

**CHILDHOOD BULLYING: AN EPIDEMIC THAT ESPECIALLY
AFFECTS LGBTQ YOUTH**

Stuart Green, DMH, LCSW

Associate Director, Overlook Family Medicine

Leadership Team, NJ Alliance for Social Emotional Learning

Founder, NJ Coalition for Bullying Awareness and Prevention

Definition and Forms

Bullying is repeated aggressive behavior (pattern of negative acts) intended to harm or intimidate, toward persons perceived as vulnerable, in a relationship in which an imbalance of power exists (or is created).

- Physical: Hitting, kicking, or other physical aggression.
- Verbal: Name-calling, teasing, or verbal threats.
- Social/Relational: Spreading rumors, exclusion from groups.
- Cyberbullying: Harassment through digital platforms.
- Hazing: teams or sororities/fraternities

Consequences

- Increased risk of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation among victims.
- Bullying during childhood linked to long-term mental health issues.
- Bullying is an ACE (adverse childhood experience), the childhood form of trauma.

Whether it is psychological, physical, or both, bullying starts young and exposure to it becomes a significant part of who we are in our adult lives.

Prevalence

- Bullying is the most common form of violence among young people.
- Approximately 19.2% of students aged 12-18 reported being bullied during the 2021-2022 school year.
- Cyberbullying affected over one in six high school students in the past year. (CDC)
- LGBT and gender-questioning kids are among the most targeted populations for harsh treatment by peers.
- Commonly targeted populations also include children with special needs, children of heavier weight, and children with any difference or minority status in a school population.
- Children who have few or no friends, are not involved in school activities, not 'connected' or 'engaged' in the school are vulnerable.

Many bullied children are noticeably alone, isolated and unengaged at school. Since they're required by law to be in school, they must find ways to exist in an environment that doesn't always adequately address the issues.

Prevalence data

- Recent data indicates a concerning rise in bullying incidents among New Jersey youth. During the 2021-2022 school year, New Jersey schools investigated over 19,000 harassment, intimidation, and bullying (HIB) incidents, confirming 7,672 cases—the highest number since the state began monitoring such incidents. (NJ DOE)
- This increase is part of a broader trend; from 2018 to 2023, bias-based incidents in New Jersey quadrupled. In 2022 alone, there were 281 hate crimes reported in New Jersey's K-12 schools and higher education institutions. (NJ Spotlight News)
- National bullying trends: The 2023 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) indicates that 19% of high school students reported being bullied on school property, an increase from 15% in 2021. (CDC)

Key Points

- It's an institutional phenomena, arising primarily from the culture and climate of institutions, such as schools, rather than from the characteristics of individuals or families.
- Culture is how we do things here. Climate is how the place feels. Leaders (eg, school leaders, adults) are primarily responsible for the culture and climate, ensuring its strength, addressing gaps where needed.
- Bullying is virtually never a single act. It's a pattern of behavior towards children who may lack support from peers or support and protection from adults at school.
- Studies have shown that isolated incidents, while harmful, are usually categorized as conflict or aggression rather than bullying unless they escalate into a pattern.
- Research has shown that bullying behaviors often persist over weeks, months, or even years, suggesting that it is rarely an isolated event. (My info-line experience supports this.)

More key points

- Surveys reveal that children bullied often describe bullying as ongoing, with incidents occurring repeatedly before they report or seek help.
- Studies where bullying is observed in schools (e.g., Craig & Pepler, 1997) show that perpetrators tend to target the same individuals over time, indicating a pattern.
- The mental health effects of bullying, such as anxiety, depression, and PTSD, are often linked to the chronic nature of the behavior rather than one-time incidents.
- Data collected from schools often shows that incidents flagged as bullying involve recurring issues (eg, gender, special needs, etc.). This informs policies that emphasize monitoring and intervention for patterns rather than one-time conflicts.

Focus on LGBTQ Youth

- **Physical Threats and Harm:** Approximately 32% of LGBTQ youth in New Jersey have been physically threatened or harmed due to their sexual orientation or gender identity. (The Trevor Project)
- **Discrimination Experiences:** About 50% of LGBTQ youth in the state have faced discrimination based on their sexual orientation or gender identity. (The Trevor Project)
- **Anxiety and Depression:** A significant number of LGBTQ youth experience symptoms of anxiety and depression, often linked to bullying and discrimination. (The Trevor Project)
- **Suicide Risk:** Research indicates that LGBTQ youth who have faced anti-LGBTQ victimization, including bullying, report higher rates of suicide attempts. (The Trevor Project)
- **Affirming Spaces:** Only 16% of LGBTQ youth identified their homes as LGBTQ-affirming, and 29% felt their schools were affirming environments. (The Trevor Project)
- **Transgender and gender-questioning students** experience bullying at nearly double the rate of their cisgender peers.

Prevalence data – LGBTQ

- 2023 YRBS-CDC:
- LGBTQ students experience higher rates of bullying and mental health challenges compared to their heterosexual peers. The 2023 YRBS reveals that 41% of LGBTQ+ teens seriously considered suicide in the past year, compared to 13% of cisgender and heterosexual students. (CDC)
- Approximately 40% of transgender students and 40% of gender questioning youth reported being bullied at school, nearly double the rate of cisgender students. (CDC)
- Specific state-level data on bullying among LGBTQ+ students in New Jersey is limited. However, national trends suggest that LGBTQ+ youth in New Jersey likely face similar, if not higher, rates of bullying and associated mental health challenges.
- Cisgender comparison data: 20.3% girls bullied, 14.8% boys bullied.
- School connectedness: a majority of cisgender youth vs less than half of questioning students and 36.6% of trans students.

Prevention and Intervention Strategies

- Anti-Bullying Legislation: New Jersey's Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights Act mandates that all schools implement comprehensive anti-bullying policies, which include protections for LGBTQ students.
- Advocacy Organizations: Groups like Garden State Equality work towards creating safe environments for LGBTQ individuals by offering resources to combat bullying and discrimination.
- Implementation of anti-bullying policies and educational programs.
- Active communication and monitoring of children's online activities.
- Advocacy for stricter age restrictions on social media platforms to protect minors and/or restricted access to smartphones. (Australia's new law - no social media before age 16.)
- Another example: NJ's anti-hazing law (Timothy Piazza).

How can parents help a child bullied?

- The most important way to support your child starts with two old-fashioned, well-known values: communication and relationship.
- The best thing parents can do is establish a supportive relationship with their kids.
- Open dialogue with your kids means they feel like they can tell you anything -- even negative experiences. When it comes to bullying, kids will 'tell' or 'not tell' depending on how they feel about who they're talking to.
- At best, about half of the kids tell an adult when they're bullied. The other half won't.
- The difference between those who tell and those who don't is a supportive, trusting, open, relationship with a parent. This can be hard to find for gender-diverse young people who don't fit into masculine or feminine stereotypes.

What can parents do if a child is bullying others?

- If you are on this side of the equation with a child who is repeatedly hurting others, the same principles apply.
- Bullying isn't a hardwired, lifelong condition. It's a behavior kids engage in, but not necessarily intractable or unchanging.
- With a supportive and empathic relationship -- where you really listen -- you'll be able to pick up on whether your child's ways of interacting hurts other kids. (and what is causing the behavior)
- Model positive behavior. And check the social environment (family, friends, etc.) for negative models.
- Expect the school to address it and help them do so.

Finding support for your child

- The New Jersey Anti-bullying Bill of Rights requires every school to have an anti-bullying specialist on-site -- typically a school counselor.
- If your child is being bullied, meet with school staff in person. (Bring supportive others, not your child.)
- Once any school staff become aware of possible bullying, the school is obligated by law to investigate and understand what's happened within 10 days.
- If they find harassment, intimidation, and bullying (HIB) is taking place, they are required to take action.
- Actions can include increasing protection and support for the targeted child and applying consequences for those bullying.

What to expect of a school

- Teachers and school leaders should be aware of children who lack friends or other supportive relationships, or who may be vulnerable 'because' of gender diversity, special needs or any minority status, although any child may be bullied.
- The vulnerability of most children bullied is visible, whether it's sitting alone at lunchtime or not belonging to clubs, activities or other social groups. It's the school's obligation to address these issues and ensure peer support and school connectedness.
- Re LGBTQ students, every school should have a gay/straight alliance (or similar), have identified mentors, staff should participate in LGBTQ organization activities (Day of Silence, No-Name-Calling Week, etc. etc.), have supportive signage and policies, including for transgender youth (most vulnerable and least supported).
- If bullying occurs and a parent meets with an anti-bullying specialist, there are always ways to stop the patterns of violence and help a child feel safe and supported at school.

For additional discussion

- Impact of Politics: Nearly half (49%) of LGBTQ youth reported that recent political events negatively affected their well-being. (The Trevor Project) (eg, current Supreme Court case on gender affirming care for youth)