



Bullying Among Young Children (Ages 5-8 Years)

For many children, the first opportunity for extended peer interaction occurs in preschool and kindergarten. Experiences during the early childhood years are important building blocks to help children develop skills that enable them to form healthy friendships and learn to reduce aggressive behaviors like bullying (Hanish, Kochenderfer-Ladd, Fabes, Martin, & Denning, 2004).

Most research on bullying and bullying prevention and intervention strategies has focused on the middle childhood years (ages 8-12) and older (Monks et al., 2005). Studies addressing bullying of preschool age and kindergarteners (ages 3-6) is still very rare (Alsaker & Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2010), although researchers are beginning to understand the nature and prevalence of bullying among this age group.

Aggression and young children

Aggression directed at peers has been observed in children as young as 12 months of age. By the time children reach preschool and kindergarten, physical peer-directed aggression is very common (Hanish et al., 2004). In fact, aggression against peers peaks during early childhood years and then declines, making peer aggression (especially physical aggression) more common among young children than any other age group (Hanish et al., 2004).

Understanding bullying behavior among young children

Bullying is a form of aggressive behavior, but not all aggression can be characterized as bullying. In order for aggressive behavior to be considered

bullying, it must involve an imbalance of real or perceived power. In addition, bullying typically is repeated over time. What is known about the nature of bullying among young children?

Studies point to important differences in how young children understand and experience bullying compared to older children, although research about bullying in very young children is scant.

- **Understanding bullying.** Researchers have found that preschoolers define “bullying” differently from older children. These younger children view bullying as being hurtful and aggressive, but they typically do not recognize that bullying involves repetitive behavior or a power imbalance (Monks et al., 2005). Young children’s ability to understand bullying may also be affected by a somewhat more limited understanding about motivation and intention; some may be unable to consistently analyze or reflect on their own behavior or understand other people’s point of view until early elementary school grades.
- **Children who are bullied.** Young children who lack assertiveness, have difficulty setting limits to demands by peers, and who tend to withdraw from peers are at risk for being bullied (Alsaker & Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2010). For preschoolers and kindergarteners, exposure to aggressive peers increases the likelihood that they will be bullied. For kindergarteners, being liked by peers and having friends, help to protect them from being bullied, although this isn’t the case for preschoolers (Hanish et al., 2005).

- **Stability of roles.** Among young and older children alike, there appears to be stability in children's roles when they are the aggressors. Those children viewed as aggressive at one point in time are also viewed as aggressive for months, and even one year later. However, roles of victimized children do not appear to be stable for young children. Preschoolers who are bullied at one point in time are not necessarily victimized later (Monks et al., 2005).
- **Co-occurrence of bullying and being bullied.** There is some evidence that preschool children who bully and those who are bullied (referred to as bully-victims in the literature) are often, though not always, one in the same (Hanish et al., 2004). Aggression and victimization were found to occur together at higher rates among young children than children in middle or late childhood (Hanish et al., 2004). Among kindergarteners, researchers have found that the characteristics of bully-victims is similar to those of older children (Alsaker & Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2010). Their physical aggressiveness and difficulty regulating their emotions and behavior puts them at risk for being bullied by their peers.
- Using telephone interviews with parents in the U.S., Finkelhor Ormrod, & Turner (2009) reported that approximately 25% of boys and 18% of girls aged 2-5 had been physically bullied in the past year (compared with 35% of boys aged 6-9 and 25% of girls aged 6-9). In addition, approximately 15% of boys and girls aged 2-5 had been emotionally bullied (compared with 30% among boys aged 6-9 and 35% among girls aged 6-9).
- Using surveys of teachers in 2003/2004, Alsaker & Nägele (2008) estimated that 6% of Swiss kindergarteners in their class could be categorized as "passive victims", 7% as "aggressive victims" (i.e., those who had been bullied but also bullied others), and 12% as "bullies." Rates of "aggressive victims" and "bullies" among kindergarteners were approximately twice as high as rates among children in grades 4-9.
- When asked to nominate peers in their class as victim, aggressors, and defenders, preschoolers (age 4-6) assigned 25% to the role of aggressor, 22% to the role of victim, and 16% to the role of defenders. The most common forms of aggression or victimization included social exclusion, physical aggression, and verbal aggression (Monks et al., 2005).

How common is bullying among young children?

Measuring the extent of bullying during the early childhood years can be challenging. Although researchers recognize that aggression is quite common among young children, it is difficult to compare the rates of bullying across different ages for several reasons.

First, commonly used assessment tools (e.g., written surveys, nomination of peers who bully others or are bullied) may not be appropriate or accurate with young children who are unable to read and write, or who are inconsistent in their abilities to express their thoughts and feelings about peers. Second, comparing findings between studies is complicated by different definitions to describe aggression or bullying. Here are some selected findings:

Strategies for Addressing Bullying Among Young Children

Many of the strategies for preventing and addressing bullying among young children are similar to those for older students. But, there are some key differences, especially when compared to tweens ages 9-13. It is important for parents, educators and other adults who interact with young children to take into account their special learning needs. Here are some strategies geared especially to young children:

- **Model positive ways** for young children to make friends. Offer words and actions they need to be successful. For example, practice positive ways that children can ask to join others in play and take turns in games. Coach older students and siblings to help reinforce these behaviors as well.

- **Exclusion of peers** can be a difficult concept for young children to understand. Modeling positive ways for children to interact with others may not sufficiently develop pro-social responses. Teachers and parents can reinforce lessons through storytelling, puppets and active learning methods that illustrate the harm it causes and what can be done to avoid it.
- **Talk frequently** with young children about interactions with peers in their classrooms or child care settings, on play dates, with siblings, and in sports or other activities. Use words to help them understand what behaviors are friendly, or not, and what the consequences of certain actions are in age-appropriate terms (e.g. if you don't share, other children may not want to play with you). Give specific examples of wrong-doings and never assume the child knows what they did was bullying.
- **Set clear rules for behavior**, monitor children's interactions carefully (including at home), and step in quickly to stop aggressive behavior or redirect it before it occurs.
- **Use age-appropriate consequences** for aggressive behavior, and as often as possible, encourage children to make simple reparations for harm caused by their aggression (whether accidental or "on purpose"). Help them practice these social skills and model the behavior for them if they resist. Adults can help children find an action that is intended to "correct" the hurt or damage they may have done (e.g., to help rebuild a knocked over block structure, replace a torn paper or crayons with new, say or do something friendly or kind that the other child would appreciate). It may be appropriate to encourage children to say "I'm sorry" when their behavior caused harm, if they are able to connect these words with their harmful behavior and if the apology can be sincere.
- **Help children to be more aware of their harmful words and behaviors.** Children may need adults' help to identify consequences of their words and behaviors with peers. (E.g., "When you told him that he couldn't be your friend today, that probably made him sad.")
- **Help children learn to substitute alternative behaviors for aggression.** Model appropriate actions to use with peers, give them specific non-aggressive words to use with peers, and liberally praise children for appropriate behavior.
- **Choosing playmates** - Teach young children that it is OK to play with their friends, but emphasize that it's not OK to leave others out in an unkind way. Practice words and actions; make sure children can find alternative activities or choose another playmate.
- **Be vigilant** about aggression and bullying among children as young as preschoolers and kindergarteners.
- **Value kindness** - Though young children may not understand the term "bullying" or how it differs from other forms of aggression (or "being mean"), talk about behaviors that hurt others and show that you value kindness. Use age-appropriate children's literature or other natural opportunities to illustrate your points. Ultimately, it is most important to reinforce the message that aggression will not be tolerated.
- **Tell an adult** - Talk frequently with children about what they should do if they are treated in a way that makes them feel uncomfortable or upset/unhappy, or if they witness other children being harmed or bullied. At this age, children should be taught to say "STOP" and to immediately go get adult help. They can be encouraged to talk about ways they can help each other, but will likely have difficulty putting these lessons into practice without adult guidance and support.

- **Use real life events, children's literature and plays** to talk about how characters made good or bad behavior choices, and to practice what they might do. Even though they may not follow through, you are laying important groundwork to preventing bullying.

The following Stop Bullying Now! Tip Sheets may provide additional information for parents and early childhood educators to help them understand and respond to bullying:

All are available at www.StopBullying.gov:

- Best Practices in Bullying Prevention and Intervention
- How to Intervene to Stop Bullying: Tips for On-the-Spot Intervention at School
- Providing Support to Children Who Are Bullied: Tips for School Personnel and Other Adults
- How to Talk with Educators at Your Child's School About Bullying: Tips for Parents of Bullied Children

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