

Peer Abuse in Schools

Why It Matters and What Schools Can Do

This publication addresses three common forms of peer abuse: bullying, teen dating violence and hazing. It defines and explores connections between these three common forms of adolescent peer abuse, addresses the legal implications of each for schools and identifies best practices for educators who wish to implement a comprehensive approach to peer abuse prevention.

Bullying

Bullying is defined by the U.S. Department of Education and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) as **“any unwanted aggressive behavior(s) by another youth or group of youths who are not siblings or current dating partners that involves an observed or perceived power imbalance and is repeated multiple times or is highly likely to be repeated.”**¹ Bullying may be physical, verbal or relational and may occur directly in the presence of the targeted youth or indirectly through electronic devices or other methods of communication.²

Research on bullying indicates youth who bully others are at greater risk of depression and involvement in delinquent behaviors than youth who do not engage in bullying behavior.^{3,4} Similarly, being bullied has been linked to physical symptoms, depression and anxiety, as well as feeling unsafe at school and experiencing lower academic achievement.^{5,6,7}

Teen Dating Violence

Teen dating violence (TDV) is defined by the CDC as any “physical, sexual, psychological or emotional violence within a dating relationship, including stalking. It can occur in person or electronically and might occur between a current or former dating partner.” Research suggests that between 9-30% of teens have been physically abused by a boyfriend or girlfriend in the last 12 months. Only one out of 10 victims report seeking help, with about half as many male victims as female victims reporting their abuse.^{8,9}

Research on TDV has documented a relationship between early bullying behavior and TDV perpetration, particularly for males. Young people who are targets of TDV are at greater risk for anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation compared to non-abused peers¹⁰ and are at greater risk for involvement in delinquent behavior.¹¹ Among adult victims of domestic violence, 15-22% report that they were initially abused by a dating partner during the teen years.¹² Thus, TDV can be a precursor to future victimization.

“There is little doubt today that being bullied in childhood is an adverse experience that casts a shadow on children’s and adolescents’ mental health and well-being. After several decades of general skepticism about the true impact of bullying victimization, accumulating evidence now demonstrates a detrimental effect on youth’s mental health and reveals other poor outcomes including low self-esteem, self-harm and academic failure.”¹³

Hazing

Hazing is defined in different ways by different people. There is general agreement that hazing includes “any activity expected of someone joining or participating in a group that humiliates, degrades, abuses or endangers participants regardless of a person’s willingness to participate.”¹⁴

Most research on hazing has been conducted among college students. One study of young adults found 48% of boys and 39% of girls involved in high school activities reported being subjected to one or more hazing activities during high school.

Approximately half of the students who were hazed reported being subjected to dangerous activities such as assault, vandalism or alcohol, tobacco or other drug (ATOD) use.¹⁵

The effects of hazing on youth are difficult to ascertain because, like other forms of peer abuse, it is significantly underreported. Hazing resulting in humiliation is believed to have negative psychological effects. Physical forms of hazing have been linked to serious injury and even death.¹⁶

Researchers make a distinction between hazing and initiation rites. Initiation rites are pro-social behaviors that build social relationships, understanding, empathy, civility, altruism and moral decision-making among members of a group. This includes such things as requiring members to maintain a certain grade point average, dress up for events, undertake group projects and fundraisers, and participate in singing and chants with prosocial themes.

Examples of bullying

Teasing, name-calling, inappropriate comments, threats of harm, purposefully excluding someone, spreading harmful rumors, coercing others to say or do harmful things, kicking, hitting, pushing, spitting, damaging or taking someone's property, rude or mean gestures.¹⁷

Examples of Teen Dating Violence

Pinching, hitting, shoving or kicking a partner; threatening a partner or harming their sense of self-worth by name calling, shaming, bullying or embarrassing on purpose; keeping them away from friends and family; or coercing or forcing a partner to engage in a sex act when they do not or cannot consent.¹⁸

Examples of hazing

Physical mutilation, yelling or swearing with the intent to demean, coercing or requiring ATOD use or excessive exercise, confinement in a restricted area, coerced consumption of nonfood substances, drowning and near drowning, immersion in noxious substances, sleep or food deprivation, forced public humiliation or forced sexual activities.

Legal Implications

Bullying Law

Each state has a bullying prevention law guiding schools to educate about bullying behaviors, develop anti-bullying policies, adopt best practices and inform parents and students. Best practices include developing a whole school approach that includes education, prevention, intervention and consistent follow-up.¹⁹

Teen Dating Violence Education

Less than 10% sought help from other service providers, such as a teacher or police officer. For those who did seek help, both males (69.2%) and females (82%) were most likely to seek help from friends.²⁰

Teens reported that moral support from their friends and family is what helped them make it through the process of obtaining a protection order.

Hazing Code

Hazing is a serious form of peer abuse and should be addressed in K-12 schools. Hazing behaviors are increasingly reported among secondary school students²¹ and may result in legal action against perpetrators, adult supervisors or the school.²² (24 P.S. §5352 et seq.)

Hazing is addressed in the Pennsylvania Crimes Code and across the nation. 18 Pa. C.S. § 2802; Current through P.A. Acts 2023-7 Section 2802 - Hazing; "(a) Offense defined. – A person commits the offense of hazing if the person intentionally, knowingly or recklessly, for the purpose of initiating, admitting or affiliating a minor or student into or with an organization, or for the purpose of continuing or enhancing a minor or student's membership or status in an organization, causes, coerces or forces a minor or student to do" acts defined by the code.

Visit <https://bit.ly/3sR1DYi> for full listing of qualifying actions.

Educators should be aware that bullying, TDV or hazing behaviors may violate civil, criminal and/or civil rights laws. For example, some acts of peer abuse may meet legal definitions for defamation, assault, stalking, sexual harassment, etc. In such cases, parents may wish to pursue a remedy through the legal system. When peer abuse targets a student's race, color, religion, national origin, gender or other protected class, schools are obligated by state and federal civil rights laws to put an end to the offensive behavior and prevent future acts. If the peer abuse behaviors include physical acts, such as assault or sexual assault, educators must report the abuse to Childline and contact law enforcement.²³

Connections and Best Practices for Schools

Although bullying, TDV and hazing are distinct forms of peer abuse, all are known to manifest among school-aged youth and can result in significant harm. In addition, these forms of abuse share a common element: all reinforce an imbalance of power between victim and abusers. Such power imbalances carry risks for public organizations, like schools, which have a duty to protect young people and a legal mandate to address systemic inequalities.

A review of research on peer abuse suggests that there are some common strategies schools should consider to prevent peer abuse and ensure adults are prepared to intervene when peer abuse is suspected. It is important to note that classroom level interventions or curriculum-only approaches are less effective than interventions that also include school level or systemic components.

1. Policies Beyond Bullying

It is recommended that schools establish discreet policies on hazing, TDV, bullying and harassment. It is critical that policies aimed at addressing peer aggression define the behavior with specificity and describe how students and adults should report the behavior when it is observed or suspected and to whom. It is important that school administrators work closely with affected students and parents — and law enforcement and the courts, when appropriate — to effectively respond to peer abuse and prevent future acts. In addition, it is useful to include a statement about how the policy links to the school's disciplinary practices, supportive services and prevention education.

2. Clear Procedures for Intervening

Schools should have clear procedures in place for investigating and responding to suspected or observed instances of peer aggression. These should be communicated to all staff in writing and reviewed at least once a year. The person(s) responsible for conducting investigations should be trained in recognizing and responding to different forms of peer aggression and should make efforts to protect the targeted student and any youth reporting the harmful behavior. Interventions for targets and perpetrators should include supportive interventions, as well as disciplinary responses for perpetrators when appropriate.

Follow-up strategies should be implemented to insure the targeted student's safety immediately following the incident. This may include such things as raising awareness among supervising adults, increasing supervision in hot spots, stay-away orders implemented by the school, and regular check-in meetings with a supportive adult. Educators should forge partnerships with local domestic violence prevention providers to ensure mechanisms of education and support are available to youth affected by TDV.



3. Professional Development for Teachers, Coaches and Support Staff

Because peer abuse is so prevalent and the effects can be long-lasting and severe, it is important that school staff and coaches are trained to recognize different forms of abuse, as well as their warning signs. In addition to providing information on bullying, TDV and hazing, training should include: guidance on how to talk with students about different forms of peer abuse; role play activities that teach adults how to intervene when abuse is observed or suspected; and instruction on how to report suspected and observed peer abuse.

4. Prevention Programming

Developmentally appropriate prevention programming should be implemented to ensure students understand what healthy relationships look like and what to do when they experience peer abuse or suspect that another student is being targeted. Programs that build social and emotional skills can be beneficial. These programs should include or be accompanied by instruction on bystander roles and definitions of bullying, TDV and hazing.

5. Engage Peers as Supporters

The three forms of peer abuse discussed in the publication are distinct in many ways. Yet, research on each form of abuse has identified peers as key players in the abuse dynamic, as well as key players in successful intervention. In the case of bullying and hazing, other students are often aware of the problem behavior. When bystanders choose to ignore it or join in the abuse, they empower the perpetrator and condone abusive behavior. In the case of TDV, friends of the victim may become alienated from them or blame the target for remaining in an abusive relationship. Because social isolation can play a role in discouraging abused youth from leaving an unhealthy relationship, friends should be encouraged to remain connected and available to peers that may be in unhealthy dating relationships.

Teens reported that moral support from their friends and family is what helped them make it through the process of obtaining a protection order.

6. Provide Targeted Information and Support to Specific Groups

Prevention and intervention for peer abuse should be linked to a three-tiered system for improving school climate and safety.

This approach addresses:

- What information and skills will be taught to all students (Tier 1) and how these will be taught (prevention programming).

- What group supports will be available to students who demonstrate risk factors for peer abuse (Tier 2).
- What individualized interventions will be used or recommended to support students who demonstrate behavioral health issues related to peer abuse (Tier 3).

In addition to prevention programming, schools may offer educational support groups focused on healthy relationships to youth who have experienced peer abuse, as well as to students that demonstrate risk factors for peer abuse. For example, research suggests that students who have experienced trauma or placement in the child welfare system are at greater risk of involvement in unhealthy relationships than students who have not had these experiences.²⁴

Because hazing is most often associated with involvement in school activities and sports, schools should provide training and discussions about what constitutes hazing to participants in school-sponsored groups. Parents and students should be asked to sign a code of conduct that states the definition of hazing and the school's policy before the student is allowed to participate in school-sponsored activities. The code should specify bystander and reporter roles, as well as the names of the school employees who are designated to accept reports of hazing.²⁵

7. Link Definitions to Data-Collection Systems

Schools use a range of data collection systems to gather information about school climate and students' educational needs. Schools should consider collecting data on peer abuse, as appropriate, through office disciplinary referral systems. In addition, periodic anonymous student surveys may be conducted to inform prevention and intervention programming plans. This may be as simple as administering a survey in health class or to specific grade levels. The [Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System](#) (YRBSS) is a set of surveys that track behaviors that can lead to poor health in students grades 9 through 12. Some of the health-related behaviors and experiences monitored are:

- Student demographics: sex, sexual identity, race and ethnicity, and grade.
- Youth health behaviors and conditions: sexual, injury and violence, bullying, diet and physical activity, obesity, and mental health, including suicide.
- Substance use behaviors: electronic vapor product and tobacco product use, alcohol use, and other drug use.
- Student experiences: parental monitoring, school connectedness, unstable housing, and exposure to community violence.
- National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments has a free school climate survey at [SafeSupportiveLearning.org/edscls](https://www.SafeSupportiveLearning.org/edscls).

8. Develop a School-Parent-Community Effort

It is important that schools develop and maintain partnerships with parents and community leaders to provide consistent messages, support and care. Partnerships with local behavioral health providers and prevention organizations can ensure students have access to support outside the school. A team effort can also help to promote shared responsibility for the health and well-being of youth across all settings.

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Note: The information in this publication was updated in 2023 by Center for Safe Schools, to reflect current best practices and research. This publication was originally created in partnership with Highmark Foundation, in 2017, as a companion piece to the Pennsylvania Bullying Prevention Toolkit. All current information and bullying prevention toolkit resources are now on CenterForSafeSchools.org.

Visit CenterForSafeSchools.org for bullying prevention resources and services.

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