

**Bullying in schools: Epidemiology and prevention**

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**Abstract**

Bullying is seen in different spheres of life but is more worrisome in schools because deleterious effects are more pronounced in victims of bullying at schools due to the young age of the victims. Different forms of bullying are observed but their effects are mostly similar though their severity varies depending on the attitude of the bullied student. Some places in any school are more prone to incidences of bullying and these areas should be specially taken care of to prevent bullying. Various strategies are adopted depending upon research in a particular institution or state but the involvement of all stakeholders is important to reduce the incidences of bullying.

**Keywords:** Bullying, schools, victimology, prevention

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**Introduction**

“Bullying is repeated verbal, physical, social or psychological behavior that is harmful and involves the misuse of power by an individual or group towards one or more persons (1).” This definition describes that the act has to be repetitive and be harmful, to be called as bullying and if did just once is not included in the bullying. This harassment can lead to a variety of consequences which is harmful and deleterious for the development of a student. This bullying involves different ways to torment a student but all leads to degradation and loss of self-respect.

It is an international problem and not confined to a few nations (2) and is a critical issue for the youth internationally (3). It is important to know about the different ways by which a student can be bullied, where the students are bullied, why they are bullied, what the consequences of bullying are and what we can do to prevent the bullying.

**Review of literature**

Bullying is one variety of violence and abuse of human rights (4) which can lead to physical or psychological damage (1),(4), impair the social, moral, psychological and physical development (4). and also hampers relaxation and enjoying (4). Psychological symptoms are reported 7.5 times higher in bullied children as compared to non-bullied children (5).

A single act of intimidation or aggressiveness or mutual conflict cannot be called bullying (1). Usually, there is a power imbalance between the victim and the offender and this power imbalance may be physical, in popularity or in the knowledge of embarrassing information (6). It looks apparently that power imbalance will be more in males but it is astonishing that females are bullied more as compared to males (7),(8).

Bullying is observed in various places like workplaces and schools (9). In schools usually, it occurs in playgrounds, school buses and in the buildings (6). The largest number of cases of bullying were seen in staircases or hallways 45.6% followed by bullying in classes-rooms 33.6%, school grounds 22.9%, cafeteria 18.9%, followed by bathroom 9.1% and school bus 7.8% and other places of school were just 0.8% (7).

Racial differences were seen in the victims of bullying (7),(8). It was seen more in native American and African American students (10). Bullying goes on increasing with increase in the standard of study; seen least in standard 6<sup>th</sup> (72.2%) and maximum in standard 12<sup>th</sup> (85.9%) but no difference was observed due to the income of the victim or their families (7). Those students who did not have fathers were more likely to bully others (11).

Incidence in one survey in the US is reported as 20.2% (8). The incidence of bullying in the US as per another survey is 21.5% in the age group of 12-18 years out of which insult, making fun or calling names constituted the biggest group (13.6%) closely followed by making students subject of rumours (13.2%); pushed, shoved, tripped or spit on in 6.0% or threatened with harm in 3.9%; excluded from activities in 4.5% or asked students to do things which they did not like in 2.2% or purposefully destroyed the properties of other students in 1.6% cases (7). It may be in the form of forced confinement also (5).

The majority of cases of bullying involves students 98% as compared to bullying by sibling 17%, teacher and their guardian and parents 8% in a survey done in the UK of bullied persons. A big group of the bullied persons did not report bullying (45%) because 32% considered nobody will take it seriously and a similar number felt embarrassed to report and good number thought that the situation will get worse 26%. There was the maximum satisfaction of 82% when reported to a family member (86%) as compared to 72% when reported to a friend (69%) and 49% when incidence was reported to the teacher (92%) (12).

The incidence of cyber bullying becomes more when children are away from supervision by adults and are more vulnerable to consequences of cyber-bullying (13). In a survey in USA 6.9% students were cyberbullied and unwanted text messaging topped in cyberbullying at a rate of 3.2% followed by putting hurtful information on net 2.8%, unwanted contact via online, unwanted contact via instant messaging in 2.1%, gaming 1.5% sharing private information purposefully or unwanted contact via email or purposeful exclusion from an online community in 0.9% each (7). Cyber-bullying is also known as electronic bullying (5).

Though some people argue that bullying is part of growing up and is an experience (4) yet it can never be justified because it is a breach of the right to education (4). It leads to various bad outcomes in the form of low self-esteem, insecurity, withdrawal from the society, aggressive behavior, drug and alcohol abuse and various mental disorders (5). Offenders were mostly suffering from poor academic achievements (3), aggression, and substance abuse while victims were associated with depression (10) and bullying is associated with poor psychosocial adjustment (3). There are defenders of victims of bullying and passive onlookers. Pro-bullying behavior is associated with tobacco and alcohol use and even defenders behavior is related to tobacco use and alcohol use (14). There is a relationship between victimization of bullying and direct self-injurious behavior (15). The most serious repercussions of the bullying come in the form of deaths of the victims of bullying (10),(16).

## **Discussion**

Bullying is a big problem in the world but this is preventable. To be successful in prevention it is very important to define bullying and this definition should be a consistent definition. Another important aspect is to know the accurate prevalence rates of bullying, anti-bullying laws, and their implementation which should be reviewed annually to find out their efficacy. Evidence-based anti-bullying programs should be developed and efforts should be made to remove the stigma associated with it. Therefore evaluation of anti-bullying programs should be done regularly and social media companies should actively work towards this programs (17).

Incidences of bullying should be reported to the authorities In the institution and in turn, they should support the victims and send them to the health departments for their treatment and also counsel the offenders making them understand what harm they are causing to the growth of the children and this will help in reduction of dropout rate due to bullying (9). Usually, offenders and victims are different students and need different preventive approaches (10).

In a Canadian study, prevention study was done based upon 5 categories of bullying behaviors: establishing positive school climate, disseminating monitoring and reviewing policy, reporting and responding to bullying and involving the community and opined that that any strategy which may be good for one institution may not yield similar results in another institution due to different implementation (18). There is a need to make the whole community aware of the nature and effects of the bullying and only then prevention is possible (19).

Some skills if learned by students can be very useful for the prevention and stopping of bullying in schools. Acting with awareness and confidence, leaving the unsafe position, saying at once to stop this, seeking adult guidance if

some unkind or disrespectful remark is given, yelling stop, positive self-talking, speaking for inclusion if excluded from some activity, getting help from busy adults and using physical self-defense but as a last resort, are the skills which can help to reduce the incidences and severity of bullying (20).

Safe Schools in USA and Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP) in Norway and Canada are well-recognized programs to prevent bullying in schools (5) and are reported to have produced a significant reduction in the victimization due to bullying (21).

School-based anti-bullying programs can effectively reduce the verbal bullying behavior (11). Early interventions reduce the negative effects of victimization and increase mindfulness and resilience (22). Arousing the empathy for the victim and condemning the behavior of the offenders by the teacher was a better method to reduce bullying than only condemning the offender, therefore the teachers should use this strategy (23). Teachers should always be involved in the implementation of antibullying programs and there should be rewards for correct use of skills by teachers and there should be positive behavioral change interventions (24).

### **Conclusions**

Schools must provide a safe environment free from bullying so that every child can grow and learn peacefully. Schools have a moral and legal duty to provide a bullying-free environment. Various governments of different countries are signatories to the International Human rights declarations and are duty bound to protect the society from violation of human rights in the form of bullying. A combination of different strategies may be adopted, implemented and assessed to find out what is working best in a particular institution and modified after assessing to make it working to produce the best results.

### **Comments**

The problem of bullying is not a well-recognized problem in all the schools in spite of its being very common. Many institutions remain in a denial mode due to the stigma associated with it. It is important to recognize this problem and make teachers, students and parents well aware of the problem and its consequences. There is urgent need to detect and act immediately after it is reported by the student. For early detection, Closed Circuit Television Cameras should be installed at places which have been reported to be frequently misused in bullying incidences. Prevention can save harmful effects of bullying and make the schools safe places where the rights of students for safe education, will never be violated.

### **Conflict of interest**

None

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