

Types of bullying

Bullying is usually described by the types of behaviours involved, so we talk about verbal, social and physical bullying.

Bullying is sometimes also labelled by where it occurs or by what type of harm is done. These words can be used alone or in combination. It can be confusing! The most common ways that bullying is described are outlined below.

Type of behaviour – verbal, social and physical

There are three types of bullying behaviour:

- **Verbal bullying** which includes name calling or insulting someone about physical characteristics such as their weight or height, or other attributes including race, sexuality, culture, or religion
- **Physical bullying** which includes hitting or otherwise hurting someone, shoving or intimidating another person, or damaging or stealing their belongings
- **Social bullying** which includes consistently excluding another person or sharing information or images that will have a harmful effect on the other person.

If any of these behaviours occur only once, or are part of a conflict between equals (no matter how inappropriate) they are not bullying.

Verbal, physical and social bullying can occur in person or online, directly or indirectly, overtly or covertly.

Setting – in person and online

Bullying can happen in person or online settings. Online bullying is sometimes called cyberbullying. Verbal, physical and social bullying can happen in person. Verbal and social bullying can happen online, as can threats of physical bullying.

Specific features of online settings create additional concern for students, parents and carers, and teachers. For example, bullying someone online can potentially have an enormous audience. Research shows that children who are bullied online are often also bullied in person. This means that effectively dealing with online bullying means looking at other situations as well.

Means – direct and indirect

Direct bullying occurs between the people involved, whereas indirect actions involve others, for example passing on insults or spreading rumours.

Indirect bullying mostly inflicts harm by damaging another's social reputation, peer relationships and self-esteem.

Visibility – overt and covert

Bullying can be easy to see, called overt, or hidden from those not directly involved, called covert.

Overt bullying involves physical actions such as punching or kicking or observable verbal actions such as name-calling and insulting. Overt, direct, physical bullying is a common depiction of bullying. (This is sometimes called 'traditional bullying').

But overt physical bullying may not be the most common type of bullying.

Covert bullying can be almost impossible for people outside the interpersonal interaction to identify. Covert bullying can include repeatedly using hand gestures and weird or threatening looks whispering, excluding or turning your back on a person, restricting where a person can sit and who they can talk with. Covert social or verbal bullying can be subtle and even sometimes denied by a person who claims they were joking or 'just having fun'.

Some bullying is **covert and indirect**, usually intentionally hidden, and very hard for others to see. This type of bullying can include spreading rumours threatening, blackmailing, stealing friends breaking secrets, gossiping, criticising clothes and personalities. Indirect covert bullying mostly inflicts harm by damaging another's social reputation, peer relationships and self-esteem, that is, through psychological harm rather than physical harm.

Harm – physical and psychological

Bullying has the potential to cause harm (although not all unwanted actions necessarily cause harm). The **physical harm** caused by some types of bullying is well recognised.

More recently, research has confirmed that short and long term **psychological harm** can result from bullying. This includes the harm to a person's social standing or reducing a person's willingness to socialise through bullying (particularly covert social bullying).

In fact, just the **fear of bullying** happening can create distress and harm. The ongoing nature of bullying can lead to the person being bullied feeling powerless and unable to stop it from happening. The effects of bullying, particularly on the mental health and wellbeing of those involved, including bystanders, can continue even after the situation is resolved.

Sometimes the term 'psychological bullying' is used to describe making threats and creating ongoing fear, but it is more accurate to describe the type of behaviour as 'verbal or social bullying' and the impact on the person being bullied as 'psychological harm'.

Context – home, work and school

Bullying can happen anywhere. It can happen at home, at work or at school. It can happen to anyone.

Bullying can occur between students, staff and parents/carers. Bullying. No Way! focuses on bullying between students. Teachers who are experiencing bullying at school should contact their health and safety representative, human resources department or union. Information related to workplace bullying is available at Australia's Fair Work Commission <https://www.fwc.gov.au/>