions as a normal part of childhood. Students may also be less willing to report social bullying than other forms of bullying behavior and may perceive that certain types of social bullying, such as social exclusion, should be handled without adult involvement (Goldstein & Tisak, 2006; Waasdorp & Bradshaw, 2011).

What Contributes to Social Bullying Involvement?

Several factors can heighten or reduce youth risks for social bullying or social aggression, including individual-, family-, peer-, and school-related influences.

Factors Related to Victimization

Although any child can become a target of social bullying, children who are at heightened risk are often those who are perceived to visibly differ from conventional social norms. This includes youth with developmental disabilities or social skills deficits, youth who are underweight or overweight, and youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) (Fox & Boulton, 2005; Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2011; Rose, Espelage, & Monda-Amaya, 2009; Wang, Iannotti, & Luk, 2010; Zablotsky, Bradshaw, Anderson, & Law, 2012). Exhibit 2 highlights the social bullying experiences of LGBT youth who are at risk for being the target of bullying (Kosciw et al., 2011).

Exhibit 2. Social Bullying and LGBT Youth

Recent national school climate surveys capturing the school experiences of students who identify as LGBT found high rates of bullying exposure for all forms of bullying behavior, including social bullying. LGBT respondents 13–20 years of age were asked how often they experienced two common forms of relational aggression: being purposefully excluded by peers and being the target of mean rumors or lies. Nearly half of all youth surveyed (49 percent) experienced deliberate exclusion by their peers "frequently" or "often" throughout the course of the school year, and 40 percent were "frequently" or "often" the target of mean rumors or lies (Kosciw et al., 2011).

Although further research is needed to fully understand the complex factors contributing to social bullying, the available research suggests that certain factors may put youth at risk for being targeted. For example, compared to their peers, targets of social bullying tend more often to be disliked by their peers, have fewer friends, have stronger needs for intimacy, and, within their friendships, report higher levels of conflict and betrayal (Crick et al., 1999; Grotpeter & Crick, 1996).

Factors Related to Perpetration

Several of the factors associated with perpetrating social bullying overlap with those linked to physical and verbal forms of bullying (Brendgen, 2012). For example, an irritable temperament, difficulty managing strong emotions, and a tendency to attribute hostile intent are associated with reactive forms of bullying of any type (Crick, Grotpeter, & Bigbee, 2002). In addition, environmental factors, such as low levels of perceived family support and exposure to domestic and community violence, have been linked with all forms of bullying behavior (Pepler, Jiang, Craig, & Connolly, 2008; Woods & Wolke 2004).

Although a common perception is that social bullying is predominantly a "girl" issue, research suggests that males engage in social bullying more often than previously thought (Card, Stucky, Sawalani, & Little 2008). Still, studies have shown that girls are more likely to engage in social bullying than other more physical forms of aggression and are more likely to be the targets of social bullying (Crick, Ostrov, & Kawabata, 2007).

From a developmental perspective, early adolescence and the transition to middle school represent a period of heightened risk for involvement in most forms of bullying. Yet, some studies have shown that social bullying behavior is generally stable (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004), suggesting that without intervention, youth will continue to engage in socially aggressive behaviors over time. Exhibit 3 summarizes differences in social bullying by age, compared with age trends for physical/verbal bullying, and highlights other factors associated with social bullying across child, peer, family, and school domains.

Exhibit 3. Factors Associated With Social Bullying

Child Factors	*Age*
	Studies suggest that physical aggression is most common in childhood, and social aggression is most common in adolescence. However, bullying behaviors tend to peak in early adolescence, when youth begin to rely more on peers and romantic partners for social support. During adolescence, youth also seek to gain acceptance from peers, advance their social status, form small peer groups known as "cliques," vie for social power within these groups, and secure individual friendships and romantic relationships (Yoon, Barton, & Taiariol, 2004).
	Personal Attitudes
	Research suggests that children who evaluate socially aggressive behaviors favorably are more likely to exhibit these behaviors than children who disapprove of such behaviors (Werner & Nixon, 2005). In addition, children who tend to detach themselves from moral obligations (e.g., by blaming others or justifying inhumane behavior) are more likely to exhibit these behaviors than those who do not (Pepler et al., 2008).

Peer Factors	**Peer Attitudes and Behaviors**
	Just as having antisocial peers can increase the risk for aggressive and delinquent behaviors, having socially aggressive peers or belonging to a peer group that tolerates and reinforces socially aggressive behaviors (by ignoring or laughing in response to these behaviors) can increase the risk for social bullying (Heilbron & Prinstein, 2008; Rodkin, 2011).
Family Factors	**Parenting Style**
	Parenting styles characterized by psychological control and lack of nurturing have also been examined as possible links to the development of social bullying (Kawabata, Alink, Tseng, van Ijzendoorn, & Crick, 2011; Pernice-Duca, Taiariol, & Yoon 2010). Parents may exert psychological control by relying heavily on the use of guilt, engaging in personal attacks, threatening to withdraw love or support, invalidating feelings, and constraining verbal expressions (Barber, 1996). Parents may display a lack of nurturing by offering low levels of emotional support and relying too heavily on coercive disciplinary methods (Hart, Nelson, Robinson, Olsen, & McNeilly-Choque, 1998; Maccoby & Martin, 1983).
	Parental Role Modeling
	Children whose parents use relational manipulation as a tactic for gaining attention or affection or as a strategy for asserting power and children whose parents model socially aggressive behaviors with family or with friends are particularly vulnerable to social bullying (Brendgen, 2012).
School Factors	**School Climate**
	Just as social bullying may negatively affect school climate, a positive school climate, or a climate characterized in part by a sense of social-emotional safety and positive relationships, is likely to discourage social bullying (Cohen, 2009).

Why Is Social Bullying Important?

Given the prevalence of social bullying, it is likely that most youth will have some exposure to this type of socially aggressive behavior (Crick, Casas, & Nelson, 2002). Although not all exposure to bullying will result in harmful effects, children who are frequent targets of social bullying can suffer more serious and long-term consequences, impacting their social-emotional health and adjustment (Copeland et al., 2013). Similarly, youth who engage in social bullying and aggression are also likely to experience adjustment issues and other consequences related to their behavior. These risks appear greatest among those involved as both a target and a perpetrator (O'Brennan, Bradshaw, & Sawyer, 2009).

Consequences for Students Who Are Bullied

Children generally consider social bullying to be mean and harmful (Crick, Bigbee, & Howes, 1996). Research has demonstrated a relationship between social bullying victimization and a range of negative consequences for youth, including peer rejection, externalizing problems, depressive symptoms, and loneliness (Crick & Nelson, 2002; Ostrov, Woods, Jansen, Casas, & Crick, 2004). Studies examining gender differences in direct and indirect aggression suggest that girls may be impacted more adversely than boys by socially aggressive interactions because they place more value on social relationships (Speiker et al., 2012). Accordingly, girls who encounter social bullying within close friendships may experience heightened levels of social anxiety, social avoidance, loneliness, feelings of distress, and behavioral problems (Crick & Nelson, 2002). Although research on the longer term consequences of social bullying is not well established, studies have linked reports of frequent adolescent exposure to social bullying with feelings of depression and anxiety in young adulthood (Dempsey & Storch, 2008).

Consequences for Students Who Bully

Research on social bullying has linked the use of aggression to a range of adverse consequences, including peer rejection, conduct problems, and internalizing behaviors (Card et al., 2008). However, social bullying can also be used as an adaptive strategy to obtain social prominence and perceived popularity (Pellegrini & Long, 2002). But even though socially aggressive youth are often perceived to be more popular than their peers, social status is not necessarily related to strong, quality friendships. Specifically, research suggests that close friendships among children who engage in social bullying are often characterized by increased conflict and jealousy and can result in feelings of loneliness (Grotpeter & Crick, 1996).

Impacts on the Learning Environment

Social bullying can also have negative consequences for the larger school environment when bullying behavior detracts from teaching and learning and negatively impacts school climate. Notably, a recent national survey found that more than half of all teachers (53 percent) in the study and one third of educational support professionals (e.g., paraprofessionals) perceived social or relational forms of bullying to be a moderate or major problem in their schools and rated it as an even greater concern than either physical forms of bullying or cyberbullying (Bradshaw, Waasdorp, O'Brennan, & Gulemetova, in press). Research shows that when students are exposed to high levels of social bullying, either as a target or as a witness to the behavior, they are more likely to perceive their schools as less safe. Youth who were frequently subjected to social bullying also held negative feelings about their own social experiences and the social climate in their schools (Goldstein, Young, & Boyd, 2008). Other studies have found that social bullying in the form of chronic exclusion impacts children's classroom participation and causes students to become increasingly disengaged from classroom activities as they progress through school (Buhs, Ladd, & Herald, 2006).

What Can Be Done to Prevent Social Bullying?

Effective school-based bullying prevention involves a social-ecological, whole-school approach that engages students, families, and all school staff in prevention efforts and establishes consistent expectations for positive behavior across all school contexts. (Espelage & Swearer, 2004; Ross & Horner, 2009). Researchers generally agree that preventing bullying in schools requires the application of a wide range of evidence-based approaches. These approaches include (a) adopting clear antibullying policies, (b) implementing a multitiered approach that involves students of all levels of risk, (c) providing adequate adult supervision during unstructured time, (d) training teachers to respond to bullying incidents effectively, (e) promoting effective classroom management, (f) using positive behavior support systems, (g) providing supports to students who have been bullied, (h) collecting data to monitor bullying and increase accountability, (i) involving families and communities, and (j) integrating and sustaining prevention efforts. These evidence-based approaches are discussed in greater detail below.

Adopt School Policies That Recognize and Prohibit Social Bullying

Clear antibullying policies are essential elements of a successful schoolwide prevention effort (Olweus, 1993). Most school districts have established local policies to prevent or reduce bullying, often in response to expectations in state legislation. (See Exhibit 4 for more information on social bullying and state bullying laws.) However, for schools to appropriately identify and respond to incidents of social bullying, school policies must recognize social bullying as a form of aggression and must contain clear

prohibitions against these behaviors. Advocates have also argued that school policies should clearly communicate a lack of tolerance for bullying due to race, religion, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression (Kosciw et al., 2011).

Exhibit 4. Social Bullying and State Bullying Laws

Policy studies analyzing the content of state antibullying legislation have focused on the extent to which legal definitions of prohibited behavior are inclusive of acts of social or relational aggression. A recent review of legislation in 49 states and the District of Columbia (U.S. Department of Education, 2011) found that only four state laws contain explicit references to social bullying behaviors (e.g., social exclusion or rumor spreading) in their legal definitions of school bullying and that 29 others define bullying in a way that could encompass social bullying behaviors. This study also found that state bullying laws and policies tended to place more emphasis on and were more explicit about disciplinary consequences for bullying than for preventive programs and policies. Although many states require local school systems to adopt definitions of bullying that conform to minimum state definitions, almost all allow districts to expand upon the definitions to broaden the scope of behavior covered in local policies.

Train School Personnel to Respond to Social Bullying Incidents Effectively

School policies should communicate clear roles and expectations for school personnel to respond to incidents of school bullying. However, national surveys suggest that while the majority of teachers and other school personnel are aware of their school bullying policies, less than half had received formal training on policy guidelines (Bradshaw et al., in press). For school personnel to respond effectively and consistently to social bullying behaviors, they need clear guidance, support, and practice on how to identify social bullying interactions, how to immediately intervene to resolve bullying situations, and how to provide appropriate follow-up and support to bullying-involved youth (National Education Association, n.d.). Resources on bullying prevention, including strategies for how to support and intervene with students, are available from the National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments (NCSSLE) (http://safesupportiveschools.ed.gov/index.php?id=01).

Implement Whole-School, Multitiered Prevention Approaches

Application of whole-school strategies based on a three-tiered public health model is a comprehensive, evidence-based approach to the prevention of bullying and other emotional and behavioral problems (Bradshaw et al., in press; Mrazek & Haggerty, 1994; O'Connell, Boat, & Warner, 2009; Walker et al., 1996). This model includes a universal system of support, or a set of activities that affect all students within a defined community or school setting. Layered onto that first tier of support are selected interventions that target a subgroup of students who are at risk—for example, those who are close friends with students who bully other students. A tiered approach might include lessons on social-emotional skill development for all students, thus making it a universal program. In fact, research highlights the importance of providing class time to discuss bullying (Olweus, 1993) and the use of lessons to foster social-emotional skills and competencies, effective communication, and strategies for responding to bullying (Farrington & Ttofi, 2009); such strategies can also have a positive impact on academic and other behavioral outcomes (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011).

At the second tier, selective interventions may include social skills training for small groups of children at risk for becoming involved in bullying. Finally, an indicated preventive intervention (third tier) may include more intensive supports and programs for students identified as bullies or victims and their families

(Espelage & Swearer, 2008; Ross & Horner, 2009). Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (Sugai & Horner, 2009) is one such tiered prevention model that is commonly used in schools and has been shown to be effective at reducing bullying and other aggressive behavior problems (Bradshaw, Waasdorp, & Leaf, 2012; Waasdorp, Bradshaw, & Leaf, 2012).

Provide Adequate Adult Supervision During Unstructured Time

Studies have suggested that increases in bullying prevalence in the transition to middle school may be related to reductions in adult supervision (Espelage, 2002). Effective supervision, especially in bullying "hot spots" such as playgrounds, buses, and cafeterias, represents an important component of effective school approaches. Unstructured time is a particularly important context for increased supervision (Farrington & Ttofi, 2009; Frey et al., 2005).

Use Professional Development and Policy to Promote Effective Classroom Management

Effective classroom management is also critical because well-managed classrooms are rated as having a more favorable climate, being safer and more supportive, and having lower rates of bullying (Koth, Bradshaw, & Leaf, 2008). Such preventive approaches provide clear and consistent expectations for behavior in the classroom, which can also be extended schoolwide. Several classroom management models, such as the Good Behavior Game, have proved to be effective at addressing a wide range of behavioral problems and mental health concerns and improving academic performance in both the short and long term (Bradshaw, Zmuda, Kellam, & Ialongo, 2009).

Introduce Positive Behavioral Interventions as an Alternative to Punitive Disciplinary Approaches

There is a general consensus in the literature that zero-tolerance policies that result in automatic suspensions are not effective at stemming bullying or addressing its consequences (American Psychological Association, 2008). Ensuring the safety of the targeted student should remain the top priority. However, aside from extreme situations in which the targeted student's safety cannot be ensured, school personnel are strongly encouraged to implement a continuum of positive behavioral supports as an alternative to exclusionary disciplinary approaches such as suspension (Bradshaw, in press).

Provide Supports to Students Who Have Been Bullied

Children who have been bullied require a systematic assessment of the potential mental health and social effects of the bullying. It is also important to reassure children who have been the targets of bullying that the behavior will not be tolerated by the school, that the bullying behavior is not deserved, and that adults will work to ensure their safety. Supports should be provided to promote effective coping and to prevent the development of behavioral or mental health concerns. In some instances, a referral to community-based mental health services may be needed; however, school-based clinical staff (e.g., school psychologists) may also be well positioned to provide supports to students who are targets of bullying (Bradshaw, in press).

Use Data to Support Monitoring and Accountability

Monitoring the prevalence of bullying among students at school and off school grounds is another useful strategy. Collecting data on bullying through anonymous student surveys can inform the supervision and intervention process (Health Resources and Services Administration, n.d.). For example, school climate surveys are a central needs assessment, monitoring, and planning tool for many whole-school interventions. These data can identify potential areas for intensive training for school staff, which is an essential element of successful bullying prevention efforts (Farrington & Ttofi, 2009). Data on bullying and school climate more broadly are also important for monitoring progress toward the goal of reducing bullying (Bradshaw, in press; Olweus, 1993).

Involve Families and Communities

Families play a critical role in bullying prevention by providing emotional support to promote disclosure of bullying incidents and by fostering coping skills in their children. Parents need training in how to talk with their children about bullying (Lindstrom Johnson, Finigan, Bradshaw, Haynie, & Cheng, in press), how to communicate their concerns about bullying to the school, and how to get actively involved in school-based bullying prevention efforts (Waasdorp, Bradshaw, & Duong, 2011). There also are important bullying prevention activities that can occur at the community level, such as awareness or social marketing campaigns that encourage all youth and adults—such as doctors, police officers, and storekeepers—to intervene when they see bullying and to become actively involved in school- and community-based prevention activities (Health Resources and Services Administration, n.d.; Olweus, 1993).

Integrate and Sustain Prevention Efforts

It is essential that schools integrate prevention efforts with their other existing programs and supports. Research by Gottfredson and Gottfredson (2001) indicates that, on average, schools are using about 14 different strategies or programs to prevent violence and promote a safe learning environment. This can often be overwhelming for school staff to execute well, thereby leading to poor implementation fidelity. Therefore, schools are encouraged to integrate their prevention efforts so that there is a seamless system of support (Domitrovich et al., 2010) that is coordinated, monitored for high-fidelity implementation, and includes all staff across all school contexts. Instead of adopting a different program to combat each new problem that emerges, it is recommended that schools develop a consistent and long-term prevention plan that addresses multiple student concerns through a set of well-integrated programs and services (Health Resources and Services Administration, n.d.). Such efforts would address multiple competencies and skills in order to prevent bullying and help students cope and respond appropriately when bullying occurs. The three-tiered public health model provides a framework for connecting bullying prevention with other programs to address bullying within the broader set of behavioral and academic concerns.

Conclusion

This *In Brief* highlights social bullying, a relatively undetected and unaddressed form of school bullying behavior. Research and practice show that social bullying is relatively common, is distinct from physical and verbal forms of bullying, is more easily concealed, is less frequently reported, is more often overlooked by adults, and has harmful effects on both bullying and bullied youth. Understanding the factors associated with social bullying, including knowledge of correlates and causes of bullying, will contribute to its proper prevention, detection, and amelioration. The relatively unobtrusive and often

group-based behaviors that characterize social bullying make it more difficult to identify and address through conventional disciplinary means. Research has shown that whole-school, preventive approaches, such as those outlined here, are critical to address social bullying effectively. Increasing awareness of social bullying and its pervasiveness, its associated harms, and its prevention are important contributions to creating safe and supportive learning environments for our nation's youth.

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