

policy brief



Battling School Bullying

what works to make schools safer?

Most American schoolchildren spend their days learning to be readers, writers and thinkers. Some, unfortunately, also learn to be victims.

Bullying is an age-old problem, and one that many adults tend to shrug off as merely a natural, if unpleasant, feature of growing up. But parents, school officials and researchers have increasingly recognized it as something considerably worse: an insidious practice that can harm perpetrators as well as victims. According to researchers, bullying is the most common form of violence suffered by children¹. “When children perceived as different are not in supportive environments, they may be at a higher risk of being bullied. When working with kids from different groups—including lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) youth and youth with disabilities or special health care needs—there are specific things you can do to prevent and address bullying... We do know that Black and Hispanic youth who are bullied are more likely to suffer academically than their white peers.”²

Research shows that the damage from bullying can go well beyond a few nasty individual encounters. Victims may suffer both short- and long-term consequences that interfere with learning, including depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, suicidal thoughts and stress. There is also a link between bullying and later difficulties with substance use, violence and antisocial behavior. Nor are bullies themselves immune: studies indicate an increased risk of suicide, low self-esteem and depression among them as well.

Although school officials have for years been trying different approaches to stop or reduce bullying, little is actually known about which strategies work best. To address this, researchers at Arizona State University’s Southwest Interdisciplinary Research Center (SIRC) measured the impact of several widely used interventions on repeat bullying and aggressive behavior by children who had already been officially identified as having engaged in bullying behavior.

Bullying occurs mostly in schools, in the presence of peers, and is most prevalent during middle school years. Though definitions vary, bullying is generally considered to be repetitive, unprovoked and intentional physical, verbal, or psychological aggression towards an individual with less power. This can include physical fighting, stealing, name calling, teasing, giving “dirty” looks and spreading rumors.

¹Ross, S. W., & Horner, R. H. (2009). Bully prevention in Positive Behavior Support. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 42, 747–759.

² <http://www.stopbullying.gov/at-risk/groups/index.html#race>

Students in the study had received a disciplinary referral for bullying because they had engaged in aggressive behavior or delivered “disrespectful messages (verbal or gestural) to another person that includes threats and intimidation, obscene gestures, pictures, or written notes ...”

The researchers examined repeated bullying and aggressive behaviors by these children within the same school year as influenced by seven intervention strategies including detention, in-school suspension, loss of privileges, out-of-school suspension, parent contact, parent-teacher conference and time in office.

Only two of the interventions, loss of privileges and parent-teacher conference, were strongly effective (statistically significant) in reducing reoccurrence.

Students whose intervention was loss of privileges received a second referral at a rate 29% lower than students who received another type of intervention. Similarly, compared to another type of intervention, students whose intervention was a parent-teacher conference received a second referral at a rate 35% lower.

Loss of privileges was defined as strategies that inhibit privileges and interaction with peers in privileged places outside the classroom, such as the playground. Parent-teacher conference encompassed strategies that involve the parents, teachers and/or administrators.

The discipline strategies that removed a student from the classroom and school environment (detention, in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension and spending time in the office) were not significantly effective in deterring reoccurring bullying and aggressive behaviors.

Parent involvement may be key to successful bullying interventions because it creates interaction between the child’s two primary environments – home and school. However, it is important to note that the type of parental involvement matters; this study found that parent-teacher conference significantly deterred reoccurring bullying, while parent contact only, without the school interaction, had the reverse effect and increased the likelihood of a repeat offense. In other words, parents can actually contribute to bullying behavior through modeling and tolerance, or because they define and interpret the significance of bullying very differently from the child or the school.

Therefore, anti-bullying interventions should involve peers, parents, teachers and school officials combined with particular disciplinary attention to loss of privileges and parent-teacher conferences as successful strategies to deter repeat bullying and maintain a safe school environment.

Data for this study include individual-level information drawn from the School-Wide Information System (SWIS) surveys and school-level information gathered from the National Center on Education Statistics. The final sample consisted of 1,221 students in grades K – 12 who had received an office disciplinary referral for bullying during the first semester.

Adapted from:

Ayers, S. L., Wagaman, M. A., Geiger, J. M., Parsai, M. B., & Hedberg, E. C. (2012). Examining school-based bullying interventions using multilevel discrete time hazard modeling. *Prevention Science*, 13(5), 539-550. # Read full article [PMCID:PMC3896994](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/24888888/)

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