

## Understanding Bullying

Bullying occurs in schools (and workplaces, churches, clubs)—it occurs when power is exerted through aggression, which may be physical or verbal. A recent survey of Canadian students reports that 54% of boys and 32% of girls bullied others in a six week time period, and 34% of boys and 27% of girls were victimized in the same time period.

Bullying changes with age. For example, at the onset of puberty, young adolescents focus on emerging sexuality and sexual identity, and bullying is likely to take the form of sexual harassment. Adults sometimes misread the line young adolescents draw between banter (for example, describing a person or action as gay) and bullying, which illustrates the complexity of identifying non-physical bullying. Across age groups, boys' bullying more likely involves physical aggression, while girls' bullying is more likely indirect aggression, like gossiping. With access to computers and the Internet, cyber-bullying (threatening text messages, breaking into e-mail accounts to spread malicious messages, spamming) has become common.

Successful interventions to prevent and stop bullying work at different levels. While bullying is usually between two people it must be understood within context—the context of school, peer relations, family and the community. Both bullies and victims respond in learned ways, ways they have learned from these contexts. Bullying is not caused just by the psychological states of bullies and victims, but is also a reflection of how tolerance and intolerance of differences (for things like racism, sexism, class-ism, homophobia) are lived out. In adolescence, peer groups become critical contexts for addressing bullying where onlookers are more likely to watch than stop a bullying incident. For most students, general anti-bullying programs are effective, but for those who frequently bully or are victims individualized interventions are more effective. Young children respond well to teacher led interventions while adolescents are often more responsive to peer led interventions. Research on anti-bullying interventions illustrates that whole school multi-faceted approaches work best.

Sandra Mathison

Professor of Education, UBC and McBride parent  
sandra.mathison@ubc.ca