# What Is Bullying?
# What Can Classroom Teachers
# Do About It?

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His mom snapped photos as Paul climbed up the high steps onto the school bus for his first ride to school. Paul stepped into the aisle and headed toward the back. But as he walked down the aisle, looking for a seat, he tripped and sprawled onto the floor. His lunch box snapped open and yogurt from his lunch smeared on the bus flooring and down the front of his new shirt. He found an empty seat and sat, looking determinedly down at his lap, tears streaming down his face. Next to him, Sam, the only other kindergartner on the bus, whispered, "Cry baby." Paul continued to look down.

Paul's first bus ride to school set a pattern of abuse from Sam. When kids their age rode the bus, Sam told them not to sit with Paul. Sometimes he snatched away Paul's jacket or hat. Soon, other kids joined in with the bullying. They laughed, grabbed Paul's hat and passed it around the bus. This mean behavior continued, daily, for the next eight years, escalating from name calling to poking, pinching, shoving, and tripping.

Paul was a different child at home than he was at school. At home Paul loved to bike ride, go fishing with his dad, watch movies with the family, or trade jokes with his mom. At school, his teachers noticed that he didn't socialize with the other children. As Paul got older, he did his homework each night. But when parent-teacher conference time rolled around, his teacher reported that Paul often didn't turn in his homework.

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Despite regular home-school communication, the problem persisted. Because he was too sad and fearful to remember his homework or pay attention in class, Paul's academic progress was sporadic. His parents talked with him about why he was having such a hard time with school, but Paul never said anything about the bullying. Though the bullying was persistent and deeply distressing, Paul, like many children who are targeted for bullying, was too ashamed and afraid to tell an adult.

In middle school, Paul finally confided in a trusted guidance counselor. The guidance counselor confronted Paul's tormentors. In time, Paul healed from the years of bullying—he made friends, enrolled in martial arts, and took on a leadership role.

Not all children recover so well. News reports recount too many stories of children who commit violent acts against themselves or others in response to persistent bullying.

Paul's story is played out every day in schools around the world. A child, like Sam, picks on another child, engaging in behaviors like name-calling and other mistreatments. Adults are unaware of the mean behavior and therefore do not intervene. When adults do not step in, children assume that the behavior is OK and the meanness escalates, with class-mates encouraging the mean behavior through watching, laughing, and even joining in. After many years of being treated in this way, adolescents often can't imagine that their life will ever improve.

Children's lives in school don't need to be this way. Teachers in many schools and classrooms teach children how to be kind and inclusive. In these classrooms there are clear rules about how to treat one another, les-sons to help children recognize bullying and other mean behavior, and protocols to help them befriend children who are targeted and report the mean behavior to responsible adults.

The focus of this book is on preventing bullying—by identifying and intervening in the small, mean behaviors that can escalate into full-blown bullying and by creating an environment where kindness rather than meanness prevails.

# What Is Bullying?

I begin by defining bullying for the simple reason that this is a book about preventing it. But there's a perhaps less obvious reason for teachers to understand how bullying differs from other kinds of mean behavior: For the safety of the targeted child, bullying requires a different set of responses from adults than aggression that grows out of conflict between equals. I talk about this in the chapters that follow.

For the purposes of this book, I define "bullying" as behavior by a person or group that establishes, asserts, or maintains social power over another person and causes pain or humiliation. Sometimes bullying is long-term and debilitating, as in Paul's case; sometimes it begins and ends within a span of weeks. Even a one-time act, however, can be mean and used to establish, assert, or maintain dominance.

There are many variations in how people define bullying. At the time of this writing, most states in the United States have laws designed to protect children against bullying in school. Each of these states has a slightly different definition of bullying, and behavior I describe as bullying may or may not refer to behavior that is a reportable offense in your state. To understand when and how to officially report bullying, you will need to become familiar with your state's guidelines. In addition, many of the researchers I refer to in the following pages use definitions of bullying that differ slightly from each other.

However, all the definitions have in common the idea that bullying is one-sided, that there is an imbalance of power, and that the bullying behavior hurts and humiliates the person who is targeted.

## Bullying can be physical, relational, or both

Bullying can consist of an act or series of acts of physical violence, such as hitting, pinching, tripping, spilling things on someone, or shoving. Bullying can also consist of acts of relational aggression such as purposely excluding someone or spreading rumors about someone.

Relational bullying can be direct or indirect. When Matt says to the other children in his class, "Let's call Mia 'Fluffernutter,'" and they chant "Fluffernutter, Fluffernutter" softly in the cafeteria, so that Mia can hear while the adults can't, that's direct relational aggression. If Matt had told everyone, "Don't play with Mia," and Mia couldn't figure out why no one would play with her, that's indirect relational aggression. I would call both acts bullying because both are assertions of power by Matt over Mia and both cause her pain and humiliation.

## Scope of the problem

Bullying is pervasive and worldwide, not rooted in any one culture. Children bully other children in rural, urban, and suburban schools, at every income level. Dr. Dan Olweus, the Scandinavian psychologist who originated modern bullying prevention programs, reported in 2010 on data gathered from a sample of 524,000 elementary and high school children in the United States who responded to the Olweus Bullying Questionnaire (Olweus & Limber, 2010). In the questionnaire, bullying is defined, in child-friendly terms, as negative, hurtful behavior that occurred repeatedly and involved an imbalance of power. Questions are multiple choice and the responses use specific language that is designed to minimize subjective reporting. For example, a question might ask if a particular behavior occurred once a month, two or three times a week, etc., rather than using terms such as "seldom" or "frequently." Questions cover a range of bullying behaviors that fall into three general categories: direct bullying, such as physical aggression or name-calling; indirect bullying, such as exclusion or rumor spreading; and cyberbullying.

Data showed that for children in grades three to five, 20%–25% of the children reported being targeted for bullying behavior at least two to three times in the previous month. Nearly 10% of the elementary school children in the database admitted to bullying others in the past month (Olweus & Limber, 2010). Other researchers report that as many as 33.7% of elementary school children in the United States say that they have been bullied at some time (Bradshaw, Sawyer, & O'Brennan, 2007).

Bullying behavior frequently starts as early as preschool or kindergarten as children begin to establish power relationships (Alsaker, n.d.; Pellegrini et al., 2007). Multiple studies have demonstrated that many children continue to be targeted year after year. Dan Olweus reports that 39% of elementary school girls and 45% of elementary school boys who reported being bullied said that they had been bullied for more than a year. Fifty percent of the high school students who reported being bullied had been bullied for more than a year (Olweus & Limber, 2010).

## Who is part of a bullying interaction?

### The child doing the bullying

Bullying is about power—gaining power, asserting it, and maintaining it. It's difficult—and not very useful—to assign a "bully personality profile." In the past, bullies were often described as the child who was an outcast, on the fringes. In contrast to that, some studies have shown that children who bully repeatedly are often the popular kids, with high self-esteem (Menesini et al., 2003). One recent study shows that students who engage in bullying behavior are often in the middle of the social hierarchy and use bullying as a way to achieve higher status (Faris & Felmlee, 2011).

The common characteristic is that the child who bullies sees assertion of power as desirable and social/emotional or physical aggression as the best—or only—way to rise in the social hierarchy.

The study done in 2003 by Menesini et al. also showed that children who repeatedly bully show moral disengagement and lack of empathy. They often think that what they're doing is just fine and it's the targeted child's own fault that he or she is different and thus deserving of being treated meanly. They feel that they deserve power and that "the loser" deserves the treatment he or she is receiving.

### The child who is targeted

Although all children have the potential to be targeted for bullying, some are more frequently targeted. Children who are shy or less assertive

### Use Language That Focuses on the Action, Not the Person

Everyone has the potential to engage in mean behaviors. For most, it's a transient action. But some people can get stuck in the mean behavior. When we use terms like "the bully" we risk stereotyping children and helping them stay stuck in that role. For that reason, throughout this book I use phrases that focus on the action rather than the person—for example, "bullying behavior" and "the person doing the bullying." These phrases communicate a belief that the person can do better and open the door for change.

Similarly, terms like "the victim" risk stereotyping a bullied child as weak or helpless. It's only a few steps from calling someone "the victim" to blaming them for playing that role. If instead we refer to the "person who is targeted," we place responsibility on the person doing the bullying and free from blame the person who is targeted.

than others have few strategies for protecting themselves. Children who are different in any number of ways may be targeted especially frequently. Jo Ann Freiberg, the Connecticut State Department of Education bullying consultant, reports that her caseload of children being targeted overwhelmingly consists of children with special needs (J. Freiberg, personal communication, June 2010). Looking different, acting different, or having self-protection skills that are less developed than those of their classmates all make the children in her caseload more likely to be targeted.

Children who do not conform to gender stereotypes can also be targeted. "She plays with the boys" or "He's gay" might be the opening gambits (Felix & Green, 2010). Children who are overweight, children who dress differently, children whose family incomes are different, either lower or higher, from those of their classmates, or children whose skills and interests are simply different from those of their classmates may be targeted (Gordon, 2010; Olweus et al., 2007).

Studies show that among the characters in this drama are a small number of children who go back and forth, sometimes instigating mean behavior and sometimes being the children who are targeted for mean behavior (Olweus, 1993). These are often the children who have poor social skills, are quick to anger, lack self-control, and have few or no friends to support them. Marie, who is often picked on or ignored, discovers that if she spreads gossip

about Kaitlyn she's suddenly the center of attention in the classroom. However, next week Marie may be targeted when Kaitlyn rallies friends to gang up on her.

### Witnesses to the mean behavior

Bullying is a social act. Researchers have found that 85% of bullying incidents include not just the child who bullies and the child targeted but also an audience: the children who witness the mean behavior. These bystanders are an important part of the equation. Often, the child who bullies will be trying to appear powerful to the audience as much as to the child targeted. In many cases, bullying needs this audience if it is to thrive; one way to thwart the bullying is for the audience to show disapproval (Craig & Pepler, 1998).

The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program describes multiple roles that bystanders might play. At one end are those who actively join in the bullying. At the other end are those who try to help the child who is targeted. Most bystanders fall in between. Some don't take an active part but support the bullying through laughter or other signs of approval; others simply watch. Some quiet bystanders might be uncomfortable with the bullying behavior, but they don't intervene (Olweus et al., 2007).

Even if bystanders only watch, the message to the child doing the bullying is that his or her behavior is acceptable. On the other hand, if bystanders show disapproval, the message is quite the opposite and can have a powerful effect. In a classic Canadian study, researchers used hidden video cameras and microphones to observe children on the playground. They found that 57% of the time when peers intervened in bullying incidents the mean behavior stopped in an average of ten seconds (Craig & Pepler, 1998).

All too often, bullying prevention policies focus on how to teach the children who are targeted to stand up to bullying. This is not a realistic approach. We don't expect people who are robbed at gunpoint to stand up to the criminals. We don't expect people who are targets of domestic abuse to "just walk away" or to "tell the batterer to stop." We need to

make bullying as socially unacceptable as domestic abuse or armed robbery. We need to teach children to take care of each other—we need to turn bystanders into allies.

### Adults

Adults are often unaware of bullying behavior in schools and classrooms. In study after study, the adults underestimated the prevalence of bullying. In the Canadian study mentioned above (Craig & Pepler, 1998), researchers observed behavior on the playground and in classrooms. They recorded an average of one bullying incident every seven minutes. Adults intervened in only 4% of these incidents. Even more amazing is the fact that when they observed classrooms, researchers noted that adults intervened in only 14% of the incidents that happened when the adults were present in the room, despite the fact that 71% of these same adults reported that they "nearly always" intervened in bullying incidents.

In Dan Olweus's 2010 report of the attitudes of more than half a million school children, 60% said that over the past two months bullying incidents had happened in their classroom with a teacher present but not intervening. The slight bright spot here is that the figure drops to 50% if we look at just the younger children in the sample, the third through fifth graders. The other 50% of the third through fifth graders said that their teachers sometimes "tried to stop the bullying" (Olweus & Limber, 2010).

## What Can We Do?

A wealth of research as well as the experiences of classroom teachers tells us that there's a lot that teachers can do to prevent bullying in their classrooms and in their schools (Bear, 1998; Bullock, 2002; Kasen, Berenson, Cohen, & Johnson, 2004; Katz & Chard, 2000; Pepler & Craig, 2007).

- First, teachers can build a classroom community where everyone feels valued and included. They can help students build strong, positive relationships with each other and with the teacher and they can establish rules that guide children toward kind, friendly, inclusive behavior.

■ Once the rules are established, teachers can take the time to help children understand how the rules apply to a range of school situations and make sure children know that teachers hold them accountable for their behavior.

■ Teachers can also increase their observation and awareness of the small, mean behaviors that can develop into bullying.

■ Finally, teachers can give students the tools they'll need to address mean behavior when they witness it.

Taking these steps will decrease the likelihood of unkind behavior and increase the likelihood that students will stand up for each other and report unkind behavior to the teacher.

Much current research and writing focuses on schoolwide practices to address bullying. And indeed, a schoolwide approach is optimal. But even if your school has not instituted schoolwide changes, you can do much in your classroom and in collaboration with grade-level team members to create a safe climate for learning.

My experience, over thirty-plus years in elementary schools, is that children can meet the expectations of the classroom, even when those expectations are quite different from those outside the classroom. Moreover, children can take what they learn in the classroom out into the wider world around them. As you change your classroom, you might just be taking steps toward changing your school.

# Strategies to Prevent Bullying

In writing this book, I drew on my many years of experience as a classroom teacher as well as on the wealth of thinking and research on how to prevent bullying. For much of my teaching career, I used the *Responsive Classroom*® approach to teaching. One of its missions is to give teachers the tools they need to create and maintain safe, caring, and joyful classrooms and to teach children to be kind and caring outside the classroom walls as well.

Many of the strategies of the approach are effective strategies for bullying prevention. In the following chapters you'll find information about helping children get to know each other through the structures of a daily Morning Meeting, creating positively stated rules that are connected to students' learning goals, using Interactive Modeling and role-playing to help children apply expectations to specific situations, and responding quickly and calmly to misbehavior.

If you are already familiar with the *Responsive Classroom* approach, I hope you'll gain a new appreciation of how consistent use of *Responsive Classroom* strategies can be an effective tool in your bullying prevention efforts. And if you are not implementing the *Responsive Classroom* approach, I believe you can find ways to adapt these strategies to your own classroom structures. If you'd like to learn more about the approach, you'll find rich resources at www.responsiveclassroom.org.

Topics covered in this book include the following:

**Addressing gateway behaviors.** I begin the book by talking about gateway behaviors—those small acts of disrespect or unkindness that we often let slide, giving children the message that these behaviors are acceptable (Englander & Schank, 2010). We hear one child call another child names. We notice two children sitting close together in a way that excludes another child. We hear about one child taking another child's cookie at lunch.

Although these are small acts, lack of attention to such behaviors can lead to full-blown bullying. It's important to notice and respond to these behaviors appropriately, nonpunitively, and calmly. Keeping the response nonpunitive is especially important—there is research that shows that when children are exposed to aggressive punishments, they become more aggressive (Kaufman, 1994).

The goal is to firmly show children that meanness is unacceptable, to teach them more appropriate social skills, and to help them begin to develop habits of kindness. To learn more about this, see Chapter One.

**Building a positive and safe classroom community from day one.**
Research indicates that bullying happens less frequently in classrooms
where all children are included in activities (Gottfredson, 2001; Greene,
2006; Newman, Murray, & Lussier, 2001). It also indicates that bullying
happens less frequently in classrooms where the teacher shows warmth
and responsiveness to children (Olweus, Limber, & Mihalic, 2000).
Researchers have discovered that these variables account for widely diver-
gent amounts of bullying behavior in the same school and even among
various classes at the same grade level (Henry et al., 2000). I'll present a
number of strategies in Chapters Two, Three, and Four that will help you
create a safe classroom community.

**Creating rules.** Rules are essential guideposts to children's behavior
and are a key ingredient in most evidence-based bullying prevention pro-
grams (Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt, & Hymel, 2010). Rules set the stan-
dard for how children treat each other, their classroom, and their work.
But for rules to be effective, teachers need to do ongoing work with stu-
dents to help them understand how the classroom rules apply to day-to-
day situations. For more information about creating and applying rules,
see Chapter Three.

**Addressing "tattling."** To effectively address bullying, we need children
to become allies who protect the child targeted for bullying by reporting
to an adult. But all too often we give mixed messages, on the one hand
asking children to tell us about bullying and on the other hand chastising
them for "tattling."

Without adequate teaching about what and how to report, children
are reluctant to report bullying to responsible adults in school. Younger
children are more willing to report than older children. Nonetheless,
in the database of more than 500,000 responses to the Olweus Bullying
Questionnaire, 70% of the third graders (the youngest children in the
sample) who reported being bullied in the past two months had not told
a teacher (Olweus & Limber, 2010).

This reluctance to report bullying results in the continuation of bully-
ing behaviors because children need adult intervention to stop such

behaviors. But it's also important to help children understand the difference between telling the teacher about small behaviors that they can let go of or resolve independently and reporting mean behavior to a responsible adult to keep someone safe. To learn more about this, see Chapters Three and Six.

**Addressing outside-the-classroom behaviors.** Research shows that a lot of bullying and pre-bullying behavior occurs in areas of the school outside of the classroom, such as the hallway, playground, lunchroom, and school bus (Olweus & Limber, 2010). Schoolwide rules and anti-bullying protocols are an important piece of addressing bullying in these areas. But there's also a lot that classroom teachers can do to help children apply the kind behaviors they're learning in the classroom to other parts of the school. In Chapter Five, you'll learn about specific strategies for helping students be better school citizens.

### About the Term "Parent"

Students come from a variety of homes with a variety of family structures. Students might be raised by grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles, and foster families. I want to honor all these people for devoting their time, love, and attention to raising children. However, it's hard to find just one word that adequately encompasses all these caregivers. For simplicity's sake, I use "parent" to refer to anyone who is a child's primary caregiver.

**Working with parents.** Communication with parents is a critical element in preventing bullying. Parents can let teachers know about children's behavior at home that might indicate problems at school and teachers can let parents know about classroom bullying prevention strategies. One international meta-analysis of bullying prevention programs found that a strong parent component was an important part of every successful bullying prevention program (Farrington & Ttofi, 2009). You'll find information about working with parents in each chapter.

**Teaching children about bullying.** Children need to know what bullying is and how to prevent it. Direct teaching may help a child who is tempted to bully to stop and think. It may empower a child who is targeted to seek help. The most effective lessons about bullying,

however, focus on helping children who witness bullying to be an ally of the child who is targeted. Children can learn to avoid laughing at the targeted child's expense, to befriend that child and comfort him, and, most important, to tell a responsible adult.

To have a positive classroom and school climate free from meanness that might escalate into bullying behaviors, we also need to directly teach children some of the subtleties of social discourse. What is the difference between laughing for fun, say at a silly joke, and laughing at someone's expense, which violates our rule to be kind? Why is it important to refer to people by their names rather than unfriendly nicknames that they may not like?

For more about this, including lesson plan ideas, see Chapter Six.

## Final Thoughts

Teachers have an important opportunity—and an obligation—to curb mean behavior. The elementary school years are a period during which adults can make a big difference. Children in grades K–5 are more willing to turn to adults for help solving relationship problems than are their older peers. Furthermore, children's attitudes toward school and learning are formed in the early years of school. By creating a climate of safety and inclusion in elementary school classrooms, teachers can support children in taking risks and discovering the joys of learning in their current lives and in the years to come.