

W5

Bullying is an issue that's often discussed at school, but it's important to keep re-assessing what it means. As we get older and experience new situations, bullying can change form. It is vital that we continue to recognise it and continue to stand against it.

What is bullying?

Bullying is the action of being intentionally and repeatedly cruel or violent towards others. It could be physical, using violence towards someone's body, or verbal, using threats or insults. Bullies can also attack using others, by spreading rumours or causing humiliation.

This may be done online, as cyber-bullying. There, bullies may hide their real name, and believe that they can write and say things that they would not dare to in 'real life', without the risk of getting caught.

Bullying can also be far subtler than we expect. Emotional bullying is done by people with close emotional connections to their victims. They are in a position to manipulate the victim's feelings, perhaps by making the victim feel guilty or worthless, or by threatening to withdraw their affection.

Bullying can also be done by people in accepted positions of power – for example someone's boss at work, or even a teacher or caregiver. These bullies use their power to intimidate and exploit people who have to obey them. They may single out certain people, or bully everyone who works under them.

Why do people bully others?

Bullies may say they are picking on someone for any reason. They may say the person they bully is weak, odd or stupid, using any differences as an excuse. However, this is never the true reason behind their actions. Bullies may enjoy their own power. They may use bullying to make themselves feel or seem stronger, perhaps because they're jealous or insecure.

Family issues, stress and trauma may also cause bullying behaviour. It is possible that bullies have witnessed similar aggressive behaviour at home, or earlier in their lives. Surveys suggest that people who have been bullied are much more likely to become bullies themselves.

Whatever the reason for bullying is it is always wrong. Bullies can be helped, rather than only punished.

What anti-bullying measures are in place?

Schools have a duty to prevent and deal with bullying. By law, every state school must have a policy in place to achieve this. The policy should be shared among pupils, parents and teachers. Students should feel comfortable reporting bullying and should know how to do it. Teachers should feel comfortable judging how best to deal with each case on an individual basis.

Many social media companies too now encourage users to report incidents of abuse and bullying online. These are rarely assessed case by case though and automatic action may be taken without requests for explanation.

What are the consequences of bullying?

Both bullies and their victims may develop long-term problems as a result of bullying. It can seriously affect both physical and mental health.

Like many mental health problems, the effects of bullying can creep up on people. They can have significant effects before people realise it.

Victims often start questioning themselves and feel increasingly insecure. They may even feel self-loathing and feel unable to live with the shame they have been forced to feel. They almost always feel isolated. This can result in self-harm and even suicide.

How can we step in to stop bullying?

Victims' fear for their safety and wellbeing, and often their critically reduced self-confidence may mean they feel unable to speak out. If you are being bullied, or you know someone who is, be brave. You do have the power to help yourself and others.

If you know someone is being bullied, doing nothing is never the right thing to do – standing by when someone is bullied is a way of helping the bully. Talk to the victim and try to make them feel safe. Include them in your activities and assure them that the bully isn't right. Give them the support they need to report the problem.

In all cases of bullying, you should report what has happened. Victims need to find a way to tell a friend or family member and ask for understanding and support. Friends can help to prevent bullying simply with their presence: bullies are less likely to attack in front of witnesses. Try to show strength: bullies feed on weakness.

Support will also make it far easier for a victim to approach an authority figure. If this adult does not seem to be taking action, tell another.