

School safety: Bullying and cyberbullying

By Angela Asch / October 2023

IN THIS BRIEF:

- ▶ Definitions of bullying and cyberbullying
- ▶ Statistics about bullying and cyberbullying
- ▶ Impacts of bullying and cyberbullying
- ▶ Signs of being bullied or bullying
- ▶ How local educational agencies can help students and families
- ▶ LEA examples of bullying prevention communication
- ▶ Sample questions for board members
- ▶ Relevant guidance and resources

Definition of bullying

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ [Stop Bullying](#) website defines bullying as “unwanted, aggressive behavior that involves a real or perceived power imbalance.⁴ The behavior is repeated, or has the potential to be repeated, over time.” A power imbalance can include using physical strength, sharing embarrassing information, or using status to control or harm.

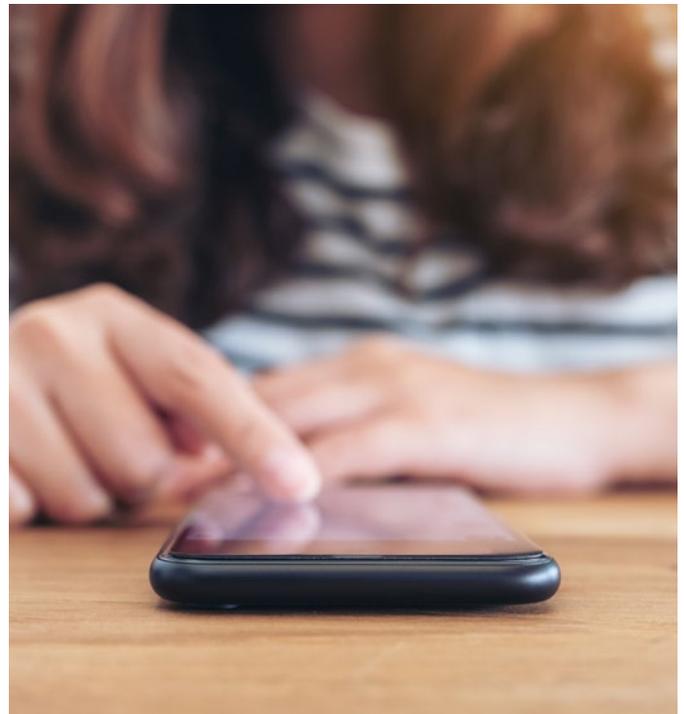
A one-time argument or disagreement where someone uses name calling or foul language does not constitute bullying. However, if the argument is not resolved and both parties have not moved on, then lingering ill will may result in continued verbal, social (relational), and/or physical abuse. All school staff, as well as parents and families, are responsible for teaching and modeling respectful behavior and building safe and supportive learning environments and should monitor all potential causes of bullying.

Introduction

All students need safe and supportive environments to learn, grow, and thrive. Local educational agencies (LEAs) can foster safe and supportive school environments by continuously working to improve school climate for all students and staff. Governance teams can support their LEAs by reviewing policies and regulations, analyzing data on bullying in their districts and county offices of education (COEs), and advocating for ways to improve student and staff well-being and school climate.

A positive, safe, and inclusive school climate helps prevent bullying and harassment, reduce absenteeism, and improve academic achievement.¹ A safe and supportive school environment minimizes distractions and disruptions to teaching and learning, communicates expectations for student behavior clearly, applies consequences for infractions fairly and consistently, and is a place where students feel engaged, included, and not discriminated against.²

Since the 2018 passage of [Assembly Bill 2291](#), all LEAs are required to adopt procedures for preventing acts of bullying and cyberbullying.³ This brief links to various resources to assist LEAs in the work of building safe and inclusive schools so all students can learn and thrive.



Bullying can take many forms

Bullying behavior can be verbal, social (relational), and/or physical, as outlined below.⁵

Verbal bullying

- » Threatening harm
- » Making inappropriate sexual comments
- » Taunting
- » Teasing
- » Name calling

Social (relational) bullying

- » Purposely hurting someone's relationship or reputation
- » Embarrassing others publicly
- » Deliberately excluding or isolating someone
- » Spreading rumors

Physical bullying

Causing physical harm to an individual by:

- » Hitting
- » Kicking
- » Pinching
- » Spitting
- » Pushing
- » Tripping
- » Choking
- » Destroying or damaging an individual's property by taking or breaking it

Students can also experience cyberbullying

Cyberbullying, as defined by Stop Bullying:

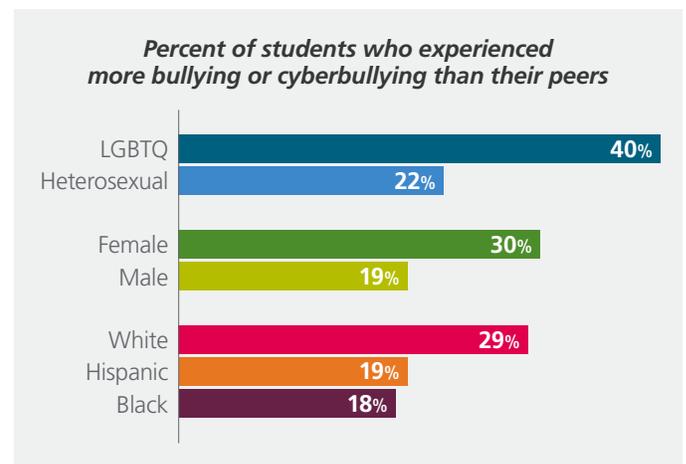
- ▶ Occurs on electronic devices such as computers, tablets, and cell phones.
- ▶ Most commonly happens through text messaging, social media apps via direct message or public posts, gaming forums, chat rooms, message boards, and email.
- ▶ Can involve public shaming or humiliation by allowing others to view, participate in, or share disparaging or harmful content about an individual or group, which can include name calling and using slurs.
- ▶ Harmful content can be shared, sent, or posted publicly and can include personal or private information to cause humiliation or embarrassment, false or negative information to discredit or disparage, or threats of physical harm.

- ▶ Can ruin reputations of both the victim and those engaging in cyberbullying.
- ▶ Can be unlawful or criminal.⁶

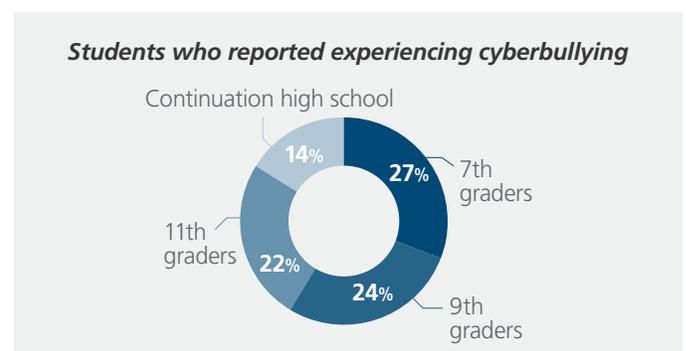
Cyberbullying is distinct from in-person bullying because it can remain online indefinitely and can be harder to recognize. Like in-person bullying, cyberbullying can be persistent as well. Electronic devices allow constant communication, making cyberbullying instant and hard to ignore. Simultaneously, electronic communication is often permanent and public, which can harm an individual's reputation and impact their employment or educational opportunities. In addition, teachers, parents, and caregivers may not see cyberbullying, making it hard for them to notice what is happening.

Statistics about bullying and cyberbullying

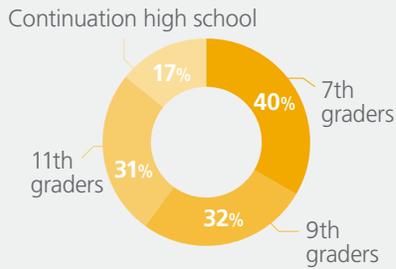
According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), in 2021, one in five teenagers experienced bullying at school and one in six experienced cyberbullying.⁷ In addition, some students experienced higher rates of bullying than others.⁸



California Healthy Kids Survey data from 2019–21 indicates that 13 percent of elementary students in California reported experiencing cyberbullying, while 43 percent reported experiencing verbal harassment/bullying in school.⁹ The latest survey data collected on cyberbullying and bullying for middle and high school students in California shows that:¹⁰



Students who reported experiencing more verbal harassment and bullying in-person at school



Impacts of bullying and cyberbullying

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention’s 2022 literature review on bullying and cyberbullying reports that bullying can cause negative academic outcomes such as truancy, an increased likelihood of dropping out of school, and a lower grade point average.¹¹ Further, a longitudinal study by Swansea University on youth under the age of 25 and cyberbullying found that youth who were victims of cyberbullying were more than twice as likely to self-harm and engage in suicidal behaviors as their peers.¹² In addition, this study found that the victims were less likely to report cyberbullying or to seek help than if the bullying occurs in person.

Bullying impacts victims and perpetrators

Bullying can cause lasting emotional, psychological, and educational harm to both victims and perpetrators.

Some of the consequences for students who are bullied manifest in behaviors that educators and families can observe. The CDC notes that there are a range of behaviors that indicate that an individual is being bullied, including:

- ▶ Withdrawing from friends and family;
- ▶ Not wanting to attend school;
- ▶ Declining grades;
- ▶ Complaints about feeling sad, nervous, anxious, or angry;
- ▶ Trouble sleeping; and/or
- ▶ No longer showing interest in their favorite activities.¹³

An individual may not exhibit all the aforementioned behaviors, and the impacts of bullying may manifest in ways not listed here.

Bullying can be difficult to detect. Open and repeated communication about the importance of identifying and mitigating bullying with all students is important and necessary to improve school climate and safety.

Perpetrators also experience the consequences of their behavior. Individuals who bully are more likely to abuse drugs and alcohol in

the future, suffer academically in school, and may be more prone to commit subsequent violence or experience more acts of violence. According to the CDC, “Youth who bully others and are bullied themselves suffer the most serious consequences and are at greater risk for mental health and behavioral problems.” The school’s approach to working with students who bully can be important to preventing future issues for the students themselves and their peers.

LEAs can take steps to assist students and families

LEAs can engage in conversations with students and their school communities about identifying and reporting bullying and cyberbullying and provide training on digital citizenship and bystander intervention. Mental health professionals working in schools can ask students about cyberbullying and self-harm and provide suicide prevention resources. COEs can help create safe school environments by collaborating with districts on staff professional learning opportunities, providing technical assistance, and sharing resources.

Additionally, connection and belonging foster positive school climate and reduces bullying behaviors. Linking students with mentors and caring adults increases connection and a sense of belonging, thereby reducing disengagement and behavior issues.

Successful bullying prevention programs incorporate several key components through a range of short- and long-term strategies:

- ▶ Using diverse, communitywide resources;
- ▶ Implementing clear schoolwide expectations;
- ▶ Providing training for all staff;
- ▶ Using Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports;¹⁴
- ▶ Addressing multiple components of bullying behavior and the environments that foster it;
- ▶ Including student voice in the creation and implementation of bullying prevention programs;
- ▶ Including mentorship for students;
- ▶ Strengthening peer-to-peer relationships; and
- ▶ Teaching inter- and intrapersonal skills.¹⁵

Bullying prevention communication examples from LEAs

Because of the importance of providing a safe and inclusive school climate, many LEAs have invested significantly in bullying prevention. LEAs such as Long Beach Unified School District,¹⁶ Elk Grove USD,¹⁷ and Garden Grove USD¹⁸ provide comprehensive information on their websites related to bullying prevention strategies and supports.

Including bullying prevention information in languages other than English, like Santa Clara County Office of Education, and making information accessible on various communication platforms will help ensure that all students and families receive and understand the impact of bullying and how to prevent it.¹⁹

Governance teams can lead by engaging their communities in creating a shared vision and responsibility for school safety and belonging to build a positive learning environment for all students and staff. Governance teams can assess their local resources and recruit community partners to aid their school safety and bullying prevention work. Building robust partnerships and meaningful community collaborations can enhance and extend a wider variety of resources and build stronger networks of support.

LEAs highlighted on the previous page provide examples of community communication on bullying and cyberbullying that educate and assist students and families.

They provide:

- ▶ Definitions of bullying and cyberbullying
- ▶ Digital citizenship education
- ▶ Instructions on how to report bullying
- ▶ Anonymous reporting (see Garden Grove USD for use of the STOP IT app)
- ▶ Resources for students and families
- ▶ Educational videos
- ▶ A list of policies that support bullying prevention

Questions for board members to consider

- 1) Do our board policies and administrative regulations addressing bullying comply with [California laws](#)?²⁰ How do our board policies and administrative regulations promote, assist, and create safe and supportive school environments?
- 2) What local data do we have about school climate? Are we tracking issues like bullying and cyberbullying?
- 3) What does the assessment of existing conditions in our LEA tell us about the needs of our students and opportunities for effective bullying prevention strategies?
- 4) Does our LEA have a professional learning plan to assist school staff in implementing the board policies and administrative regulations related to bullying?
- 5) What indicators can be used to monitor and assess the effectiveness of our LEA's safety-related policies and bullying prevention strategies? What additional resources are needed?
- 6) What opportunities are there to incorporate student, parent/guardian, and community input into our LEA's safety policies, curricula, and strategies?

Bullying and cyberbullying resources

The following includes bullying and cyberbullying prevention tools and school safety strategies:

Safe and supportive school environments

CSBA offers governance teams resources to enhance school safety, including guidance on a range of safety issues, sample board policies and administrative regulations, tips on developing comprehensive school safety plans and best practices for communicating during a crisis, along with associated magazine articles, policy briefs, and blogs. bit.ly/3pBStNd

Belonging: How Social Connection Can Heal, Empower, and Educate Kids by Dustin Bindreiff provides research-based strategies for strengthening relationships, building inclusive classrooms, developing trust, and fostering a sense of psychological safety. bit.ly/3smEGeW

SchoolSafety.gov provides schools and districts with actionable recommendations to create a safe and inclusive learning environment where students can thrive and grow. Use these resources to help implement anti-bullying initiatives at your schools, download the SchoolSafety.gov infographic for an overview of bullying, and learn about strategies to identify, prevent, and address bullying. bit.ly/3P4rvYW

Bullying prevention

This California State PTA webpage provides resources on bullying and cyberbullying to increase awareness and prevention and decrease bullying behavior. bit.ly/3snUj5W

The California Department of Education provides bullying prevention training materials, publications, and resources for educators, parents, community-based organizations, and community members for recognizing bullying behavior and approaches for determining how to respond. bit.ly/45EHh2d

StopBullying.gov provides information from various government agencies on what bullying and cyberbullying are, who is at risk, and how to prevent and respond to bullying. bit.ly/45kN0dL

The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry provides families and clinicians free resources regarding bullying, such as videos, research, training to prevention bullying, and book recommendations. bit.ly/44qGOzv

Relevant CSBA sample policies, administrative regulations, and legal guidance

CSBA *GAMUT Policy* and *Policy Plus* subscribers have access to the most up-to-date CSBA sample policy language. The following are sample board policies (BP) and administrative regulations (AR) that have been developed in compliance with California laws and address the issues of bullying, harassment, and discrimination:

- ▶ BP 0410 – Nondiscrimination in District Programs and Activities
- ▶ BP/AR 0450 – Comprehensive Safety Plan
- ▶ BP/AR 4119.11, 4219.11, & 4319.11 – Sexual Harassment
- ▶ BP/E 4119.12, 4219.12, & 4319.12 – Title IX Sexual Harassment Complaint Procedures
- ▶ BP/AR 5131.2 – Bullying
- ▶ BP 5131.8 – Mobile Communication Devices
- ▶ BP 5137 – Positive School Climate
- ▶ BP/AR 5145.2 – Freedom of Speech/Expression
- ▶ BP/AR 5145.3 – Nondiscrimination/Harassment
- ▶ BP 5145.9 – Hate-Motivated Behavior
- ▶ BP/AR 6145.5 – Student Organizations and Equal Access
- ▶ BP 6159.4 – Behavioral Interventions for Special Education Students

CSBA also provides legal guidance on issues of bullying, harassment, and discrimination. The following are a sample of legal guidance relevant to specific student groups:

- ▶ [Legal Guidance on Rights of Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Students in Schools](#)
- ▶ [Legal Guidance Providing All Children Equal Access to Education, Regardless of Immigration Status](#)

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Endnotes

- 1 Currie, L. (2015, August 10). *Why Teaching Kindness in Schools Is Essential to Reduce Bullying*. Edutopia. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/3QPnIWk>
- 2 Bindreiff, D. (2023, May 21). *How a Sense of Safety Shapes Student Learning and Behavior*. EdWeek. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/3YOUoLZ>
- 3 Chiu (2018, September 18). *AB-2291 School safety: Bullying*. (2017-2018). California Legislative Information. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/3Phg40p>
- 4 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2022, June 30). *What Is Bullying*. StopBullying.Gov. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/3QPO84F>
- 5 See Endnote 4
- 6 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2021, November 5). *What Is Cyberbullying*. StopBullying.Gov. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/45FJQRQ>
- 7 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2021, September 2). *Fast Fact: Preventing Bullying*. CDC. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/45lyOeB>
- 8 See Endnote 7
- 9 CalSCHLS (n.d.). California School Climate, Health, and Learning Surveys. Retrieved June 30, 2023, from <https://bit.ly/3OFLbE>
- 10 See Endnote 9
- 11 Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (2023, February 1). *Bullying and Cyberbullying Literature Review: A product of the Model Programs Guide*. OJJDP. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/45FKj6y>
- 12 Swansea University. (2018, April 19). *Young victims of cyberbullying twice as likely to attempt suicide and self-harm, study finds*. ScienceDaily. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/3skZOCv>
- 13 See Endnote 7
- 14 California Department of Education (2023, February 21). *Definition of MTSS*. CDE. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/3E94Bto>
- 15 Pacer’s National Bullying Prevention Center (2023, February 28). *Bullying Facts: What you need to know*. PACER.ORG. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/45htTBp>
- 16 Long Beach Unified School District (n.d.). *Bullying Prevention*. Retrieved June 30, 2023, from <https://bit.ly/44jbumn>
- 17 Elk Grove Unified School District (n.d.). *Bullying & Cyberbullying Prevention*. Retrieved June 30, 2023, from <https://bit.ly/44hq7GN>
- 18 Garden Grove Unified School District (n.d.). *STOPit - Anonymous Reporting*. Retrieved June 30, 2023, from <https://bit.ly/45hujHZ>
- 19 Santa Clara County Office of Education (n.d.). *Bullying Prevention and Education Resources*. Retrieved June 30, 2023, from <https://bit.ly/3qFX8P8>
- 20 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2023, May 8). *California Anti-Bullying Laws & Policies Components of State Anti-Bullying Laws and Regulations*. StopBullying.Gov. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/45ERBYc>