

What is bullying?

School resources

Bullying is a form of mean, hurtful behaviour that can happen to anyone at any time. Not all aggressive or harmful behaviour is considered bullying. The definition of bullying has four essential characteristics:

- **The behaviour is mean and harmful.** Bullying causes short- and long-term negative outcomes for the victim.
- **The behaviour is repeated, persistent and ongoing.** Bullying is usually not a one-off incident and is not a normal part of growing up.
- **The behaviour is carried out on purpose with the intent to cause harm, fear, or distress to another person.** This can be in the form of physical, emotional, psychological, academic or social harm. This includes harm caused to a person's reputation, their personal belongings, or their feelings of safety and wellbeing at school.
- **There is a perceived or real power imbalance between the perpetrator and victim** based on factors such as age, physical size and strength, gender, gender identity, ethnicity, intelligence, physical resources such as weapons, social status and popularity, or disability.

Why the definition of bullying is important

Bullying is a word often used to describe a lot of different aggressive or harmful behaviours that are not actually bullying. Bullying is one-sided and does not include one-off incidents or conflicts between strangers. Bullying happens within social relationships, involving repeated and hurtful behaviours that stem from a misuse of power¹.

A clear and shared definition is important so that centres, schools, kura, adults, and young people can identify bullying and distinguish it from other types of aggression or conflict. It is important that everyone is looking for the same types of behaviours before labelling a person as a bully. Incorrectly labelling a child as a bully can lead to serious and inaccurate stigmatisation. A consistent approach to defining and understanding bullying is also important so that appropriate strategies and interventions can be implemented.

Some examples of bullying behaviours

Bullying evolves throughout childhood, so what bullying might look like during the early years can be different to how it might look in older children. It can involve an individual or a group and can be very obvious (such as punching or calling someone names) or hidden (such as rolling eyes at a person or whispering mean things). Here are some examples of bullying behaviours you might see in your centre, school or kura:

- **Physical bullying** involves causing harm to a person's body or possessions. For example, hitting, kicking, biting, spitting, beating up, stealing or damaging a person's belongings, using mean or rude hand gestures, and being made afraid of being hurt. Physical bullying is more commonly used by younger children. As children get older, they are more likely to use verbal bullying, social/relational bullying, and electronic/cyberbullying.

- **Verbal bullying** involves name-calling, saying or writing mean things about a person, threats, discriminatory, racial and hurtful comments, insults, and hurtful teasing.
- **Social and relational bullying** involves excluding others from a group, telling others not to be friends with someone, damaging or destroying a person's social reputation or social acceptance, gossiping or spreading rumours, rolling of the eyes, and embarrassing a person or sharing private information about the person without permission. Social and relational bullying is sometimes called **covert bullying**. It is often harder to recognise and observe because the behaviour occurs behind the person's back.
- **Electronic or cyberbullying** involves the use of technology to participate in any of the behaviours described above. It may include using email, mobile phones, text messages, and internet sites to upset, threaten, socially exclude, embarrass, or damage social relationships, and uploading photos or videos of another person to cause harm or disrespect to another. Children who are bullies or are bullied online are also often perpetrators and victims of bullying in person. It is also easy for bullies to remain anonymous when they use technology to harm another person. This means we need to be aware of all the places bullying can take place, knowing that it might be occurring in multiple contexts.

Why it is important to be aware of bullying

Research indicates that New Zealand's reported rates of students experiencing bullying behaviours are among the highest in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries². Bullying negatively impacts everyone involved and can have serious immediate, short- and long-term physical, social, emotional and psychological impacts. For instance, a student being bullied at school may withdraw from socialising with other students, reducing their sense of belonging and connectedness. Serious experiences of depression, anxiety and low self-esteem can result from bullying, all of which can contribute to a person's ability to develop and maintain positive relationships. Bullying can also impact on students' academic achievement and learning.

The negative consequences associated with bullying are not limited to the perpetrator and victim. Research shows that bullying affects everyone including those people who witness or know about the bullying behaviour³. For the witnesses or bystanders, they may feel sad or guilty about the bullying that is going on. They may be unsure how to respond or fear that they may become a target of the bully.

Everyone should be aware of bullying because it impacts on the safe environment we should be creating in our centres, schools, kura, and classrooms. When we condone or ignore bullying, we are communicating to others that serious harmful behaviours are acceptable or aren't worthy of an intervention response. Bullying behaviours undermine the aroha, manaakitanga, wellbeing, and contribution of young people, all of which are key values of the New Zealand education system – Te Whāriki and The New Zealand Curriculum. Bullying is also seen as stable behaviour, which means that young children who regularly bully others may grow up continuing to use violence and aggression. Without effective strategies and intervention, the negative consequences of bullying can continue into adulthood.

Debunking myths about bullying

Bullying is a normal part of growing up

While some social conflicts and disagreements can teach children problem-solving skills, negotiation, perspective-taking and conflict resolution skills, ongoing harmful behaviour will impede the healthy development of a child. Bullying is not a normal part of childhood, nor will children go through a bullying phase. Bullying can have serious negative consequences for young people. Thinking that bullying is

a common, normal part of childhood that will build children's character is harmful and communicates to children that bullying has to be tolerated. This perception is likely to lead to ongoing bullying that becomes more serious over time.

Children will sort it out themselves

While some children may have the skills and confidence to respond to a perpetrator, other children are fearful of the repercussions of standing up for themselves or others. They might be worried that the bullying will continue or even get worse. They might not know what to do or say to the perpetrator and that is why it is so important that adults and other young people respond to victims when they reach out for support. No child wants to hear 'you can sort it out yourself' when they are seeking support from victimisation. If they could sort it out themselves, they probably would. Without adult intervention, students will start to feel unsafe, that their parents and teachers aren't taking them seriously, and that they are incapable of protecting themselves.

All bullies lack social skills and have no friends

Some bullies have low self-esteem while others feel really good about themselves. This might be because they have used bullying behaviours as a way to gain social control, making themselves popular and well-liked by their peers. These bullies are likely to have plenty of friends and supporters, and they may have advanced social skills that they use to strategically manipulate others to get what they want. We can't assume that all bullies lack social skills and the skills to interact positively with others. Children with all personalities and social skills can be bullies.

The child will tell me if they are being bullied

Unfortunately, many young people do not report being bullied because they are too embarrassed, they are worried that the bullying will get worse, or that the adults won't believe them or won't stop the bullying. Even young people with strong relationships with their teachers and parents choose not to report bullying. So it's important that adults are aware of the signs that could indicate a child is being bullied:

- Cuts or bruises for unknown reasons
- Damaged clothing or belongings
- Frequent requests to stay home from the centre, school or kura
- A lack of enthusiasm to go to the centre, school or kura or be with their friends
- Reluctance to join in activities they once enjoyed
- Making comments like 'nobody likes me' or 'I don't have any friends'
- Seeming unhappy or sad, lacking self-confidence or self-esteem
- Choosing to spend more time alone
- Being visibly upset after using their computer or mobile phone
- Suddenly avoiding online technology for unknown reasons
- Refusing to say what is wrong when an adult inquires

Bullying is easy to see happen

Remember that bullies don't always lack social skills or awareness – they are smart. Bullying frequently happens in places and spaces where adults aren't around to see it. For instance, bullying takes place on the playground, in bathrooms, in busy school hallways, and online. This is why it is important that young people are aware of bullying so they can report it when they see it happen.

Bullies are always boys

Bullying is not gender-specific and girls can be bullies too. Boys are more likely to use physical and less obvious aggression when they bully, whereas girls tend to use more hidden behaviours such as social

exclusion and ostracism. No matter what type of bullying behaviours are used by boys or girls, all are equally harmful.

The role of adults in responding to and preventing bullying

All adults, including teachers, parents, and other support staff are crucial in creating and maintaining a safe and supportive school environment. The school's behaviour policy about bullying is an important place to start to establish a shared understanding of bullying and how best to respond. The involvement of teachers, parents, and young people in developing this policy is crucial so that everyone understands and agrees to the preventative and responsive strategies that will be implemented when bullying is identified.

Adults play an important role in responding to and intervening in bullying behaviours. Adults should be aware of bullying and what it looks like throughout a young person's development. Remember, young people won't always come to adults to tell them about bullying – sometimes we need to recognise the signs ourselves and investigate.

Young people need to be taught that bullying is unacceptable and that there are alternative, positive ways to behave and resolve conflict. When adults do nothing about bullying, they communicate to young people that bullying behaviours are acceptable. When adults understand the underlying causes for a young person's bullying, they are able to provide support and practical intervention such as teaching conflict resolution or perspective-taking skills.

Preventing and responding to bullying can be complex and challenging, but with the leadership of adults, we can create centres, schools, kura where all young people feel safe and that they belong. The follow-on resources will provide some practical tips for how adults can spot bullying in early, primary, and secondary schools, how to address bullying, and ways to prevent bullying from occurring. For more information, see [Bullying in New Zealand Primary and Secondary Schools](#) and [Bully Free NZ](#).

Endnotes

¹ Olweus, D. (1993). *Bullying at school: What we know and what we can do*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.

² Education Review Office (May 2019). *Bullying prevention and response in New Zealand schools*. The full report can be accessed <https://www.ero.govt.nz/assets/Uploads/Bullying-Prevention-and-Response-in-New-Zealand-Schools-May-2019.pdf>

³ Rivers, I., Poteat, V. P., Noret, N., & Ashurst, N. (2009). Observing bullying at school: The mental health implications of witness status. *School Psychology Quarterly*, 24(4), 211–223.

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Cara Swit

Dr Cara Swit is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Canterbury and currently teaches in early intervention, child and family psychology, and positive behaviour. Her research explores the important role of teachers and parents/whānau in fostering healthy social relationships in young children. Cara's current research project examines the impact of young children's aggression on teacher and parent health and wellbeing. She delivers practical workshops designed to equip ECE educators and parents to support young children's social development.