

# Preventing Aggression and Bullying in Early Childhood

Most research on bullying focuses on school-aged children; however, bullying also affects children as young as age four. This brief addresses the relevance of the term bullying to young children’s behaviors, reviews current research and describes prevention and intervention strategies that can be used in preschools and child care settings.

## What is bullying?

Bullying is defined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the U.S. Department of Education 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. Bullying may inflict harm or distress on the targeted youth including physical, psychological, social or educational harm.”<sup>1</sup>

Bullying behavior can be direct or indirect and may involve physical, verbal or relational aggression. See Table A for examples. Direct bullying is easy to see and occurs in the presence of the target, while indirect bullying is more subtle. Relational aggression is bullying behavior that is directed at harming a child’s social standing or status.<sup>2</sup>

**Table A: Examples of physical, verbal and relational aggression**

| Physical                   | Verbal       | Relational                  |
|----------------------------|--------------|-----------------------------|
| Pushing                    | Taunting     | Isolating target from peers |
| Kicking                    | Teasing      | Spreading rumors            |
| Forcibly taking belongings | Name-calling | Giving the “cold shoulder”  |
| Hitting                    | Threats      | Refusing to share friends   |

## Do young children bully others?

Aggressive behavior is present in young children and includes such things as verbal and physical aggression and social exclusion. When a young child’s aggressive behavior becomes persistent or severe or when another child is repeatedly targeted, it may meet the definition of bullying. Although bullying can occur in preschool-aged children, it is more commonly identified among elementary-aged youth.

Compared to older children, young children may be less likely to engage in covert or indirect bullying behaviors because these behaviors require more advanced social and linguistic skills.<sup>3</sup> In addition, manifestations of aggression and bullying in young children tend to be goal-directed and influenced by developmental and situational factors.

For example, a child may tell a peer that they will not be their friend if they do not give up a toy. In this case, the child may be exhibiting a form of relational aggression because he or she does not possess the more complex skills of planning, problem-solving or negotiating to meet his or her needs. Physically aggressive behaviors (e.g., hitting and kicking) or verbal behaviors (e.g., teasing and taunting) may be the result of poor self-management skills, limited communication skills or undeveloped social skills.



## What are the effects of bullying on young children?

Young children who are bullied by their peers can experience distress. They may feel fearful of other children and anxious about going to preschool or other settings where aggressive peers are present.

Children who are bullied may be vulnerable to future victimization by peers and at risk of underachievement if intervention is not provided.<sup>4</sup> In addition, students who engage in bullying in preschool are at risk of developing serious and persistent behavioral problems.<sup>5</sup>

Bystanders are students who are not directly involved in the aggressive act but they witness the behavior. Young children who are bystanders to bullying can recognize when another child is behaving in a harmful way and may be able to learn strategies for responding (e.g., say “Stop it,” or tell an adult). If aggressive behavior is not addressed in a setting, bystanders may mimic the behavior.<sup>6</sup> This can lead to a negative social climate and interfere with student learning.

## Why do young children exhibit aggressive behavior or bully others in preschool and kindergarten?

Because the social and behavioral demands of preschool and school settings are different from students’ home environments, children may experience some predictable challenges that can result in aggressive responses, including challenges with:

- Routine class behavior.
- Language and communication.
- Cooperative activities or play.

Within structured learning and care settings, young children are expected to engage in routine behaviors that support learning while navigating spontaneous social interactions required for

play and other cooperative activities. Children benefit from being taught how to engage in common classroom and social routines (e.g. lining up for recess, taking turns at the water table, using manners at snack time, sitting quietly in the book corner, etc.) and from activities that build vocabulary, listening skills, speaking skills and other social skills.

Beginning around age 3 or 4, children can learn to use language and more complex thinking skills to solve social problems. For example, research suggests that 4-year olds can learn to:

- Identify feelings in themselves and others.
- Interpret the meaning of social cues based upon their perspective.
- Consider and evaluate different behavioral options.
- Decide how to respond to a situation.<sup>7</sup>

## How can adults prevent aggression and bullying behavior among young children?

It is important that adults take steps to prevent bullying and respond to all aggressive behavior. The following are recommended components of prevention in preschools:

### Prepare the Environment

Ensure children have access to developmentally appropriate play materials and activity centers that are organized for group work. For example, if an art corner is designed for four children, then provide a table with four seats and a set of organized materials for four.<sup>8</sup>

### Teach and Practice Routine Behavior

Provide explicit instruction on classroom routines, such as how to line up, how to take out materials and put them away, how to sit quietly during circle time, how to say please and thank you, how to take turns, etc. Practice these skills periodically and reinforce children for following classroom and behavioral routines.<sup>9</sup>

### Supervise Hot Spots

Ensure there is adequate supervision, especially in areas where children engage in less structured activities, such as dramatic play areas, book corners, cubbies, bathrooms and playgrounds. Bullying is less likely to occur during times and in areas where there is more structure and active supervision.<sup>10</sup>

### Limit Labels

Adults should avoid labeling children as mean, bad, victims or bullies and rather discuss the experiences of the child. A young child may have difficulty understanding common definitions of bullying behavior. Further, they may have difficulty understanding different types of bullying behaviors, the repetitive nature of peer abuse and the characteristic imbalance of power.<sup>11</sup> However, young children are able to understand aggressive and non-aggressive behaviors and are able to learn the difference between acceptable and unacceptable behaviors at school.



## Teach Feeling Awareness and Social Problem-Solving Skills

It is important to expose children to feelings vocabulary and teach social problem-solving skills. This is best achieved by implementing an evidence-based social and emotional learning (SEL) program. Social skills can also be reinforced by reading and discussing storybooks. Teachers may also use feelings vocabulary and model problem-solving in class by narrating their own experiences and choices.<sup>12</sup>

## Set Classroom Expectations and Procedures

Procedures and codes of behavior should be taught explicitly to children. Classroom expectations should be stated in simple, positive terms. Adults should intervene when peer aggression occurs by stopping the behavior, reminding students of the classroom expectations and encouraging students to make better choices. With older children the adult may ask the child to come up with behavioral alternatives that are helpful, not hurtful.

## Use Literature to Promote Empathy and Helping Behavior

Books can be used to create awareness of the difference between helpful and hurtful social behaviors and promote empathy among young children. Adults should select age appropriate titles with social themes and prepare questions to promote individual or group reflection. For example, a teacher may ask: “What happened to the character in the book? Why do you think people treated him or her that way? How does it feel to be treated that way? How else could they have responded? What would you have done if you were there to help?”<sup>13</sup>

## Responding to Aggression and Bullying in Young Children

In order to improve interpersonal relationships and decrease aggression and bullying, staff must understand the difference between bullying and predictable preschool behaviors. When aggression is observed, adults should respond, keeping the following guidelines in mind:

- Intervene when red flag behaviors are observed by naming the behavior (pushing, name calling, etc.) and referring to classroom behavioral expectations.
- Avoid general statements such as, “be nice.” Instead use specific language, like “Please use your words to tell your friends you would like to play.”
- Lead children in problem-solving conversations such as, “What are some things we can do if two people want to use the same color crayon at the same time?”
- Eliminate adult bullying, such as threats, shaming and punishing behaviors.<sup>14</sup> These behaviors suggest to students that it is okay for stronger, more powerful people to dominate weaker people.
- Recognize when a child’s aggression is the result of a skill weakness (i.e., language development, self-awareness, self-control, etc.) and teach those skills. In some cases, it may be appropriate to help the family access additional supportive services for the child (e.g., Early Intervention, family counseling, etc.)

## Evidence-Based Programs for Young Children

Bullying prevention can be supported through schoolwide improvement initiatives such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) which is a multi-tiered framework for organizing climate improvement efforts and teaching behavioral routines.<sup>15</sup> The PBIS framework helps preschools develop behavioral expectations and use data to inform decision making.

From there, schools are expected to select evidence-based strategies and programs to support students’ social and behavioral learning. PBIS uses a three-tiered model to organize interventions for students needing the least (tier 1) to most intensive (tier 3) degrees of support.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to learning behavioral routines, young children benefit from being taught SEL skills to aid in the development of interpersonal relationships. SEL is the process through which children and adults acquire the knowledge, attitudes and skills they need to recognize and manage their emotions, demonstrate caring and concern for others, establish positive relationships, make responsible decisions and handle challenging situations constructively. The following are some programs recognized by the Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) as effective for teaching SEL skills to young children:

### AI’s Pals

Teaches SEL skills to young children through explicit instruction to develop social competence, autonomy and problem-solving. AI’s Pals includes 46 core lessons and nine booster lessons.

### I Can Problem Solve (ICPS)

Teaches key vocabulary for understanding feelings and engaging in problem-solving. This vocabulary is then used to teach children how to recognize different perspectives, generate alternative solutions, anticipate consequences and solve problems. The prekindergarten program includes 59 lessons designed to be taught as games.

### The Incredible Years Series

Three different curricula for children, teachers and parents. The Child Training program (Dinosaur Curriculum) emphasizes developing skills to understand and recognize feelings, solve problems, manage anger and develop and maintain friendships. The program includes approximately 60 lessons.

### Promoting Alternative Thinking Skills (PATHS)

Preschool and kindergarten program promotes emotional literacy, self-control, social competence, positive peer relations and interpersonal problem-solving skills through scripted lessons.

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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](http://CenterForSafeSchools.org).



Visit [CenterForSafeSchools.org](http://CenterForSafeSchools.org) for bullying prevention resources and services.

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