

PRACTICE BRIEFS



Bullying Intervention

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ABSTRACT: Bullying is characterized as repeated aggressive behavior involving a power imbalance that causes harm. It can include traditional bullying, cyberbullying, hate speech, and targeting based on identity. Bullying and suicidality are closely intertwined, particularly among youth who have existing or emerging mental health diagnoses. Addressing bullying requires a comprehensive, multi-level approach encompassing micro-, meso-, and macro-level interventions.

Introduction

Bullying, defined by Barone and Barone (2021) as repeated aggressive behavior involving a power imbalance that causes harm, includes traditional bullying, cyberbullying, hate speech, and targeting based on identity (Fossum et al., 2023; Gee et al., 2024). Psychological distress, social isolation, academic difficulties, and safety concerns are lasting impacts of bullying (Fossum et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2024). About 34% of school-aged youth are involved in bullying, including 16% as targets, 6% as perpetrators, and 12% as both targets and perpetrators (Feijóo et al., 2021), highlighting the pervasive nature and complex target-perpetrator cycle (Liang et al., 2024). This article examines treatment strategies across micro-, meso-, and macro-level interventions, and addresses ethical and cultural factors related to bullying.

Overview

Bullying perpetrators may use bullying to gain social status despite negative consequences (Wiertsema et al., 2023). A core characteristic of bullying is its toxic impact on interpersonal relationships; the perpetrator often aims to isolate and dehumanize the target, creating a belief that the abuse is unstoppable (Carney et al., 2011). Verbal abuse is the most common form of traditional bullying, and spreading rumors or social media exclusion dominates cyberbullying (Feijóo et al., 2021).

Bullying targets typically suffer silently. Gender differences exist. Boys face more physical violence, whereas girls face more emotional and psychological abuse (Feijóo et al., 2021). Targets may hesitate to seek help due to perceived adult inaction (Cameron et al., 2021; Ng et al., 2021). Because telling an adult does not guarantee help, bullying tends to worsen after disclosure (Bjereld et al., 2021; Muñoz-Fernández et al., 2025). Youth have better outcomes if they have trusted adults in their orbits who listen to their experiences.

Bystanders encourage or disrupt bullying. Active intervention empowers targets, whereas inaction increases their distress (Ng et al., 2021). Bullying is cyclical; factors like maladjustment and self-control influence whether an individual becomes a target or perpetrator (Liang et al., 2024). Perpetrators dehumanize and blame targets to avoid guilt, which reinforces the behavior (Bjärehed et al., 2020). Moreover, targets with maladjustment and low self-control are more likely to become perpetrators (Liang et al., 2024).

Treatment Approaches

Addressing bullying requires a comprehensive, multi-level approach encompassing micro-, meso-, and macro-level interventions. Supported by the American Counseling Association (ACA) Advocacy Competencies (2018), this framework recognizes the interconnectedness of individual, relational, and societal factors in perpetuating and preventing bullying.

Micro-Level Interventions

Micro-level interventions should challenge rigid perceptions, promote understanding of behavioral complexities, and foster a growth mindset. These interventions target individual students and their immediate families, aiming to equip them with skills and support to navigate bullying and foster resilient family dynamics. For targets, fostering resilience and self-esteem is crucial. Emotional regulation and positive school climate significantly contribute to resilience (Virilia et al., 2024).

Micro-level interventions include:

- **Individual counseling:** Cognitive techniques, taught in individual counseling, could help students reframe negative self-perceptions, develop coping mechanisms, and enhance self-worth.
- **Group therapy:** Group therapy settings can offer a safe space for sharing experiences, reducing isolation, and increasing peer learning.
- **All therapeutic settings:** Individual and group settings can include counseling techniques such as social-emotional learning skills, assertiveness training, and effective reporting strategies.

Bullying behaviors are shaped by systemic and relational factors across both **home and school environments**. **Parenting practices** characterized by rejection, chaos, and coercion increase the likelihood of bullying perpetration, whereas warmth, structure, autonomy support, and parental involvement are protective (Hinduja & Patchin, 2022). Similarly, students' **perceptions of teacher unfairness**, such as inconsistent or ineffective adult responses to bullying, contribute to negative bullying dynamics within schools (Barone & Barone, 2021). In contrast, **positive home and school climates** promote resilience and emotional regulation, reducing bullying involvement (Gee et al., 2024; Virilia et al., 2024).

Meso-Level Interventions

Meso-level interventions target immediate social environments with school and community focus. The goal is to create supportive, inclusive environments that actively deter bullying and promote positive peer interactions. School climate and culture are central. Feeling unsafe in school and experiencing a lack of care from teachers is linked to bullying and mental health problems (Fossum et al., 2023). Additionally, perception of teacher unfairness can derail a healthy school climate (Barone & Barone, 2021). Disrespect and denigrating comments, like body-shaming and identity-based microaggressions, are often overlooked in school interventions. Yet, these experiences contribute to shame, isolation, diminished belonging, and emotional trauma, all of which are established predictors of suicidality among youth (Bjereld, 2021; Gee et al., 2024). In contrast, authoritative school climates with fair rules, adult support, and prevention efforts reduce hate speech (Gee et al., 2024). Increasing societal awareness of how everyday interactions link to interpersonal emotional pain is vital to prevention efforts.

Meso-level interventions include:

- **Teacher training:** Equip teachers to identify, intervene in, and prevent all forms of bullying. Training should cover bullying dynamics, consistent disciplinary practices, and cultural competency for race-based bullying. Perceived teacher unfairness can diminish school belonging and increase vulnerability to bullying (Liang et al., 2024).
- **Clear anti-bullying policies:** Develop and consistently enforce comprehensive policies defining bullying, outlining reporting procedures, and specifying consequences for perpetrators (Ramirez et al., 2024).

- **Promoting school belonging:** A diminished sense of school belonging mediates the link between perceived teacher unfairness and bullying victimization (Barone & Barone, 2021). Schools can foster belonging through initiatives like peer mentoring, student-led anti-bullying campaigns, restorative justice, and student participation in decision-making.
- **Mental health support:** Provide accessible mental health services (e.g., school counselors, psychologists) to address problems often associated with bullying (Fossum et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2024).

Macro-Level Interventions

Macro-level interventions address broader societal factors that influence bullying. Creating trauma-informed schools requires leadership that models empathy and accountability. Professional development covering microaggressions, the role of shame in behavior, and strategies for emotional repair helps normalize reflection and mutual respect. When adults model and hold one another to these standards, students likewise internalize them, fostering a culture of psychological safety, belonging, and care that reduces bullying and suicidality (Bjereld et al., 2021; Muñoz-Fernández et al., 2025; Virlia et al., 2024). The interventions aim for a cultural shift toward greater empathy, respect, and inclusivity via policy changes, public awareness campaigns, and systemic reforms.

Macro-level interventions include:

- **Legislation and policy:** Advocate for and implement stronger state and national anti-bullying legislation. This includes mandating school-based prevention programs, providing mental health resources, and establishing clear reporting and response guidelines (Ramirez et al., 2024).
- **Media literacy and responsible technology use:** Promote media literacy education to help youth critically evaluate online content and understand their digital footprint. This also involves collaborating with technology companies to develop tools and policies that reduce cyberbullying and hate speech (Nee et al., 2023).
- **Research and data collection:** Invest in understanding bullying’s evolving nature and long-term impacts, and intervention effectiveness. This includes collecting disaggregated data on various groups to identify specific vulnerabilities and tailor interventions (Nee et al., 2023).
- **Professional standards and ethical guidelines:** ACA’s (2018) Advocacy Competencies play a crucial macro-level role by establishing ethical guidelines and professional standards for youth counselors. They emphasize advocating for clients, promoting social justice, and contributing to a safe, inclusive society. Counselors use their expertise to inform policy and advocate systemic changes addressing bullying at its root.

Cultural and Ethical Considerations

Effective bullying intervention necessitates a deep understanding of cultural and ethical considerations, particularly concerning the diverse ways individuals experience and present the impact of bullying. Bullying’s effects vary across cultural and demographic groups. Although research highlights general psychological distress, social isolation, and academic difficulties as common consequences (Fossum et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2024), it also points to specific forms of targeting, such as hate-based speech based on individual their identities (Gee et al., 2024). Marginalized individuals may face identity-linked bullying, causing unique psychological harm and reluctance to report due to fear of discrimination or misunderstanding.

Gender differences in bullying experiences—with boys more likely to experience physical violence, and girls more likely to experience emotional and psychological abuse such as spreading rumors or being excluded (Feijóo et al., 2021)—suggest that the emotional and behavioral responses to bullying may also differ. Professionals must be attuned to these varied presentations, recognizing that a one-size-fits-all approach to identifying distress may overlook the nuanced ways individuals from diverse backgrounds

express their pain. Interventions, therefore, must be similarly nuanced, considering specific demographic contexts, perhaps via targeted diversity and inclusion initiatives to promote understanding and tailored support.

Several ethical challenges emerge in the context of bullying intervention. Interventions must be effective, equitable, and sensitive. Perceived teacher unfairness can diminish a student's sense of school belonging, increasing their vulnerability to bullying (Barone & Barone, 2021). This raises ethical questions about the responsibility of institutions to foster inclusive environments and address systemic biases that might contribute to bullying or hinder effective support.

Moreover, the concerning reality that telling an adult about bullying does not guarantee help (Bjereld et al., 2021; Muñoz-Fernández et al., 2025) presents a profound ethical dilemma. Professionals are ethically bound to protect clients from harm and provide effective assistance, yet this finding highlights a potential breakdown in trust and efficacy that can exacerbate a victim's suffering. This underscores the ethical imperative for adults, including counselors, to be perceived as trusted confidants who will not only listen but also take steps to help targets (Bjereld et al., 2021). ACA plays a crucial macro-level role by establishing ethical guidelines and professional standards, emphasizing advocacy for clients, promoting social justice, and contributing to a safe, inclusive society (ACA, 2018).

Conclusion

Bullying is a complex issue with significant negative impacts on mental health, academics, and overall well-being. Bullying is often cyclical, with victims sometimes becoming perpetrators due to factors like maladjustment and low self-control. This brief underscores the importance of trusted adults who take supportive action and the detrimental effect of bystander inaction, advocating comprehensive, empathetic, and multi-faceted strategies to disrupt bullying cycles and promote inclusivity. Addressing bullying requires a multipronged approach recognizing the interplay of individual vulnerabilities, relational dynamics, and societal influences. Implementing micro-level interventions (empowering individuals/families), meso-level strategies (fostering supportive school environments), and macro-level initiatives (promoting societal change) is crucial for creating safer, more inclusive spaces for all youth. Bullying and suicidality are closely intertwined, particularly among youth who have existing or emerging mental health diagnoses. Bullying acts as both a precipitating stressor and an amplifier of underlying vulnerabilities such as depression, anxiety, trauma-related disorders, and neurodevelopmental conditions. These dynamics operate through cycles of shame, social exclusion, and dysregulation, which heighten suicidal ideation and self-harm risk, specifically for youth who are marginalized.

Resources

- ACA Advocacy Competencies: ACA outlines necessary counselor behavior, skills, and knowledge to address systemic barriers. https://www.counseling.org/docs/default-source/competencies/aca-advocacy-competencies-may-2020.pdf?sfvrsn=b001425c_4
- American School Counselor Association: The school counselor and bullying/harassment prevention and the promotion of safe schools. <https://www.school-counselor.org/Standards-Positions/Position-Statements/ASCA-Position-Statements/The-School-Counselor-and-the-Promotion-of-Safe-Sch>
- Stop Bullying: An official U.S. government website that outlines what various stakeholders can do in the event of bullying. <https://www.stopbullying.gov/resources/get-help-now>
- School Safety: An official U.S. government website providing schools and districts with actionable recommendations to create safe and supportive learning environments for students and educators. <https://www.schoolsafety.gov/bullying-and-cyberbullying>

- Together Against Bullying: A self-assessment for students to help them identify the ways in which they perpetrate bullying behaviors. <https://www.togetheragainstbullying.org/tab/changing-behavior/bullying-self-assessment>

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