



Information sheet:

Understanding bullying behaviours

There are many different definitions of bullying but almost all of them include three distinct elements. Bullying:

- is **deliberately harmful** aggressive behaviour
- is behaviour that is **repeated** over time
- involves a **power imbalance** between those who bully and those being bullied.

Types of bullying behaviour

It is widely accepted that there are different types of bullying. These fall into four main groups:

- **verbal** bullying – repeated mocking, name-calling, unwanted teasing, homophobic, or racist remarks
- **physical** bullying – repeated hitting or kicking, taking or threatening to take possessions
- **social or relational** bullying – repeated exclusion, spreading rumours or gossiping, withholding friendship, pulling faces
- **cyber** bullying – repeated threats, criticism, or unkind comments or images sent by text, email, or posted on social networking sites.

What bullying is not

Not all acts of aggression are bullying. For example, although unacceptable behaviour, a one-off physical fight between children of similar size and strength is not bullying. A New Zealand publication, Responsive Schools, can help schools to clarify what is and is not bullying and to develop their own definitions.

The bullying continuum

Some researchers express a concern that many anti-bullying interventions address all incidents of bullying behaviour as if they were equally severe. They suggest, instead, that bullying behaviours sit along a continuum from mild to high severity. It is important that schools define what they consider to be a mild, moderate, or severe incident.

Many mild bullying episodes can be addressed by approaches such as informal teacher intervention or through training bystanders to intervene.

Moderate cases may need a more formal method, such as a restorative justice conference.

Severe cases of bullying or other behaviours, such as assault, may require the police to be involved.

Understanding bullying

Understanding why people bully can be useful in exploring ways to build a safer and more caring climate. Research shows the role of the wider social environment in shaping and influencing behaviour.

Common explanations for bullying:

- **Bullying as a developmental process** as young children start to assert themselves and establish their social dominance. Physical bullying can be more common with younger children. As they get older, verbal and relational forms of bullying become more frequent.
- **Bullying as a personality trait** in children with low empathy or a predisposition towards aggressive behaviour. Some studies also show that children who have certain types of personality traits may be more likely to be bullied or engage in bullying behaviours.
- **Bullying as learned family behaviour** in children from families with particular characteristics and ways of dealing with things.
- **Bullying as a social phenomenon** that reflects patterns of dominance of some groups over others. Prior to the 1980s, bullying was mostly understood as an interpersonal interaction between a perpetrator and a victim. Since then, research has increasingly viewed bullying as a social phenomenon operating within a peer group. A key change in thinking about bullying occurred when researchers found that bullying behaviours often occur in the presence of peers or bystanders who participate either directly or indirectly. They found that when peers intervene, bullying stops faster. These studies have resulted in more focus on ways to support peers to intervene, as well as ways in which teachers can create pro-social norms in classrooms. Types of bystanders can include:
 - assistants, who join and assist
 - reinforcers, who laugh or encourage without engaging in the behaviours
 - outsiders/onlookers, who are not involved but see bullying happen
 - defenders who try to stop the bullying and assist those being bullied.
- **Bullying as a socio-ecological phenomenon** that draws on systems thinking and considers the 'ecology' of the system within which behaviours occur. Variables in the wider environment known to influence the cause and expression of bullying behaviours include individual, peer, family, school, community, and societal factors. The socio-ecological perspective combines and builds on the earlier perspectives and includes a wider consideration of the types of factors that might influence bullying behaviour; for example, societal norms or aggression on television.

While all of these explanations will be valid in some situations, consensus is forming around this last one – bullying as socio-ecological phenomenon. This perspective allows for multiple explanations for bullying behaviours that look beyond the individual and explore the multiple risk and protective factors that exist within individuals, peer groups, families, schools, communities, and the wider social environment.

This information is summarised from research briefs on the Wellbeing@School website. Produced by the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER) in 2012, these research briefs summarise what is known in New Zealand and internationally about how to promote a safe and caring school environment that addresses bullying behaviour.

Read the following useful research briefs from the Wellbeing@School website:

Wellbeing@School: Building a safe and caring school climate that deters bullying, Overview paper (Boyd, 2012)

Wellbeing@School: W@S-What-bullying-is-research-brief

Wellbeing@School: W@S-Building-social-competency-research-brief

Publications referred to in this information sheet include:

Espelage, D., & Swearer, S. (2010). A socio-ecological model for bullying prevention and intervention. In S. Jimerson, S. Swearer, & D. Espelage (Eds.), *Handbook of bullying in schools: An international perspective* (pp. 61–72). New York: Routledge.

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Salmivalli, C. (1999). Participant role approach to school bullying: Implications for intervention. *Journal of Adolescence*, 22(4), 453-459.

Wearmouth, J., Glynn, T., & Berryman, M. (2005). *Perspectives on student behaviours in schools: Exploring theory and developing practice*. Milton Park, Oxfordshire: Routledge.