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Those Who Are Bullied and the Harms

What Is “Bullying?”

Anston is being treated really badly by some of the other students in his sixth grade class. They make fun of his glasses and his weight. They intentionally refuse to allow him to sit with them at lunch. This has been going on for months. Anston is becoming more and more depressed. His grades are dropping. He often stays home because of headaches. When he told his principal that he was being bullied, her response was, “This is not bullying. There is nothing I can do.”

What is “bullying?” It will likely not surprise you to know that there is no clarity on the answer to this question. It will be helpful for you to know about the different definitions so that if you are told that what is happening to your child is “not bullying,” you will be empowered to respond in an effective manner. These are the different definitions.

- **Academic definition.** Researchers consider “bullying” to be when someone intends to be hurtful to someone, this harm is repeated, and there is an “imbalance of power.” Imbalance of power means that the hurtful person has greater social or physical power than the one they are treating badly. There is general agreement that bullying behaviors include these components and can involve physical aggression, verbal aggression, and relational aggression or social exclusion.¹

1 Hellström, L., Thornberg, R., and Espelage, D.L. (2021). Definitions of bullying. In: *Wiley Blackwell Handbook of Bullying: A Comprehensive and International Review of Research and Intervention* (ed. P.K. Smith and J. O’Higgins Norman), 2–21. Wiley Blackwell.

- **Statutory definitions.** In the United States, are 50 different state statutory definitions of what is called bullying or harassment, and sometimes intimidation.² A 2011 US Department of Education (USDOE) report on state statutes noted that the lack of consistency “contributes to confusion over how a specific incident should be treated.”³ You can see all of the different state statutory definitions at <https://stopbullying.gov>. Because these statutes require that school districts create anti-bullying policies, your state’s statutory definition becomes part of the policy in your district’s disciplinary code. When a principal tells you or your child that “this is not bullying,” they are saying “this does not, in my opinion, meet the definition in our policy.”
- **Discriminatory harassment.** The definition of “discriminatory harassment” or “harassment” comes from US federal civil rights laws. This is a definition provided by the USDOE Office for Civil Rights (OCR): “Harassment creates a hostile environment when the conduct is sufficiently severe, pervasive, or persistent so as to interfere with or limit a student’s ability to participate in or benefit from the services, activities, or opportunities offered by a school. When such harassment is based on race, color, national origin, sex, or disability, it violates the civil rights laws that OCR enforces.”⁴
- **International definitions.** Internationally, the term “bullying” is defined in different ways by different countries. There are cross-cultural differences in how hurtful behavior is expressed in different countries. There are also differences in perspectives associated with physical aggression, verbal aggression, and relational aggression or social exclusion.⁵
- **Terms or questions in surveys.** The term “bullying” is also used in surveys. These generally ask about hurtful acts. The CDC’s Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) uses this definition: “Bullying is when 1 or more students tease, threaten, spread rumors about, hit, shove, or hurt another student over and over again. It is not bullying when 2 students of about the same strength or power argue or fight or tease each other in a friendly way.”⁶ Most of the surveys do not ask about seriousness, frequency, or harmful impact. This is a concern because

2 <https://www.StopBullying.Gov/resources/laws> (accessed 1 August 2024).

3 Stuart-Cassel, V., Bell, A., and Springer, J.F. (2011). Analysis of state bullying laws and policies. US Department of Education. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED527524.pdf> (accessed 1 August 2024).

4 <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-201010.pdf> (accessed 1 August 2024).

5 Smith, P.K., Robinson, S., and Slonje, R. (2012). The school bullying research program: why and how it has developed. In: *Wiley Blackwell Handbook of Bullying: A Comprehensive and International Review of Research and Intervention* (ed. P.K. Smith and J. O’Higgins Norman), 42–59. Wiley Blackwell.

6 <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/yrbs/questionnaires.htm> (accessed 1 August 2024).

the surveys do not distinguish between hurtful incidents that were resolved and those that are more serious or persistent.

- **Cyberbullying.** Cyberbullying is a newer form of hurtful behavior that is accomplished using digital technologies and social media. Because there is such a clear overlap between face-to-face bullying and cyberbullying, my recommendation would be a focus on the hurtful behavior, not the means by which this occurred.
- **What students think.** A student could complain they are being bullied based on one hurtful act that was not significantly serious – or serious or persistent hurtful incidents and situations that match any of the above definitions.

A document on bullying and cyberbullying was recently provided by the California School Board Association.⁷ On page one, column one, the document references a recent California statute that addresses the need for a policy that prohibits discrimination, harassment, intimidation, and bullying based on specified protected class status. The state statute requires schools to address what should be considered discriminatory harassment, but under the state anti-bullying statute. These provisions are not in accord with the requirements under federal civil rights laws. On page one, column two, the document provides the academic definition. The difference between definitions is not addressed. On page two, the document references the California Healthy Kids Survey, which asks students about a range of hurtful acts which could or might not have been serious or persistent. This is a recipe for total confusion.

The perspective I share with school leaders is that we need to shift to a focus on empowering students to maintain positive relationships, reducing all forms of hurtful behavior, and ensuring both students and school staff can respond effectively to all incidents that involve hurtful behavior. Some of these may be more minor incidents that students should be able to resolve by themselves or with school staff assistance. Other more serious incidents will need to be resolved by a school team including the principal. All of these hurtful incidents cause some level of harm and can disrupt the environment.

If a student is experiencing someone being hurtful to them, they are unable to get this to stop, and this is causing them distress and an interference with their learning, should it really matter whether the hurtful acts meet the district’s policy on “bullying?”

7 Asch, A. (2023). School safety: bullying and cyberbullying. California School Boards Association. https://www.csba.org/-/media/CSBA/Files/GovernanceResources/EducationIssues/ConditionsofChildren/BullyingGovBrief-REPD_10-2023.ashx?la=en&rev=d409e63de5f641839230ee2dd9ae9ff9 (accessed 1 August 2024).

Students Who Are Bullied

In this section, I will describe two general profiles of the kinds of students who are bullied.

Bullied and Hurtful Students

Jacob has had a challenging life. He is living with his single mom, as his father is in prison. His mom struggles with ensuring the family has sufficient money and sometimes she drinks too much. Jacob has attention challenges, which interfere with his ability to focus while in school. Jacob is frequently excluded by other students in his class. They also often poke fun at his clothes and indicate that he smells. Jacob has begun to be aggressive to other students. He triggers and gets very upset. When he is upset he will lash out at anyone around him, especially those who are always poking fun at his clothing.

Some students have both been bullied and excluded by others and they are also being hurtful. Sometimes, these students are called “bully-victims.” This is backwards. The saying “hurt people hurt people” fully applies to these students. They are “victims” who are now also “bullies” – except I suggest not using these terms. It is imperative to address the hurtful way these students are being treated to support them in stopping their hurtful behavior.

This may be your child or a student who is being hurtful to your child. These students have generally been repeatedly denigrated and excluded by other students and sometimes by school staff. They may also often come from homes that have a high level of violence or neglect. This has impacted their ability to self-regulate. These young people tend to be unpopular, aggressive, easily angered, and have few friends.⁸ They are very low on the school’s social ladder – the most ostracized by peers.⁹

These students may engage in behaviors that encourage other students to be hurtful to them. They are generally impulsive and poor in regulating their

8 Kochel, K.P., Ladd, G.W., Bagwell, C.L., and Yabko, B.A. (2015). Bully/victim profiles’ differential risk for worsening peer acceptance: the role of friendship. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology* 41: 38–45. Nansel, T.R., Overpeck, M.D., Pilla, R.S. et al. (2001). Bullying behaviors among US youth: prevalence and association with psychosocial adjustment. *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)* 285 (16): 2094–2100. Juvonen, J., Graham, S., and Schuster, B. (2003). Bullying among young adolescents: the strong, the weak, and the troubled. *Pediatrics* 112 (6 Pt 1): 1231–1237.

9 Cook, C.R., Williams, K.R., Guerra, N.G. et al. (2010). Predictors of bullying and victimization in childhood and adolescence: a meta-analytic investigation. *School Psychology Quarterly* 25: 65. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0020149>.

emotions.¹⁰ Other students can subtly pick on them until they “snap” and become disruptive. Most school staff do not notice or they ignore the more minor hurtful acts directed at these students. Then, when they become disruptive, they are the ones who are disciplined.¹¹

These students engage in “reactive aggression.”¹² Reactive aggression is emotional and impulsive hurtful behavior. They impulsively react badly in response to something bad that has been happening to them.

Marginalized hurtful students are at high risk.¹³ They have higher levels of depression, anxiety, eating disorders, substance abuse, and suicidal behavior.¹⁴ They are less successful academically.¹⁵ They are more likely to carry weapons to school to protect themselves.¹⁶ They are less likely to graduate.¹⁷ They have the highest rates of self-harm, plans for suicide, and attempted suicide.¹⁸ They also have higher rates of serious criminal charges in adulthood.¹⁹

10 Juvonen, J., Graham, S., and Schuster, B. (2003). Bullying among young adolescents: the strong, the weak, and the troubled. *Pediatrics* 112 (6 Pt 1): 1231–1237.

11 Green, V.A. (2021). The role of teachers. In: *Wiley Blackwell Handbook of Bullying: A Comprehensive and International Review of Research and Intervention* (ed. P.K. Smith and J. O'Higgins Norman), 333–350. Wiley Blackwell.

12 Dodge, K.A. (1991). The structure and function of reactive and proactive aggression. *The Development and Treatment of Childhood Aggression* 16 (5): 201–218. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6494.2009.00610.x>.

13 Gini, G. and Pozzoli, T. (2009). Association between bullying and psychosomatic problems: a meta-analysis. *Pediatrics* 123 (3): 1059–1065. Copeland, W.E., Wolke, D., Angold, A., and Costello, E.J. (2013). Adult psychiatric outcomes of bullying and being bullied by peers in childhood and adolescence. *JAMA Psychiatry* 70 (4): 419–426. Wolke, D. and Lereya, S.T. (2015). Long-term effects of bullying. *Archives of Disease in Childhood* 100 (9): 879–885. <https://doi.org/10.1136/archdischild-2014-306667>.

14 Juvonen, Graham, and Schuster, Bullying among young adolescents Kowalski, R.M. and Limber, S.P. (2013). Psychological, physical, and academic correlates of cyberbullying and traditional bullying. *The Journal of Adolescent Health* 53 (1 Suppl): S13–S20.

15 Glew, G.M., Fan, M.Y., Katon, W. et al. (2005). Bullying, psychosocial adjustment, and academic performance in elementary school. *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine* 159 (11): 1026–1031. Schwartz, D. (2000). Subtypes of victims and aggressors in children's peer groups. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology* 28: 181–192.

16 van Geel, M., Vedder, P., and Taniol, J. (2014). Bullying and weapon carrying: a meta-analysis. *JAMA Pediatrics* 168 (8): 714–720. Klomek, A.B., Sourander, A., and Elonheimo, H. (2015). Bullying by peers in childhood and effects on psychopathology, suicidality, and criminality in adulthood. *Lancet Psychiatry* 2 (10): 930–941.

17 Wolke, D., Copeland, W.E., Angold, A., and Costello, E.J. (2013). Impact of bullying in childhood on adult health, wealth, crime, and social outcomes. *Psychological Science* 24 (10): 1958–1970. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797613481608>.

18 Ford, R., King, T., Priest, N., and Kavanagh, A. (2017). Bullying and mental health and suicidal behaviour among 14- to 15-year-olds in a representative sample of Australian children. *The Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* 51 (9): 897–908.

19 Wolke, D., Copeland, W.E., Angold, A., and Costello, E.J. (2013). Impact of bullying in childhood on adult health, wealth, crime, and social outcomes. *Psychological Science* 24 (10): 1958–1970. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797613481608>.

These students are functioning at a high level of traumatic distress.²⁰ They have learned that their environments are unsafe. Their amygdala, their threat sensor, is always functioning at “on.” They may also trigger and become upset or aggressive in response to situations that, from an outside perspective, appear to be relatively minor.

If your child is being treated badly and is also engaging in hurtful and disruptive behavior, the guidance set out in Chapter 5 provides recommendations to better support your child. Chapter 12 will provide you with guidance on how to document what is happening and the recommended steps to address this concern, which will require both support for your child and holding your child accountable for any harm they cause.

Bullied Students

Jessie is an autistic, non-binary high school student. They have challenges “acting normal” because their brain does not function in a way that supports them in doing so. Jessie has been bullied by other students since kindergarten, because they are thought of as “weird.” Now that Jessie has changed their name, the students have realized why they are so different. The bullying and exclusion has increased. Jessie stopped reporting being bullied to the school. They learned long ago that this only made things worse. They were told to stop acting so strangely and the bullying would stop. The students would then call them a “snitch.”

Bullied students are those who are seriously or persistently treated badly by their peers. When students are asked by researchers to describe those who are bullied, they frequently refer to bullied students in a negative way.²¹ They use terms such as “different,” “odd,” or “weird.” Some students perceive that these students are not behaving as they “should.” Therefore, they deserve to be treated in a hurtful manner. These “misfit” students disturb the status quo, which demands conformity to “normal.”²² They are on the lower levels of the school’s “social ladder.”

20 Woods, S. and White, E. (2005). The association between bullying behaviour, arousal levels and behaviour problems. *Journal of Adolescence* 28 (3): 381–395. Fanti, K.A. and Kimonis, E.R. (2013). Dimensions of juvenile psychopathy distinguish “bullies,” “bully-victims,” and “victims.” *Psychology of Violence* 3 (4): 396–409.

21 Thornberg, R. (2011). She’s weird! – the social construction of bullying in school: a review of qualitative research, 2011. *Children & Society* 25 (4): 258–267.

22 Pouwels, J.L. and Garandeau, C.F. (2021). The role of the peer group and classroom factors in bullying behavior. In: *Wiley Blackwell Handbook of Bullying: A Comprehensive and International Review of Research and Intervention* (ed. P.K. Smith and J. O’Higgins Norman), 450–466. Wiley Blackwell.

Those students who engage in bullying strategically target students they know others do not support. This is less risky for them. Other students are less likely to step in to help these bullied students, because this could raise the risk of being targeted themselves or damage their reputation by standing up for a student who is considered “weird.”

However, it is not always the case that lower social status students are the ones being treated badly by peers. Especially in the teen years, students at higher levels on the social ladder may also be bullied.²³ These students are those who the hurtful students perceive to be rivals or potential rivals. The involved students are at a relatively equivalent level of the school’s social ladder. These students are treated badly by peers who are trying to obtain dominance, which will be discussed in Chapter 2. Often, these are situations that relate to romantic relationships and dating.

Amber is a freshman in high school. She gets good grades, is a member of a student leadership group, and she plays on the school’s volleyball team. One day, she spent some time in the lunchroom talking to Burt. Lilah is also a freshman and is one of the top players on the volleyball team. She is very popular. She really likes Burt. After she saw Amber talking with Burt, she started attacking Amber. Mostly she posted hurtful stuff about Amber on social media. She also encouraged the other players to ignore her. Other students have started laughing at and avoiding Amber.

Identity-based Bullying

Identity-based bullying is biased-based bullying that occurs because of the student’s actual or perceived “identity” within a group or class of people who are marginalized within our society.²⁴ Marginalized identity groups include those who are considered a protected class under most civil rights laws. This generally includes race, color, national origin, religion, disabilities, and sexual minorities. Students within other identity groups may also be the subject of identity-based bullying. This includes students who are overweight, low income, or some other group of marginalized students.

Identity-based bullying may be serious or may be persistent minor incidents, the harms of which add up. These serious or persistent hurtful acts may be

23 Pouwels and Garandeanu. The role of the peer group and classroom factors in bullying behavior.

24 Espelage, D.L. (2021). What do we know about identity-based bullying? Virtual Symposium: Understanding and Preventing Youth Hate Crimes and Identity-based Bullying. OJJDP. <https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/programs/preventing-youth-hate-crimes-bullying-initiative> (accessed 1 August 2024).

directed at one young person. Identity-based bullying also includes the pervasive or widespread targeting of many students within the entire identity group.

Zahra recently immigrated from Afghanistan. She is learning to speak English. She wears a hijab, which is considered sacred in her family and religion. She has been called a “terrorist” and asked if she was a member of the Taliban. Students try to pull off her hijab. One asked her, “Do you have any hair under there?” She has been told that she is not welcome in our country and to go back to where she came from. One of her teachers has trouble pronouncing her name and has decided to call her “Sarah.”

Identity-based bullying is recognized as causing greater harm than more general bullying.²⁵ The reason for this is that in addition to the actual experience of being treated badly, students who are bullied based on their membership in an identity group can have an ongoing expectation that they will always be treated badly because of “who they are.”

Many students who are in minority identity groups also have concerns related to intergenerational trauma.²⁶ This will be discussed in Chapter 4. For sexual and gender minorities, the stress may also include the need to conceal their identity from those within their family, school, and/or community.

There is an overlap between identity-based bullying and hate crimes.²⁷ A hate crime is a criminal offense against a person or property motivated in whole or in part by the offender’s bias against that person based on their race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, disability, sexual orientation, or gender identity.²⁸

Hate crimes committed by young people look similar to adult hate crimes.²⁹ Most juvenile hate crimes are motivated by bias based on race or ethnicity. Almost

25 Flentje, A., Heck, N.C., Brennan, J.M., and Meyer, I.H. (2020). The relationship between minority stress and biological outcomes: a systematic review. *Journal of Behavioral Medicine* <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10865-019-00120-6>. Meyer, I.H. (2003). Prejudice, social stress, and mental health in lesbian, gay, and bisexual populations: conceptual issues and research evidence. *Psychological Bulletin* 129: 674–697. <https://doi.org/10.1037/00332909.129.5.674>.
26 Bhushan, D., Kotz, K., McCall, J., et al. (2020). Office of the California Surgeon General. Roadmap for Resilience: The California Surgeon General’s Report on Adverse Childhood Experiences, Toxic Stress, and Health. Office of the California Surgeon General. doi: 10.48019/PEAM8812.

27 Jones, L.M., Mitchell, M., and Turner, H. (2021). Characteristics of hate crimes involving juveniles: findings from the National Hate Crime Investigations Study (NHCIS). Virtual Symposium: Understanding and Preventing Youth Hate Crimes and Identity-Based Bullying. OJJDP. <https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/programs/preventing-youth-hate-crimes-bullying-initiative> (accessed 1 August 2024).

28 Title 18, USC, Section 249, *Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr., Hate Crimes Prevention Act*.

29 Jones, L.M., Mitchell, M., and Turner, H. (2021). Characteristics of hate crimes involving juveniles: findings from the National Hate Crime Investigations Study (NHCIS). Virtual Symposium: Understanding and Preventing Youth Hate Crimes and Identity-Based Bullying. OJJDP. <https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/programs/preventing-youth-hate-crimes-bullying-initiative>.

half of the hate crime cases involving juvenile suspects are incidents that happened at school or on school grounds.

Societal Values of the Local Community

There are regional differences in how identity-based bullying manifests in schools that relate to the values held by local community residents. Recently in the United States, intense battles have emerged in many states over the increased efforts of schools to achieve greater diversity, equity, and inclusion. Battles over these issues are raging in some communities, with angry parents accosting board members, school leaders, and teachers. These parents have children who are attending school in these communities, who may be bringing these values into the school.

If you live in a region or state where these battles have been raging, this is going to create greater difficulties in interacting with the school to achieve a resolution of the situation with your child. Hopefully not, but possibly, the principal or other leaders in your district may also hold attitudes that are biased. If information that your child has filed a complaint with the district becomes known, your child and your family could face retaliation from others in the community.

In Chapter 12, you will learn about strategies to document what is happening and the harmful impact on your child, and to file an effective complaint with your child's school. Your complaint will include a specific request to keep the fact that you or your child were the source of the complaint confidential.

If your child is a member of a minority identity group and other students within this minority group are also being bullied, my guidance is to not try to address this concern just from the perspective of your child. If you proceed to address these concerns as a group of families, hopefully with the support of an advocacy group, there is likely a lower potential for your child to be specifically identified and retaliated against. This is discussed more in Chapters 11 and 12.

Identities

The following are the different bases for identity-based bullying:

- **Race, ethnicity, religion, national origin.** Data related to the concern of race, ethnicity, or religious-based bullying can be complicated.³⁰ The basis and level of bullying of racial or religious minorities will be different depending on the racial or religious make-up of the school and community.³¹

³⁰ Espelage. What do we know about identity-based bullying?

³¹ Kuldass, S., Dupont, M., and Foody, M. (2021). Ethnicity-based bullying: suggestions for future research on classroom ethnic composition. In: *Wiley Blackwell Handbook of Bullying: A Comprehensive and International Review of Research and Intervention* (ed. P.K. Smith and J. O'Higgins Norman), 252–272. Wiley Blackwell.

- **Newly immigrated.** Students who have newly immigrated have many times experienced trauma that led to their relocation, which could contribute to behavior that makes them more vulnerable to being bullied.³² These students are also less likely to feel comfortable reporting this to the school due to their lack of comfort in their new community and school.
- **Indigenous youth.** In the United States, Native American students have both the highest rates of experiencing victimization in the form of threats or physical violence and the highest dropout rates when compared to other racial groups. In other countries, these hurtful dynamics between the majority society and Indigenous peoples also appears evident.³³
- **Asian American.** A 2021 survey, found that 80% of Asian American teens had experienced bullying, both in person or online, and that they are significantly less likely to report bullying to an adult than non-Asian American teens.³⁴
- **Religious minorities.** In the United States, religious minorities include members of minority religions such as Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, and Jews. The Council on American–Islamic Relations reports that, over the last decade, 40–50% of Muslim students have consistently reported being bullied, nearly half reported feeling unsafe, unwelcome, or uncomfortable at school because of their Muslim identity, and 25% of students reported that an adult at their school made offensive comments or acted in a way that was offensive to Islam/Muslims.³⁵ Over 50% of Sikh children experienced school bullying.³⁶ The percentage increased to 67% for turbaned Sikh children. Each year, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL)

32 Fandrem, H., Strohmeier, D., Caravita, S.C.S., and Stefanek, E. (2021). Migration and bullying. In: *Wiley Blackwell Handbook of Bullying: A Comprehensive and International Review of Research and Intervention* (ed. P.K. Smith and J. O'Higgins Norman), 361–378. Wiley Blackwell.

33 National American Indian & Alaska Native School Mental Health Program (undated). Bullying & native youth. <https://mhttcnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Bullying-fact-sheet.pdf> (accessed 1 August 2024); Campbell, E.M. and Smalling, S.E. (2013). American Indians and bullying in schools. *Journal of Indigenous Social Development* 2 (1): 1–15. <http://hdl.handle.net/10125/29815>. Allam, L. (2018). Indigenous children more likely to fear lack of safety, bullying and discrimination. *The Guardian*, October 11. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2018/oct/11/indigenous-children-more-likely-to-fear-lack-of-safety-bullying-and-discrimination> (accessed 1 August 2024).

34 Act To Change, ADMERASIA, and NextShark (2021). 2021 Asian American bullying survey report in partnership with Act To Change, ADMERASIA, and NextShark. <https://acttochange.org/bullyingreport> (accessed 1 August 2024).

35 Council on American–Islamic Relations (2024). CAIR-CA. 2023 bullying report. <https://ca.cair.com/losangeles/publications/2023-annual-bullying-report/?eType=EmailBlastContent&eId=c41cc598-4752-461d-8272-8d127d133f1b> (accessed 1 August 2024).

36 The Sikh Coalition (2014). “Go home, terrorist”: a report on the bullying of Sikh American school children. March 1. <https://www.sikhcoalition.org/documents/pdf/go-home-terrorist.pdf> (accessed 1 August 2024).

tracks incidents of anti-Semitic harassment, vandalism, and assault in the United States. In 2022, the ADL found that there was a 36% increase from 2021.³⁷ Another study of middle and high schoolers in the United States demonstrated that 34.3% of Muslim students, 25% of Jewish students, and 23.1% of Hindu students reported they had been targeted at school because of their faith the last 30 days.³⁸

- **Disabilities.** A new report from UNESCO, *Violence and Bullying in Educational Settings: The Experience of Children and Young People with Disabilities*, documented the nature of violence and bullying experienced by young people with disabilities in schools.³⁹ This assessment concluded that young people with disabilities are three to four times more likely to be victims of any type of violence in all settings. Within education systems throughout the world, students with disabilities have been found to experience substantially higher rates of peer bullying than those without disabilities. Students with emotional and behavioral challenges are more likely to be victimized than those with other disabilities. Students with disabilities also experience higher rates of physical violence at the hands of teachers, are more likely to be physically restrained or confined, and are also subjected to greater emotional and psychological violence from teachers than students without disabilities.
- **Sexual or gender minority status.** Sexual and gender minority students are extremely vulnerable to being bullied.⁴⁰ GLSEN's *2019 School Climate Report* revealed that 82% of LGBTQ+ students reported feeling unsafe in school because of at least one of their actual or perceived personal characteristics, 79% reported avoiding school functions or extracurricular activities because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable, 58% reported hearing homophobic remarks from teachers or other school staff and 72% reported hearing negative remarks about gender expression from teachers or other school staff, and almost all of the

37 Anti-Defamation League (2023). Audit of Antisemitic incidents 2022. <https://www.adl.org/resources/report/audit-antisemitic-incidents-2022> (accessed 1 August 2024).

38 Hinduja, S. and Patchin, J.W. (2022). Bias-based cyberbullying among early adolescents: associations with cognitive and affective empathy. *The Journal of Early Adolescence* 02724316221088757.

39 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2019). *Violence and bullying in educational settings: the experience of children and young people with disabilities*. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000378061>. See also O'Moore, M. and McGuire, L. (2021). Disablist bullying. In: *Wiley Blackwell Handbook of Bullying: A Comprehensive and International Review of Research and Intervention* (ed. P.K. Smith and J. O'Higgins Norman), 342–360. Wiley Blackwell.

40 Blaya, C. (2021). Bias bullying problems among school children: sexual and gender-based bullying, and intersectional considerations. In: *Wiley Blackwell Handbook of Bullying: A Comprehensive and International Review of Research and Intervention* (ed. P.K. Smith and J. O'Higgins Norman), 273–289. Wiley Blackwell.

students heard negative remarks about sexual identity or gender orientation and very few witnessed school staff step in to stop this.⁴¹ In addition, 76% experienced in-person verbal harassment and 31% were physically harassed. Only 35% of these students reported the harassment to the school and, of those who reported, 60% said staff did nothing in response. Most did not report because they did not think staff would do anything. These students may be living in families where their sexual or gender minority status will not be accepted. They cannot risk reporting any concerns of being treated badly to school leaders. These leaders could also be biased against them or could “out” them in a way that will lead to greater challenges, including within their family.

- **Groups that do not receive civil rights protections.** Students in all of the above sections are considered protected class students under US civil rights laws. These laws likely do not provide protections for all students who may experience identity-based bullying. This includes students who are overweight, obese, or have some other “undesirable” physical appearance; students who are in foster care; lower-income students, and those who are experiencing significant home adversities, such as parents who are incarcerated or engaged in drug or alcohol abuse.⁴² In a study of students in middle and high school, both overweight and obese students were at increased risk of experiencing bullying.⁴³ They may also experience situations where school staff blame them for being targeted.⁴⁴ There is no easily available data for other groups of students. Chapters 11 and 12 will provide insight into a strategy to bring students within these groups under federal civil rights laws if a student is now experiencing mental health concerns and an interference with their learning.

Implicit Bias and Microaggressions

Ella is a black student who just had beautiful, colorful extensions in her hair. Amy came up to her at school and immediately reached out to play with her hair extensions, without asking permission. When Ella stepped back and tried

41 Kosciw, J.G., Clark, C.M., Truong, N.L., and Zongrone, A.D. (2020). *The 2019 National School Climate Survey: the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer youth in our nation's schools*. GLSEN.

42 There is, unfortunately, not sufficient research on the common identity-focused basis upon which students are treated badly in addition to protected classes. The recent report by National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine did have an extensive section on concerns of students with obesity who experience bullying.

43 Waasdorp, T.E., Mehari, K., and Bradshaw, C.P. (2018). Obese and overweight youth: risk for experiencing bullying victimization and internalizing symptoms. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 88 (4): 483–491. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/ort0000294>.

44 Gray, W.N., Kahhan, N.A., and Janicke, D.M. (2009). Peer victimization and pediatric obesity: a review of the literature. *Psychology in the Schools*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.20410>.

to explain that she did not think it was respectful for Amy to just come up and touch her hair and she felt this was racist, Amy responded, “Well, I am color blind. I do not see colors.”

Students who are members of marginalized identity groups also deal with concerns related to implicit bias and microaggressions. To start this discussion, it is helpful to consider three forms of bias or prejudice against those who are not members of the dominant group in society:

- **Explicit bias.** Explicit bias is a known negative attitude about a specific identity group.⁴⁵ Overt comments or behavior that demonstrate this explicit bias could be considered bullying or discriminatory harassment. These concerns are not the focus in this section, but are the focus of this book.
- **Implicit bias.** Implicit bias is an unconscious negative attitude against members of an identity group. Implicit bias is shaped by our life experiences. Implicit bias is developed through repeated reinforcement of stereotypes through media, families, schools, and communities.⁴⁶ The way people behave can be influenced by their implicit biases – but they are unaware they hold such biases.⁴⁷ Acts or statements that are not intended to cause harm, but do cause harm because of underlying identity issues, are sometimes referred to as microaggressions. However, the person who has said or done something that caused offense is not intending to be aggressive. It is important to distinguish between “intent” and “impact.”
- **Institutional inequities.** Institutional inequities are the ways in which institutions or systems function that disadvantage marginalized identity groups.⁴⁸ Individuals within institutions who make decisions that result in inequities may make these decisions based on their personal explicit or implicit biases. Institutional inequities are a profound concern. These inequities have an extensive historical basis, which has resulted in profound inequities in our society. Schools absolutely have significant concerns related to institutional inequities, very frequently driven by the implicit biases of staff members and school board members.

45 Understanding bias: a resource guide. https://www.justice.gov/d9/fieldable-panel-panes/basic-panes/attachments/2021/09/29/understanding_bias_content.pdf (accessed 1 August 2024).

46 Staats, C., Capatosto, K., Wright, R.A., and Contractor, D. (2015). *State of the Science: Implicit Bias Review 2015*, 3e. Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity, The Ohio State University.

47 Implicit bias. APA Dictionary of Psychology. <https://www.apa.org/topics/implicit-bias> (accessed 1 August 2024).

48 Authority. Oxford Reference.com. <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095435710> (accessed 1 August 2024).

Implicit bias can influence behavior. Implicit bias is understood to be a cause of unintentional discriminatory acts. These implicit biases are in large part outside the conscious awareness of individuals.⁴⁹ Most people consider themselves moral and respectful people, not wanting to engage in hurtful behavior directed at others. While the intent of a person may not be to offend, the impact of their statement or actions may have been perceived to be offensive by another.

Complicated History of Focus on Microaggressions

Chester M. Pierce, an African American Harvard-trained psychiatrist, was the first to describe the concept of microaggressions in the 1960s. He defined microaggressions as “black–white racial interactions [that] are characterized by white put-downs, done in an automatic, preconscious, or unconscious fashion.”⁵⁰ Note that his focus is on unconscious actions, not actions intending to cause harm. These are actions that are grounded in implicit bias.

Derald Wing Sue is another researcher in this area. He describes racial microaggressions as:

Racial micro aggressions are brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color. Perpetrators of micro aggressions are often unaware that they engage in such communications when they interact with racial/ethnic minorities.⁵¹

Sue also stated:

People who engage in microaggressions are ordinary folks who experience themselves as good, moral, decent individuals. Microaggressions occur because they are outside the level of conscious awareness of the perpetrator.⁵²

You can see in these statements that the original definition of microaggressions involved unconscious, unintended hurtful statements or actions. Sue has created confusion by expanding the definition to include both intentional or unintentional, but he essentially acknowledges most of these are unintentional.

49 Greenwald, A.G., Dasgupta, N., Dovidio, J.F. et al. (2022). Implicit-bias remedies: treating discriminatory bias as a public-health problem. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* 23 (1): 7–40.

50 Pierce, C.M. (1974). Psychiatric problems of the Black minority. In: *American Handbook of Psychiatry* (ed. S. Arieti), 512–523. Basic Books.

51 Sue, D.W., Capodilupo, C.M., Torino, G.C. et al. (2007). Racial micro aggressions in everyday life: implications for clinical practice. *The American Psychologist* 62 (4): 271–286. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.62.4.271>. PMID: 17516773.

52 Desmond-Harris, J. (2015). What are microaggressions? Vox, February 16. <https://www.vox.com/2015/2/16/8031073/what-are-microaggressions> (accessed 1 August 2024).

Sue's work has been criticized by Scott Lilienfeld, who finds the concept of a microaggressions to be excessively fuzzy. As he stated:

Yet despite the good intentions and passionate embrace of this idea, there is scant real-world evidence that micro aggressions is a legitimate psychological concept, that it represents unconscious (or implicit) prejudice, that intervention for it works, or even that alleged victims are seriously damaged by these under-the-radar acts.⁵³

Lilienfeld certainly affirms that prejudice exists and can manifest as subtle snubs, slights, and insults directed at members of historically marginalized identity groups or through more overtly prejudicial statements or actions. However, he has noted that as a result of the work of some researchers, what has emerged in companies, universities, and in K-12 education settings are workshops on how to identify and avoid microaggressions. These workshops include disseminated lists of microaggressions to caution against expressing statements that might cause offense. Statements such as "Where are you from?," "America is a land of opportunity," or "I believe that the most qualified person should get the job" are considered by Sue and Monnica Williams, another researcher, to be microaggressions.⁵⁴

Williams suggests that if 30% of people within an identity group find a statement to constitute a microaggression, then it should be considered a microaggression.⁵⁵ This is her arbitrary figure. Who gets to decide what statements are microaggressions? A study by Lilienfeld found that many of the microaggression statements identified by Sue and Williams are not perceived by most minorities as offensive.⁵⁶

Another challenge relates to how discussions about microaggressions are being perceived by members of marginalized identity groups. A focus on implicit bias and microaggressions may make them feel more threatened and create the perception that they should always be on the lookout for signs of prejudice. Not only do they have to deal with situations of explicit bias and institutional inequities,

53 Lilienfeld, S.O. (2017). Microaggressions? Prejudice remains a huge social evil but evidence for harm caused by microaggression is incoherent, unscientific and weak. *AEON*. <https://aeon.co/essays/why-a-moratorium-on-microaggressions-policies-is-needed>.

54 Lilienfeld, S.O. (2017). Microaggressions: strong claims, inadequate evidence. *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 12: 138–169.

55 Williams, M.T. (2019). Microaggressions: clarification, evidence, and impact. *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 15: 3–26.

56 Lilienfeld, S.O. (2020). Microaggression research and application: clarifications, corrections, and common ground. *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 15 (1): 27–37. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691619867117>.

Lilienfeld, S.O. (2017). Microaggressions? Prejudice remains a huge social evil but evidence for harm caused by micro aggressions is incoherent, unscientific and weak. *Aeon*, June. <https://aeon.co/essays/why-a-moratorium-on-microaggressions-policies-is-needed> (accessed 1 August 2024).

they also have to be on the lookout for unintentional hurtful acts – which are yet another reminder of the discrimination they face in our society.

While none of the research in the area has mentioned this, it is important to recognize the role a part of the brain called the hippocampus is playing. This will be discussed in Chapter 4. The hippocampus is where our life experiences are processed. These life experiences impact how we act and how we respond to new situations. Stored life experiences are guiding perceptions and emotions for everyone in the situation – both the person who says or does something that someone else finds offensive and the person who is feeling offended. Members of marginalized identity groups have plenty of challenging memories of hurtful life experiences stored in their hippocampus. It is not unreasonable that they may feel offended – even in situations when no offense was intended.

Ineffective Efforts to Change Implicit Bias

Another significant challenge in this area is that efforts to inform people about their implicit biases and to encourage positive change have not been effective. In 1998, Anthony Greenwald and colleagues developed an assessment that is said to measure implicit bias.⁵⁷ He has noted that an assessment of over 490 studies of anti-bias training in companies found that these trainings were ineffective in changing behavior.⁵⁸ Of significant concern, according to Greenwald, is that there are many consultants who are offering their services to institutions for “anti-bias training” when there are no research findings that demonstrate any significant effectiveness of such trainings. Many consultants are offering such services to schools.

In a recent article, Greenwald stated this:

I see most implicit bias training as window dressing that looks good both internally to an organization and externally, as if you are concerned and trying to do something. But it can be deployed without actually achieving anything, which makes it in fact counterproductive.⁵⁹

Greenwald suggested two strategies that can play a more effective role in undermining the damaging impact of implicit biases in companies and other institutions:

57 Greenwald, A.G., McGhee, D.E., and Schwartz, J.L.K. (1998). Measuring individual differences in implicit cognition: the Implicit Association Test. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 74: 1464–1480.

58 Patrick Forscher Calvin, K. and Axt, L.J.R. (2019). A meta-analysis of procedures to change implicit measures. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

59 Mason, B. (2020). Making people aware of their implicit biases doesn’t usually change minds. But here’s what does work. PBS, June 10. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/making-people-aware-of-their-implicit-biases-doesnt-usually-change-minds-but-heres-what-does-work> (accessed 1 August 2024).

- **Preventive measures.** Preventive measures that make it less possible for people to act with implicit biases in a way that has discriminatory outcomes. A good example of this is when orchestras started using audition approaches that hid the identities of the people auditioning. This resulted in a significant increase in women players.
- **Maintaining a focus on data.** An analysis of the data of the company or school should reveal where inequities exist, how much of a challenge this is, and who should be responsible for implementing a remedy.

Implicit Bias in Schools

There are significant concerns about the role implicit bias plays in schools. It is absolutely clear from the data that the implicit biases of educators play a huge role in the institutional inequities that are negatively impacting students in minority identity groups. It might be hoped that teachers are supportive of all students and want the best for their students. However, recent studies have shown that teachers in the United States hold pro-white/anti-bias at the same level as the general population.⁶⁰

The most obvious evidence of concerns about the role of implicit bias is the difference in the disciplinary rates between white and black students and students with disabilities.⁶¹ Even when considering issues such as poverty, students who are black are suspended more often than students who are white for the same kinds of misbehavior. A focus on suspensions is important because this is a leading indicator of whether a student will drop out of school, and because out-of-school suspension increases their risk for future incarceration.

There is a myth that it is necessary to suspend the misbehaving students so the good students can learn. However, it appears that schools that have lower levels of suspensions have higher test scores.

Other research shows that teachers' implicit racial/ethnic biases are associated with the fact that white teachers have lower academic expectations of students of color.⁶² Yet another study showed that there were larger racial disparities in test scores and suspensions in counties where larger number of teachers had both

60 Starck, J.G., Riddle, T., Sinclair, S., and Warikoo, N. (2020). Teachers are people too: examining the racial bias of teachers compared to other American adults. *Educational Researcher* 49 (4): 273–284. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189x20912758>.

61 Losen, D.J. and Gillespie, J. (2012). *Opportunities suspended: the disparate impact of disciplinary exclusion from school*. The Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civiles: UCLA <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3g36n0c3> (accessed 1 August 2024).

62 Jacoby-Senghor, D.S., Sinclair, S., and Shelton, J.N. (2016). A lesson in bias: the relationship between implicit racial bias and performance in pedagogical contexts. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 63. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2015.10.010>.

explicit and implicit anti-black biases.⁶³ Even when teachers believe they are being fair and are using a grading rubric, their implicit biases can lead to rating students negatively on the basis of gender, race, and assumed ability, even when achievements are equal.⁶⁴

One study in this area focused on why black children are more likely to be expelled or disciplined in preschool than their white peers.⁶⁵ This study found that preschool teachers tend to complain more about children classified as black/Hispanic/poor and black/non-poor and identify their behavior as problematic compared to white/Hispanic/non-poor children. However, the researchers found no differences in patterns of misbehavior when the children were observed.

Many of these studies have focused on race, specifically black students. The concerns of excessive suspensions of students with disabilities have also been addressed. The focus on implicit bias concerns associated with the instruction of students who are neurodivergent or sexual minorities are also being expressed.⁶⁶

Underlying these concerns are findings that are similar to those noted by Greenwald, which is that trainings in implicit bias do not seem to result in positive behavior change. Greenwald's encouragement for practices that can reduce the potential impact of the implicit biases held by school staff are appropriate. His recommendation for use of data to identify the concerns and harmful impact is of exceptional importance. In Chapter 12, you will note my recommendations for a Continuous Improvement Process to identify and address concerns about the school environment. The Continuous Improvement Process data analysis must reveal the concerns of inequities grounded in all forms of bias in every school, with a requirement to identify and implement strategies to address these concerns, with subsequent evaluation of effectiveness by the same data. It is essentially to hold schools accountable for making positive change.

63 van den Bergh, L., Denessen, E., Hornstra, L. et al. (2010). The implicit prejudiced attitudes of teachers: relations to teacher expectations and the ethnic achievement gap. *American Educational Research Journal* 47 (2): 497–527. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831209353594>; Chin, M.J., Quinn, D.M., Dhaliwal, T.K., and Lovison, V.S. (2020). Bias in the air: a nationwide exploration of teachers' implicit racial attitudes, aggregate bias, and student outcomes. *Educational Researcher* 49 (8): 566–578. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X20937240>.

64 Parrekh, G., Brown, R.S., and Zheng, S. (2021). Learning skills, system equity, and implicit bias within Ontario. *Canada Educational Policy* 35 (3): 395–421.

65 Sabol, T.J., Kessler, C.L., Rogers, L.O. et al. (2022). A window into racial and socioeconomic status disparities in preschool disciplinary action using developmental methodology. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 1508: 1. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nyas.14687>.

66 Robertshaw, S. (2024). How educators' implicit bias stifles neurodivergent learners. *Attitude*, May 21. <https://www.additudemag.com/implicit-bias-educators-learning-differences> (accessed 1 August 2024); Marks, M.J. and Amodei, M.L. (2023). Implicit gender bias in the classroom: memories from K-12 education. *Journal of Research Initiatives* 7: 2.

Respectful Dialogue

The increased activities in schools related to diversity, equity, and inclusion have been interpreted by some as intending to shame white students and families for their privilege. People do not like to be blamed for systemic inequities in society that they had absolutely nothing to do with creating. At this point in time, everything has gotten very political, which is not helping anyone.

Systemic inequities have been a part of our society essentially for forever. Significant progress has been made to address these inequities. More work is absolutely essential. Because we have not yet accomplished what we need to accomplish, we do not know how to effectively do this. Some of the approaches may be effective. Others may be ineffective or even harmful. Respectful dialogue about these concerns would be a preferred way to accomplish this, rather than angry parents protesting at school board meetings.

Consider the recommendations made by Lilienfeld:

So, what to do? Although the [micro aggression research] is presently highly problematic, we should not throw the baby out with the bathwater. Subtle prejudice undeniably exists, and a certain proportion of what are now misleadingly termed “micro aggressions” probably reflect such prejudice. If we could reconceptualise most micro aggressions as inadvertent cultural and racial slights, we’d all be better off. The micro aggressions culture prevalent on many campuses and in many businesses makes just about everyone feel threatened, and could amp up already simmering racial tensions. This culture often makes minority individuals feel that they should be on the lookout for mild signs of prejudice, and that they need to walk on eggshells. Distributing lists of “forbidden” phrases to campus administrators or faculty members, or mandating micro aggressions training for employees, are unlikely to be helpful. A time-out on these ill-advised programmes is long overdue.

Yes, many majority individuals say unintentionally offensive things to minority individuals from time to time, often because they are careless or oblivious, or because they are simply unaware of these individual’s past racial and cultural experiences. Microaggressions should be the start of an open dialogue, not the end. Telling someone: “What you just said is a racist microaggression. You offended me and you have to stop” is unlikely to lead to a productive two-way conversation. In contrast, it could be a fruitful entry-point into a difficult but mutually enlightening discussion to say: “You probably did not mean this, but what you said bothered me. Maybe we are both misunderstanding each other. I realise that we are coming from different places. Let us talk.”⁶⁷

67 Lilienfeld, Microaggressions?

The challenge in the situations when someone has engaged in unintentional actions or statements that cause offense is that the person who is offended is the only one who recognizes this. The person who said or did something that another perceived as offensive did not intend to cause harm and does not have the insight into the fact that this is what happened. This, then, will require the person who is offended to take one of two actions:

- Decide that the situation is not sufficiently serious for them to do anything.
- Decide that they would like to reach out to the person who said or did something that caused them offense and bring their concerns to this person's attention.

This is essentially a version of the Serenity Prayer – to “serenely accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” I make this statement full well knowing how many times a day members of marginalized identity groups take a deep breath and choose serenity, but harm has been done to their emotional well-being. In Chapter 5, I will provide some suggestions on how your child can respectfully reach out to someone who said or did something that did not appear to be intended to be hurtful, but was.

My Thoughts

These are my thoughts on how we might be able to proceed in addressing these issues in a way that could potentially be less contentious:

- Significant efforts need to be made to address the institutional inequities that exist in our society, including in schools. To address institutional inequities requires a focus on what the data are saying, the identification of how the institution functions to identify the underlying sources of those inequities, the identification and implementation of strategies to address these inequities, and proceeding with the understanding that the effectiveness of the institution's efforts will be measured by the data. It is for this reason that my strong recommendation is for parents and students within marginalized identity groups to strongly advocate for a data-based approach to address institutional inequities.
- It must be recognized that everyone has implicit unconscious biases gained through life experiences. This includes those who would be considered to be part of the dominant culture, as well as those who are in marginalized identity groups. These biases are wired into our brains. However, our brains can change.
- These implicit unconscious biases can have an impact in our saying or doing something that makes someone else feel offended or sad, even though this was not our intent. That person's implicit, unconscious bias, given their life experiences, has also shaped how they perceive our statement or action. Implicit biases are impacting both how someone says something and how it is received.

- To better address implicit bias, there is a need to increase respectful dialogue. It is understandable that people who are within marginalized identity groups may have concerns about speaking up if someone has said or done something that had a harmful impact on them. But that person is not going to know they have caused offense unless someone tells them. If they are approached in a calm and respectful manner and also given the opportunity to explain and to further the dialogue, this is likely to be a path that can lead to positive outcomes. When someone says or does something, grounded in their implicit biases, that someone else finds to be offensive, this presents a valuable “teachable moment.” If the person who was offended, or a person who witnessed this, takes steps that seek to increase understanding and promote dialogue, this could provide a pathway to address the implicit biases that are interfering with positive society.

The Harms of Bullying

Jason is a middle school student. He has always been considered by other students to be “different” or “weird.” Jason has been bullied since he entered kindergarten. Whenever he complained about this or a teacher witnessed this bullying, he was told that if he would just stop acting so strangely the other students would not treat him like they are. Jason had a friend through elementary school, Eileen. But as they entered middle school, Eileen was told by the other students that she should not hang out with Jason because the other students would also think she is “weird.” So she told Jason that she could not hang out with him any more. That night, Jason took his life.

The harms caused by being bullied have been extensively and well documented. A recent commentary in *Pediatrics*, outlined these harms:

Bullying can have life-long health consequences. It has been associated with stress-related physical and mental health symptoms, including depression, anxiety, post traumatic stress, and suicidal ideation. When bullying is motivated by discrimination or an attack on someone’s core identity (e.g., their sexual orientation), it can have especially harmful health consequences. The effects of bullying are not limited to the bullied. Bystanders who witness bullying may experience mental health consequences (e.g. distress) as well.⁶⁸

68 Schuster, M.A. and Bogart, L.M. (2013). Did the ugly duckling have PTSD? Bullying, its effects, and the role of pediatricians. *Pediatrics* 131 (1): e288–e291.

A report by the American Educational Research Association, entitled *Prevention of Bullying in Schools, Colleges, and Universities: Research Report and Recommendations*, also provided an overview of concerns:

- 1) Bullied students experience higher rates of anxiety, depression, physical health problems, and social adjustment problems. These problems can persist into adulthood.
- 2) Bullying students become less engaged in school, and their grades and test scores decline.
- 3) In high schools where bullying and teasing are prevalent, the student body is less involved in school activities, performs lower on standardized tests, and has a lower graduation rate.
- 4) Students who engage in bullying are at elevated risk for poor school adjustment and delinquency. They are at increased risk for higher rates of criminal behavior and social maladjustment in adulthood.
- 5) Students who are bullied but also engage in bullying have more negative outcomes than students in bully-only or victim-only groups.
- 6) Cyberbullied students experience negative outcomes similar to those experienced by their traditional counterparts, including depression, poor academic performance, and problem behavior.⁶⁹

A significant aspect related to the harms experienced by those who are bullied depends on the extent to which those targeted are defended by their peers. If they are defended by at least one classmate, students who are bullied appear to experience less distress.⁷⁰ This is why it is really important for schools to focus on strategies to increase the willingness of students to step in to help if they witness bullying.

Trauma

It is essential to “connect the dots” between experiencing being bullied and trauma. One study that looked at the connection between bullying and trauma symptoms found a high incidence of trauma symptoms among students who were

69 American Educational Research Association (2013). *Prevention of bullying in schools, colleges, and universities: research report and recommendations*. <http://www.aera.net/newsroom/news/preventionofbullyingresearchreportandrecomm/tabid/14865/default.aspx>, 9–10 (accessed 1 August 2024).

70 Sainio, M., Veenstra, R., Huitsing, G., and Salmivalli, C. (2011). Victims and their defenders: a dyadic approach. *International Journal of Behavioral Development* 35 (2): 144–151. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0165025410378068>.

bullied. The more frequently they were bullied, the worse the symptoms.⁷¹ The students with the worst trauma symptoms were the ones who both engaged in and were bullied.

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) describes two forms of trauma.⁷²

- **Acute trauma.** Acute traumatic events involve experiencing, witnessing, or a threat of a serious injury to yourself or another.
- **Chronic stress.** Chronic traumatic situations that occur repeatedly over periods of time. This also is called “toxic stress.”

Bullying situations could involve acute trauma, chronic stress, or both. The term “serious” bullying is connected with what would be considered an acute traumatic incident. “Persistent” bullying is a situation of chronic or toxic stress.

The standards for trauma under the new American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition* (DSM-5) focus on major traumatic events, unfortunately not on chronic or complex traumatic situations.⁷³ However, it is very helpful to consider the four diagnostic symptom clusters outlined in DSM-5. These are:

Re-experiencing covers spontaneous memories of the traumatic event, recurrent dreams related to it, flashbacks or other intense or prolonged psychological distress. Avoidance refers to distressing memories, thoughts, feelings or external reminders of the event. Negative cognitions and mood represents myriad feelings, from a persistent and distorted sense of blame of self or others, to estrangement from others or markedly diminished interest in activities, to an inability to remember key aspects of the event. Finally, arousal is marked by aggressive, reckless, or self-destructive behavior, sleep disturbances, hyper-vigilance, or related problems.⁷⁴

The trauma symptoms outlined in DSM-5 closely match the reported symptoms of students who are bullied. In Chapter 12, you will find a Documentation Guide to document the harmful incidents and the harmful impact on your child. The questions related to the harmful emotional impact on your child are in accord with the symptoms outlined in DSM-5.

71 Idsoe, T., Dyregrov, A., and Idsoe, E.C. (2012). Bullying and PTSD symptoms. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology* 40: 901–911. <http://www.uis.no/news/being-bullied-can-cause-trauma-symptoms-article62673-8865.html> (accessed 1 August 2024).

72 National Child Traumatic Stress Network. About Child Trauma. <https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/about-child-trauma> (accessed 1 August 2024).

73 American Psychiatric Publishing (2013). Posttraumatic stress disorder. <http://www.dsm5.org/Documents/PTSDpercent20Factpercent20Sheet.pdf> (accessed 1 August 2024).

74 American Psychiatric Publishing. Posttraumatic stress disorder.

Academic Performance and Absences

It is widely recognized that maintaining a positive school climate is critical component for supporting student academic achievement.⁷⁵ Schools that have a high level of bullying have lower achievement scores. If your child is being bullied, this is highly likely to be having a damaging impact on their academic success. If many students in the school are being bullied, this will result in lower academic progress for the school. Schools focus so much attention on learning objectives and test scores. They would have higher levels of achievement if they would focus on improving the feelings of safety and belonging of their students.

School absences and avoidance are also a major concern. If your child is being bullied, there is a significant risk that they will try to be absent from school.⁷⁶ One study examined the impact that bullying had on fear of attending school and school avoidance.⁷⁷ This study found that bullied students were six times more likely to report fear at school and school avoidance than their non-bullied peers.

The Cyberbully Research Center conducted a survey of approximately 5,700 middle and high school students in the United States. They asked if they had stayed home from school at any time during the last school year because they were being bullied at school or online. The responses showed that: 18.5%, about 4,750,000 students, skipped school at some point in the last year because they were bullied at school; 10%, about 2,750,000 students, stayed home because of cyberbullying; approximately 2%, over 500,000 students, said they stayed home many times due to bullying at school; 1.2%, or 300,000 students, stayed home many times because of cyberbullying. Based on these numbers, approximately 5.4 million students skip school at some point in the year due to bullying or cyberbullying and over 530,000 students skip school many times.

There is a significant focus at this time on addressing concerns of school absenteeism. USDOE released a report entitled *Chronic Absenteeism in the Nation's Schools*.⁷⁸ There are two major factors that relate to students being absent. One is

75 Huang, F.L., Eklund, K., and Cornell, D.G. (2017). Authoritative school climate, number of parents at home, and academic achievement. *School Psychology Quarterly* 32 (4): 480–496.

O'Brien, N. (2021). School factors with a focus on boarding schools. In: *Wiley Blackwell Handbook of Bullying: A Comprehensive and International Review of Research and Intervention* (ed. P.K. Smith and J. O'Higgins Norman), 467–484. Wiley Blackwell.

76 Havik, T., Bru, E., and Ertesvag, S.K. (2015). School factors associated with school refusal and truancy-related reasons for school non-attendance. *Social Psychology of Education* 18 (2): 221–240.

77 Vidourek, R.A., King, K.A., and Merianos, A.L. (2016). School bullying and student trauma: fear and avoidance associated with victimization. *Journal of Prevention & Intervention in the Community* 44 (2): 121–129.

78 USDOE (2019). *Chronic absenteeism in the nation's schools: a hidden educational crisis*. <https://www2.ed.gov/datastory/chronicabsenteeism.html> (accessed 1 August 2024).

that there are significant problems in the home. The other is that students do not feel they are safe, welcome, and respected in school – because they are being bullied. Curiously, despite the data that shows black, Hispanic, Native American, and Pacific islander students, and students of two or more races having greater absences, the word “bullying” does not appear in the report.

My own story fits in this section. I was bullied as “Weirdo Willard” throughout junior high school. I had contracted mononucleosis. This disease saved me. If I did not want to go to school, I put the bulb of the thermometer against a light bulb to give the appearance of a mild fever. Seeing this, my mom let me stay home. I missed 31 days of school. The school wanted to hold me back, but my grades were okay. I had essentially been homeschooling myself with the textbooks. I was dropped out of Honor Society.

Suicide and Self Harm

There is a clear association between bullying and engaging in suicidal behavior, including self-harm.⁷⁹ It is known that suicide behavior involves many factors. However, persistent bullying can create higher risk of suicidal thoughts and behavior. A serious or significant bullying incident can trigger suicidal behavior.

A study that looked at the results of 47 other studies found that being targeted by bullying, engaging in bullying, and both being targeted and hurtful were all associated with increased experiences of suicidal thoughts and suicidal behavior.⁸⁰ Those who are both bullied and are being hurtful have the greatest risk.

Self-harming behavior is when people intentionally hurt themselves when the immediate objective is not to lead to death.⁸¹ This includes cutting or burning their body. Both being bullied and being hurtful increases the risk of teens and young adults engaging in these self-harming behaviors.⁸²

While being bullied is a well-documented factor in youth suicide, students who have engaged in bullying should never be blamed for a decision of a young person

79 Suicide Prevention Resource Center (2011). Suicide and bullying: issue brief. https://sprc.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Suicide_Bullying_Issue_Brief-2.pdf (accessed 1 August 2024).

80 Holt, M.K., Vivolo-Kantor, A.M., Polanin, J.R. et al. (2015). Bullying and suicidal ideation and behaviors: a meta-analysis. *Pediatrics* 135: e496–e509. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2014-1864>.

81 Nock, M.K., Joiner, T.E. Jr., Gordon, K.H. et al. (2006). Non-suicidal self-injury among adolescents: diagnostic correlates and relation to suicide attempts. *Psychiatry Research* 144: 65–72. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2006.05.010>.

82 Heerde, J.A. and Hemphill, S.A. (2018). Are bullying perpetration and victimization associated with adolescent deliberate self-harm? A meta-analysis. *Archives of Suicide Research* 23: 353–381. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13811118.2018.1472690>.

to take their life.⁸³ Blaming tragic incidents on students who engaged in bullying ignores the multiple factors, can increase copy-cat behavior, and unfairly blames students for what are overall school climate concerns.

What should be considered, however, is whether the school knew the student was being persistently bullied and failed to effectively intervene. The feelings of hopelessness and helplessness of students who are experiencing persistent bullying and know from experience that there is no way to get this stopped by asking for help can be profound.

School Violence

There is a clearly established connection between bullying and school violence. When students are bullied, they appear to be more likely to bring a weapon to defend themselves. Like suicide, students engaging in school violence is a situation that involves many factors.

In one study, researchers found that high school kids who had been bullied in the past year were more likely to carry a weapon to school.⁸⁴ The study also looked at other actions that could make a student feel unsafe. This included students who had been threatened or injured with a weapon, had been in a physical fight, had their property stolen or damaged, or had missed school because they felt unsafe. With each additional reported concern, the percentage of students who brought a weapon to school increased.

A comprehensive study of school shootings by the US Secret Service (USSS) and USDOE demonstrated that almost three-quarters of the attackers felt persecuted, bullied, threatened, attacked, or injured by others prior to the incident.⁸⁵ In some of these cases, being bullied appeared to have a significant impact on the shooter and appeared to have been a factor in the decision to attack at the school.⁸⁶ Students who engage in school shootings or other forms of violence do

83 Robinson, I. (2018). I tried to befriend Nikolas Cruz. He still killed my friends. *New York Times*, March 27. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/27/opinion/nikolas-cruz-shooting-florida.html> (accessed 1 August 2024).

84 Pham, T.B., Schapiro, L.E., John, M., and Adesman, A. (2017). Weapon carrying among victims of bullying. *Pediatrics* 140 (6): e20170353. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2017-0353>. PMID: 29180461.

85 Vossekuil, B., Fein, R.A., Reddy, M. et al. (2004). The final report and findings of the Safe School Initiative: implications for the prevention of school attacks in the United States. US Secret Service and US Department of Education. <https://www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/preventingattacksreport.pdf> (accessed 1 August 2024).

86 Vossekuil et al. The final report and findings of the Safe School Initiative.

not fit into one singular profile. There are always multiple factors involved in these situations.⁸⁷

If your child is being bullied and you maintain guns or other weapons in your house, it is exceptionally important that they are kept in secure storage location that your child is unable to access. Often decisions to take one's life or take a gun to school are made in an impulsive manner. The last thing you want is for your emotionally distressed child to be able to access a gun.

87 National Threat Assessment Center (2018). Enhancing School Safety Using a Threat Assessment Model: An Operational Guide for Preventing Targeted School Violence. U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Secret Service https://www.secretservice.gov/data/protection/ntac/USSS_NTAC_Enhancing_School_Safety_Guide_7.11.18.pdf (accessed 1 August 2024).

