Understanding Bullying Behavior

What Educators Should Know and Can Do

By Elizabeth Kandel Englander

This may not be the first time you've read about bullying, but like many educators, perhaps you still feel frustrated with a problem that seems to defy a tsunami of opinions, discussions, stories, and proposed solutions. Anyone working in schools knows very well how serious bullying can be; on the other hand, it's not uncommon to hear even mild slights characterized as bullying. We want to help children who are being targeted, but we also know there's no way to *require* children to like each other. We know that children can be cruel online, but realistically, how can educators address problems that are happening off campus and in cyberspace?

My purpose in this article is to help educators sort through some thorny issues that complicate our efforts to understand bullying and cyberbullying, and to suggest practical and realistic ways to address these behaviors effectively.

Let's start with a few key points that are often not well understood but can really help clarify everything that follows.

First, the chronic overuse of the term *bullying* produces a set of problems that actually impedes our prevention efforts. By permitting children to blithely frame many interpersonal difficulties as bullying, we're allowing (perhaps even encouraging) them to abandon consideration of personal responsibility in situations where they may bear some. Likewise, by calling everything bullying, we greatly water down the very real distress that targets of bullying experience, and this can result in children themselves taking bullying much less seriously.

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY JAMES YANG

Probably the single most common confusion I see in the field is the mix-up between bullying and fighting. Fighting is an equal-power conflict. Bullying, on the other hand, occurs between a powerful aggressor and a target who lacks the power to fight back.[1]

This leads us directly to the second point, namely that bullying is an abusive behavior and needs to be understood as such.

Third, contemporary bullying is not always easy to recognize. Teachers and administrators today sometimes miss or misinterpret incidents because they lack information about what to look for.

Fourth, bullying in school is not always separate from what happens on the Internet. We may tend to think of bullying and cyberbullying as distinct and unrelated events, but in actuality, they're often neither.

Finally, bullying is not a problem adults alone could or should fix; children *do* need to learn how to cope with meanness, whether it's milder incidents that adults help coach them through or more serious situations that require direct adult intervention.

What Is Bullying?

Precisely defined, bullying is calculated, ongoing abuse that is aimed at a less powerful target.[2] Bullying is intentional and repetitive social cruelty; the targets cannot defend themselves.

Using this definition, between a quarter and a third of children report being targeted by bullies in a given year.[3] Notably lacking are statistics on bullying at very young ages. In my own research based on survey data from parents of younger students, 6 percent of kindergarten parents, 7 percent of first-grade parents, and 19 percent of second-grade parents reported that they were aware their child was being, or had been, bullied at school or online (and cyberbullying can indeed start this early).[4]

It's harder to know how common cyberbullying is. Higher rates of cyberbullying are reported in studies that ask about a wider variety of digital behaviors or about problems that may have happened during longer periods of time. It does appear clear, though, that as children grow, digital bullying occupies an increasingly larger proportion of all bullying incidents. In my own 2015 research, 31 percent of elementary school bullying was reported to have occurred electronically, but almost all (97 percent) of high school bullying involved electronics.

Digital communication changes how we communicate and thus, in turn, changes the social interactions that ensue both online and offline. Children don't see the school hallways and cyberspace as separate. For them, text messaging is just another way of talking, and the Internet is just another place where they see their friends.

But digital technology isn't the only factor that has changed the nature of bullying. Many of us saw or experienced bullying as children, and it's natural that as adults we should be on the lookout for the kind of overt, often physical bullying behaviors we saw when young. But research shows that most bullying today does not involve any physical contact.[5] A mistaken focus on physical bullying sometimes causes us to miss the forest for the trees. We need to know much more accurately what to look for and what to respond to.

Most bullying today is centered around the use of psychological methods, including those I call *gateway behaviors*—socially inappropriate behaviors used to convey contempt and dominance, such as whispering about people in front of them, laughing at others openly, eye rolling, ignoring, name calling, encouraging peers to drop friends, posting embarrassing photos online, and so on. Gateway behaviors in and of themselves don't necessarily indicate bullying. Students may use gateway behaviors when they're in a quarrel or simply annoyed with a peer.

Regardless, these "beginning" or low-risk ways of asserting power or expressing contempt, left unchecked, can normalize disrespect and thus escalate into conflict and bullying.[6] It's the *continually repeated* and *targeted* use of gateway behaviors by powerful peers, with the intent to demean and harass, that becomes true bullying.

How Do I Tell If It's Bullying?

Actually, you may not always be able to tell. While the kids involved have the entire story, the adults may only see the immediate gateway behaviors, with no real information about whether the underlying problem is bullying, fighting, or some other issue. Not being able to tell if a problem is bullying doesn't mean you cannot respond effectively, however. But for the moment, let's explore how to assess an incident to determine if a situation is bullying.

> Bullying is calculated, ongoing abuse that is aimed at less powerful targets who cannot defend themselves.

Assessing intentional cruelty. Sometimes this is obvious, but often it's not. It can be difficult to judge an internal process like intention. However, there are clues that can help detect indications of bullying, such as power imbalance and repetition.

Assessing power imbalance. In my research, subjects who reported that they were able to exploit bullying successfully for their own social gain rated themselves as significantly more popular than other children.[7] Because most children's power today is derived from high social status (rather than from physical size), consider any known differences in social power (popularity and social status) between the children involved.[8] Perhaps the alleged aggressor is much more popular than the target. Or, the alleged target may belong to a socially vulnerable group. Popular kids and groups vary from school to school, but students often targeted for bullying are those with special needs and those who identify (or who are identified, accurately or not) as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or queer/questioning (LGBTQ).

Very recent research from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has in fact confirmed what many educators have observed anecdotally: namely, that lesbian and gay students

report being bullied (and violently attacked, including sexually attacked) at very high rates. The 2015 report of the CDC's Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System, which analyzed the results of its Youth Risk Behavior Survey of representative samples of U.S. high school students, found that 34 percent of these vulnerable students reported being the targets of bullies on school property, 23 percent experienced sexual dating violence, and 42.8 percent had contemplated suicide.[9] A study published in the journal of the American Sociological Association found that LGBTQ students are four times more likely to be targets of cyberbullying.[10] This situation could be termed a crisis, and one in which the imbalance of power is playing a pivotal role.

Assessing repetition. It's important to distinguish, when possible, between problems that are ongoing but have been detected only for the first time, and problems that are genuinely one-time incidents. Just because a child *reports* a bullying incident for the first time doesn't mean it's the first time it has happened. The bottom line is, the child may know things he or she hasn't disclosed to you and may be the only source likely or able to divulge that information. The only way to tap that vein is to develop enough of a connection with the student that he or she is likely to tell you the entire history.*

If you suspect that a child may be experiencing repeated episodes of cruelty, but you're not sure whether he or she would divulge such information to you personally, the most responsible course of action is probably locating an adult in whom the child can comfortably confide. That person may or may not be you. Don't misinterpret this as a criticism. The chemistry that unfolds between you and the children you teach is not entirely in your control.

Dealing with Gateway Behaviors

As I pointed out above, you may not be able to definitively label a situation as bullying, but the good news is that even without that information, you can still respond effectively. The solution is to focus on the behaviors you can see instead of the internal motives and feelings you can't see.

When a child behaves in a way that breaks a school rule, you know what to do: follow the school's protocols. But gateway behaviors are trickier precisely because they usually *don't* break school rules. (How could a school have a rule against laughing?) In those cases, the student is obeying the letter of the law but is still behaving in a socially inappropriate way. Since these socially inappropriate behaviors, by themselves, are only small transgressions and may be viewed as minor misbehaviors, they can be used right in front of adults.

As I stated above, adults may have trouble deciding whether a child's gateway behaviors rise to the level of bullying because they also can be used to tease or to be mean just once. Even if you become an expert at recognizing these behaviors, you won't always know *why* they're being used. Two boys laughing pointedly at a third might be doing it for the first time or the hundredth time. There's usually no obvious way to know which it is. So what should the response be, if you're not sure which you're seeing?

Many adults I train remark that they may pause and attempt to do an on-the-spot motive analysis: "Maybe the child only meant it as a joke, or it could very well be just a passing minor bit of nastiness." If what they see is really egregious—an overt threat, for example—then they know what to do. But if they only see an inappropriate behavior and don't know if it's being used to bully, they may decide it could be counterproductive to stir the waters. Unfortunately, an accumulation of these inappropriate yet minor social misbehaviors can poison the social climate in a school. That's why gateway behaviors absolutely require a response, *regardless* of why they're being used.

Formal discipline is an option but one you can't, or won't, often use for gateway behaviors, since its application is obviously limited for behaviors that don't break any rules and that may or may not be being used for bullying.[11] Furthermore, using formal discipline for teasing or every random mean comment is not only overkill but probably impossible. Instead, what you need is a response that can be used *before* behaviors rise to a level that requires formal discipline. It has to be one that is also appropriate in the event the child has merely gone too far with a tease or has, in a rare spiteful mood, thrown out a single mean comment or gesture.

Your goal in responding to gateway behaviors is simple: you want the children in your school to understand that you expect them to behave in a reasonably civilized and considerate manner at all times. It's not necessary to establish the motive of the offending student(s) (e.g., teasing versus bullying). All you need to ascertain is the presence of an inappropriate social behavior.

The Nine-Second Response

I've developed a response set for gateway behaviors that has several advantages. It's quick, easy to do, makes sense to everyone, takes the onus off the target and puts it on the entire community, and can't be debated or argued with. It avoids the entire can-you-prove-I-did-this conundrum, and it addresses bullying behaviors while not branding the casual users with a scarlet "B" that will follow them for life. Most importantly, this response will clearly convey to all the students who see it what your expectations are for their social behaviors.

*For more on the importance of connecting with students, see "It's About Relationships" in the Winter 2015–2016 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/ae/winter2015-2016/ashley.

Step one: Consistently notice gateway behaviors. This is the difficult part of the response, because the idea of having to respond to every snicker and rolled eye may indeed be seen as, at best, overwhelming, and at worst, simply impossible. But remember that the goal of setting expectations is not to find yourself obliged to constantly point out violations but rather to change the students' behavior so that those violations no longer occur. Once children understand a clearly stated expectation for their behavior, most will comply with it (the exception being those who have too many other challenges). In other words, notice and respond consistently, and you won't have to do it for long.

Step two: Own the impact. Once you notice a gateway behavior, responding is simple and quick. When you see a child who behaves contemptuously or rudely toward another child, simply tell the offending child that *you*—*not* the target—are offended and bothered by the behavior and that they must stop.

That's it. Clocked, this takes about five seconds, although I call it the *nine-second response* because it takes another four seconds to pull your mind together when you're not accustomed to responding. Teachers who are used to doing it tell me they can respond very rapidly.

The critical element here is to *not* emphasize the damage being done to the target ("How do you think that made Kristin feel?"). Instead, emphasize the damage to yourself and to the entire school community. No question or attention should be drawn to the target—implying to any watchers that the target is really not the problem. If needed, you can always talk with that child later, but for now, you're driving home the message that the use of socially cruel behaviors affects you and the entire school by poisoning the school climate. By not addressing the target, you're emphasizing that it is not the target's job to bear the responsibility for that damage.

While some teachers ask me if it's OK to say that a gateway behavior affects everyone, or that it's something "we" (the school community) don't do, it is most effective to tell a child that *you*, personally, are being harmed by his or her behavior. The fact that you are directly affected (offended, bothered) emphasizes the message that gateway behaviors don't simply harm people in the abstract. People who use them are being truly hurtful to the school community, and there are very good reasons for the social rules that forbid such behaviors. Most children who engage in these behaviors are focused only on wounding the target and haven't particularly considered that they could be having a much broader negative impact.

There is still a role for formal discipline. If you repeatedly see a child doing something mean, particularly to the same target, you should of course continue to respond, but you should also go up to the next level. Two problems need to be addressed: (a) you suspect that bullying is going on—this is no longer a one-time event, and (b) you are asking this student to stop being offensive, and he or she is ignoring you and persisting. Both counts should be subject to formal discipline.

As for a more positive and preventive way to address these behaviors, having a class discussion is a great way to examine gateway behaviors and their consequences. Begin by asking your students to identify behaviors they consider rude or inconsiderate. Make a list on the board. If the students don't think of common gateway behaviors, like name calling or eye rolling, you can include them on the list. Once you have a reasonable catalog, ask your students, "Why do we have rules about these behaviors? What's the purpose?" Encourage a discussion about how manners aren't just meaningless, arbitrary rules—they are guidelines based on consideration for the feelings of others, and by keeping everyone feeling OK, manners allow people to function at their highest level.

The point of this class discussion is to remind children that social rules aren't pointless or even only about kindness. Social rules keep people's feelings from being hurt and help students focus on academics. Finally, you can encourage a discussion about why and how these rules are sometimes broken by accident (such as with teasing that goes too far), versus on purpose. The Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center offers free, age-appropriate curricula for kindergarten through grade 12 that can help you shape those discussions (see www.marccenter.org).

Most bullying today is centered around the use of psychological methods.

Regarding cyberbullying, children can easily make any adult feel less than capable about technology. However, while children may easily learn which buttons to push on a gadget, they often fail to understand the *impact* of electronic communications and how tone and meaning can get lost. What children need is help in understanding how to send and interpret accurate communications. (See "Identifying and Responding to Cyberbullying" on page 28 for more about cyberbullying and how educators can respond.)

Keep the Focus on the Child's Behavior

Although I always encourage a focus on the behavior itself rather than on the label, educators in many states are obliged to make an official determination about whether a child's behavior constitutes "bullying." I truly believe that there's no way to always get this issue exactly right. Still, here are some general suggestions that may help:

Evaluate the balance of power. Ask yourself if one of the children has much less power than or is afraid of the other. If the answer is yes, then taking a closer look is a better approach than dismissing the incident.

Weigh the content of the dispute. Ask yourself if the dispute appears to be relatively inconsequential. A quarrel over whether

someone's mother is an alcoholic is not inconsequential, but an argument over who gets to go first on the slide can be. Is the content of the quarrel something that can be really hurtful? Is it important? If the answer is no, then encouraging the children to work it out for themselves is probably merited. (The exception to this is when the dispute is repeated, in which case the content becomes largely irrelevant.)

Consider whether the dispute is a repeat occurrence. Regardless of content, is this situation or problem appearing repeatedly? Even if the content seems very trivial, students who are engaging in problem behaviors together over and over again are essentially struggling with a larger issue. That's a signal that a talk is merited.

Look for an obvious ulterior motive. An obvious ulterior motive is always a signal to take a situation more (not less) seriously, although the situation may be different from the one being reported. For example, a young child persistently telling you that so-and-so is cutting in line and should be punished is a signal for a talk with the "telling" child. You may ultimately decide that so-and-so is indeed guilty, or you may find yourself uncovering something entirely different.

Determine whether the situation has escalated. Adults should devote attention and care to any situation between children that appears to be escalating. Children often don't understand how their behaviors can contribute to an escalation, including their digital behaviors. Some education is often in order.

Always respond to fear. If a child is afraid, that situation always merits your close attention. Always provide a fearful child with support and a safety network, including a "safe adult" whom he can visit whenever needed. Check in with him regularly and often.

Having a class discussion is a great way to examine gateway behaviors and their consequences.

Always offer a safety hatch. Even if you tell kids to work something out for themselves, or tell them not to "tattle" (an approach I strongly recommend against—see important research by the Youth Voice Project[12]), finish your comment by letting the children involved know that you will listen later if this is important (even though you may not be able to listen right now).

Identifying and Responding to Cyberbullying

It may be difficult to ascertain if the harassment that occurs online meets the traditional three criteria for bullying (intent, power imbalance, and repetition).[1] It's not only that power imbalances can shift unpredictably online; the difficulty is also that while a target may legitimately *experience* online behavior as bullying, an alleged cyberbully may never have *intended* that outcome.

At times, this issue may be irrelevant, particularly when digital behaviors closely resemble in-school bullying. For example, the aggressor and target may largely agree on intention and outcomes when a student sets up a web page committed to "The Group Who Hates Sally Smith." That aggressor clearly intends to be hurtful; the web page is updated regularly with new content, so she intends the hurt to be repetitive, and because she invites others to become "members" of the group or web page, she's clearly looking for the audience to admire her power.

But many other times, the alleged cyberbully's actual intention is much less clear, and the target may experience the online behavior in a way that's completely different from how it was meant. Suppose a student sends a funny, embarrassing image of another student to two of his buddies on Instagram, who then forward it to dozens of other students. You could argue that the meme's creator, who was trying to be funny, *should* have realized that his snarky picture could get sent to many others, but this action still probably wouldn't meet the criteria for bullying. The creator's intention wasn't to demonstrate his power or dominance, and although the picture was forwarded many times, he personally sent it out only once, to two people. He may not have intended for it to hurt the target and may have assumed that the target would never know.

Nevertheless, the subject of that image might indeed experience what happened as bullying—the humiliating picture was sent and seen repeatedly and was certainly sent on purpose. The object of the "joke" is likely to feel markedly powerless as well, since once out on the Internet, that image is essentially uncontrollable.

The point here is that when we talk about assessing intent, power, and repetition in a digital environment, there are two perspectives—the alleged bully's and the target's—and they may be very different. Which counts more: the intention of the bully, or the subjective experience of the target? As I've noted, sometimes this is hard to figure out even in face-to-face incidents, and the difference between these two perspectives can be magnified when the interactions are digital.*

Because the intent to hurt or bully can be absent or not apparent in a digital environment, it's critically important for children to understand the dynamics of online communication—and how easily casual digital actions can escalate out of their control.

*For more on bullying and cyberbullying prevention, the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center offers free research-based curricula, online needs-assessment and surveying services, downloadable games, information for parents, and training materials for faculty and administrators.

Even if you ask them to work it out, help them with the process. Rather than just saying, "You two work this out," prompt the children by asking them, "How could you two work this out for yourselves, without having to ask for help from a grownup? Can one of you propose a solution?" If the students respond with a reason why they came to you (e.g., "But he never does what he says he'll do"), then help them negotiate a compromise, but also stay put, to help enforce the results. Hopefully, the extra minutes you spend there will mean that in the future, these children will be able to work out small problems for themselves.

Finally, when discussing a student's hurtful behavior with parents, students, or others, a few cautionary points are in order:

1. Never use the word *bullying* unless you must. It's emotionally loaded and likely to generate an emotional response. Refer to a child as a bully only when you are absolutely required to.
2. If you must label a situation as bullying, make clear the criteria used for that label and how you see the case fitting these criteria.
3. The parents of the bully will often disagree with your assertion, and it's a good idea to let them save some face. Sometimes it's helpful for parents to know that many children may "try out" bullying. That may permit them to focus on their child's behavior without being distracted by a debate about the word *bullying*. Keep in mind, though, that they may need to hear a recommendation that their child discuss the incident with their pediatrician or family doctor.
4. On the other side, the parents of the target may disagree if you *don't* think the situation is bullying, in which case it's often a good idea to reemphasize the indisputably objectionable nature of the behavior in question and refocus on concrete actions that can increase the child's sense of safety (such as providing the child with a "safe adult" whom she can visit any time she feels the need, or providing daily or weekly check-ins with the students and their parents during the resolution of the incident).
5. Never cite confidentiality without explaining it—this point cannot be overemphasized. Many parents don't understand that federal law (and possibly state law, depending on the state) forbids administrators from discussing another parent's child in any way. To an upset parent, you may appear to be stonewalling or even protecting the other student. It's critical to point out that you absolutely don't have a choice—you understand how they feel, but you must obey the law.

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While cyberbullying and bullying may affect the target similarly, the cyberbully and the bully may be two very different animals. Assessing for cyberbullying, therefore, relies heavily on the subjective experience of the target—and we need to keep in mind that the existence of a cyberbullying target won't always imply the coexistence of an intentional cyberbully.

Unlike traditional bullying, much cyberbullying takes place off campus, most typically on a mobile device or in the child's home. This means that the behavior falls into a different legal category. While behavior that takes place at school is clearly under the jurisdiction of educators, behavior at home is usually viewed as being under the jurisdiction of parents.[2] Still, this doesn't permit schools to wash their hands of it. If the behavior in question involves criminal activity, threats, significant violence, or electronic or physical stalking, I believe (as a nonlawyer) the police should be consulted.

It's often worthwhile to have an educational discussion with the cyberbully and cyberbystanders. This discussion is *not* discipline; it is educational, about the dangers of cyberbullying and the fact that everyone is now aware of the situation. If relevant, discuss future legal problems the child may face if these behaviors continue. You can involve a school resource officer or police officer in the discussion, and the child's parents.

If you find out about an online situation, be sure to inform potential cyberbullies and cyberbystanders about the consequences for bullying or cyberbullying while in school. If the cyberbully or cyberbystanders engage in any bullying or cyberbullying in school, follow through on consequences immediately. Inform all relevant adults (teachers, coaches, counselors, and bus drivers) about the situation between the children. Make sure they are aware of the potential for bullying and urge them to keep a very sharp eye on these children. If it were me, I would document everyone I had informed of the situation.

Follow up with parents, especially the parents of targets. Do not wait for them to call you; let them know that the above actions are being taken. Many parents want to know what disciplinary actions are being taken against a cyberbully, and you will need to educate them about confidentiality laws. Be sure they know you are not merely refusing to furnish information because you personally wish to protect a bully.

–E.K.E.

Endnotes

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Contemporary bullying is different; it's now more often played out as psychological, rather than physical, attacks. What we call *cyberbullying* can be intentionally cruel or (sometimes) just thoughtless digital behavior; either way, it may still be experienced as bullying by the recipient. What happens online and what occurs offline are inextricably linked, especially among teens. Children start online interactions very young—early in elementary school. The older they get, the more bullying migrates online.

It's critical to recognize the beginning level of abusive behaviors—gateway behaviors—and stop them when you see them. Teach your students how digital interactions lack a lot of social information, and how that can lead to problems with others if they're not careful. Encourage friendships and friendly actions between peers. That's the best defense.

Meetings with parents can be difficult, but keep in mind that most parents are trying their best. Their job is not easy. Just as important, don't minimize the concerns of children who seek you out. Connect with them and remember: working with children is never just about the academic content. □

Endnotes

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