What bullying behaviour is and is not

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What we know about bullying behaviour

Internationally, there is a wealth of information, programmes and resources available for schools about bullying, but also a lot of misinformation. Swearer, Espelage and Napolitano (2009) identify eight common myths about bullying behaviour.

> **Myth 1. Bullying is an isolated, individual aggressive action**
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> Definitions of bullying emphasise that it includes the intent to harm, repetition and an imbalance of power—it is not a single act.
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> **Myth 2. Bullying occurs between a bully and a victim**
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> Bullying is a dynamic social interaction often carried out in the presence of others which can be influenced by peers, schools, families and communities. People can move in and out of the role of bully, victim or bystander.
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> **Myth 3. Bullying is a normal part of growing up**
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> Bullying is not a normal or inevitable part of childhood. Many children do not experience bullying and do not bully others.
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> **Myth 4. Physical bullying is more damaging than social or verbal bullying**
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> Social and verbal bullying can be just as harmful as physical bullying. Adults may be unaware of social bullying and newer forms such as cyber-bullying.
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> **Myth 5. It's impossible to stop bullying**
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> Bullying occurs in varying degrees in most schools, but there are many schools and classrooms in which bullying is rare. It takes a co-ordinated effort to stop bullying.
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> **Myth 6. Anti-bullying policies are ineffective**
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> Policies are important as they increase awareness of healthy social behaviours, signify an intention to act and lay a foundation for change.
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> **Myth 7. Bullying prevention and intervention are complicated and expensive**
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> Stopping most bullying is about developing healthy social relationships. There are many strategies that schools can use to do this.
>
> **Myth 8. Figuring out how to evaluate anti-bullying efforts is too complicated**
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> Schools have access to staff who are experienced in assessing change and students can be involved in this process.
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> *(Adapted from Swearer, et al., 2009, pp. 5-6)*

What bullying is, and is not

Bullying behaviour is described in many different ways but most definitions include three distinct elements:

- bullying is **deliberately harmful** aggressive behaviour
- bullying is behaviour that is **repeated** over time
- bullying involves a **power imbalance** between those who bully and those being bullied.

Types of bullying behaviour

Bullying is **not one behaviour**, and it is widely accepted that there are **different types of bullying**. These fall into four main groups shown in the box.

Bullying is sometimes used as a catch-all term to describe any act of aggression in schools, but **not all aggressive behaviours are bullying**. A one-off physical fight between students of similar size and strength is not bullying, and a situation is not bullying if the people involved do not perceive it as harmful (e.g., good-natured teasing).

The different types of bullying behaviours

- **verbal**—repeated mocking or put downs, name-calling, unwanted teasing, homophobic or racist remarks

- **physical**—repeated hitting or kicking, taking or threatening to take possessions

- **social or relational**—repeated exclusion, spreading rumours or gossiping, withholding friendship, pulling faces

- **cyber**—repeated threats, criticism or unkind comments or images sent by text, email or posted on social networking sites

Bullying behaviours sit along a continuum from minor, major to crisis. Research shows that most incidents are minor, and extreme cases occur much less frequently. Many minor bullying episodes can be addressed by approaches such as informal teacher intervention or through teaching students conflict resolution strategies; major cases may need a more formal method such as a restorative conference (see **The W@S research brief, Addressing conflicts in ways that build social competence**).

Crisis cases of bullying or other behaviours such as assault may require different strategies.

For this reason, schools need to work with their community to clearly define what bullying is and is not, and outline the characteristics of a minor, major or crisis incident and how each will be addressed.

Support and resources:

- The New Zealand publication, *Responsive Schools* (Carroll-Lind, 2010), can help schools to develop definitions of different behaviours.

- For crisis incidents, support is available from the Ministry of Education's emergencies and traumatic incidents team: Freephone 0800 84 83 26.

Is bullying behaviour a concern in New Zealand?

Many New Zealand children experience bullying in some form. By the age of 14, two-thirds of te young people involved in the Competent Learners study had reported experiencing and/or engaging in bullying (Wylie & Hipkins, 2006).

Some young people are the frequent targets of this behaviour. The New Zealand *Youth '07* survey of secondary students found a small but significant number of students (around 6 percent) reported they were bullied at school on a weekly basis (Adolescent Health Research Group, 2008). This figure is similar to international data.

However, other New Zealand data suggest that we have higher rates of bullying behaviour than other countries. In the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), the 9-year-old students from New Zealand reported experiencing more bullying behaviour than students from other countries (Martin, Mullis, & Foy, 2008; Mullis, Martin, & Foy, 2008). This study also showed differences between student and teacher views of school safety. In contrast to student reports, New Zealand teachers' average ranking was in the middle of the range of countries. Many other studies show student reports of being bullied or witnessing bullying behaviour are usually higher than teacher or parent reports. **This suggests that adults may be unaware that bullying is occurring**.

New Zealand studies indicate that, as in other countries, most bullying behaviour happens at school, particularly in the school playground. Boys tend to engage in more physical bullying while girls are more likely to be involved in social or relational bullying (Wylie & Hipkins, 2006).

One unusual feature of bullying behaviour is that it is continually changing. In the past 10 years cyber-bullying has become more common. Bullying also changes in nature as students get older. **Studies suggest that it peaks when students are aged around 11 to 14 and reduces as students move into the upper teenage years**. The literature suggests that the most effective time to design approaches to address bullying behaviour is when students are aged around 7 to 14.

Both New Zealand and international surveys suggest that there might have been a slight reduction in bullying over the past 10 years. However, what has changed in that time is how we view bullying and our awareness of the harm that it can do. We are also less accepting of any kind of aggression or violence towards children and there is an increasing understanding that **being bullied is a violation of a person's human rights**.

Who is at risk of being bullied?

Some studies have focused on trying to identify students or groups who are more likely to be at risk of being bullied. Studies show that a range of students are at risk.

Researchers qualify this information by noting that the list of characteristics that might predict bullying is so wide that**, at some point in their life, all children may be in at least one of these categories** (Rigby, 2006).

> **Who is at risk of being bullied?**
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> Students who:
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> - are unassertive or socially withdrawn
> - are not part of the majority culture of a school or society by virtue of factors such as their ethnicity, cultural or religious background or sexual orientation
> - have special learning needs
> - have just joined or changed schools (e.g., the first year of secondary school is a common time for students to experience bullying behaviour).

From these findings, researchers have suggested that much of the effort in addressing bullying is **best targeted at all students (a universal approach)** rather than trying to identify individuals or groups who are likely to be involved in bullying behaviours at a particular point in time (a targeted approach). A universal approach is recommended in the Wellbeing@School resources.

Impacts of bullying behaviour

It is clear that **bullying can have a detrimental impact on young people's health, wellbeing and learning**. New Zealand data from the *Youth2000 and Youth '07* health surveys showed that students who had been frequently bullied were also more likely to avoid going to school, to have significant depressive symptoms or to attempt suicide (Clark et al., 2009; Fleming et al., 2007; Fortune et al., 2010).

There is also considerable evidence that *both* experiencing bullying and engaging in bullying are associated with adverse longer term health and education outcomes. In New Zealand, the Competent Learners study found that involvement in some form of bullying was one of the factors associated with early school leaving (Wylie, Hipkins, & Hodgen, 2008).

Understanding bullying behaviour

Understanding why people engage in bullying can be useful as schools explore ways to further build a safe and caring school environment. **Understandings about bullying behaviour have changed over time as new research evidence has emerged**. Rather than there being one definitive explanation for this behaviour, different or multiple explanations can be meaningful in different contexts. Earlier explanations tended to see bullying as an individual or family "deficit", whereas **more recent research shows the role of the wider system and social environment in shaping and influencing behaviour** (see the box below).

What are the common explanations for bullying behaviour?

- **Bullying as a developmental process** as young children start to assert themselves and establish their social dominance. This raises the question of whether bullying behaviours should be seen as "normal" or "abnormal". In answer, some researchers describe bullying as a "normal but unacceptable" power relationship.

- **Bullying as a personality trait** in children with low empathy or a predisposition towards aggressive behaviour. However, studies have found that only a small proportion of children who engage in bullying at school continue on to commit violent acts as adults. Studies also show that many of the people who engage in bullying as children "grow out of it". People also can step in and out of roles such as bully, victim or bystander. For these reasons, researchers caution about labelling a student a bully as it implies a stable personality trait (Wearmouth, Glynn, & Berryman, 2005).

- **Bullying as learned family behaviour** in children from families with particular characteristics and behaviours (e.g., exposure to violence in the home is a risk factor for bullying).

- **Bullying as a social phenomenon** which reflects patterns of dominance of some groups over others. Prior to the 1980s, bullying was mostly understood as an interpersonal interaction between a perpetrator and a victim. Since then, research has shown that bullying is a social phenomenon that happens within a peer group. A key change in thinking happened when researchers found that bullying behaviours often occur in the presence of peers or bystanders who participate either directly or indirectly (Salmivalli, 1999). They found that when peers intervene, bullying stops faster. These studies have resulted in more focus on ways to support peers to intervene, as well as ways in which teachers can create caring norms in classrooms.

- **Bullying as a socio-ecological phenomenon** which considers how the "ecology" of the wider system can shape behaviours. For example, studies show that similar schools can have quite different rates of bullying behaviour and there are a range of risk and protective factors in the wider environment that are known to influence the cause and expression of bullying behaviours. These include factors related to the individual, peers, families, schools, communities and society (Espelage & Swearer, 2010; Orpinas & Horne, 2006).

While all of these explanations may be valid in some situations, bullying is increasingly being **described as a socio-ecological rather than individual phenomenon**. In essence, the socio-ecological perspective combines and builds on the earlier perspectives to look beyond the individual to consider the multiple factors that are known to influence bullying behaviour.

What next?

Reflecting recent studies that describe bullying behaviour as a systemic issue, researchers also suggest that **systems-thinking solutions are needed to address bullying**. These solutions gather community support to draw on the resources of the wider system. For this reason, approaches to addressing bullying behaviours need to be aimed at **changing the culture of the wider system** and need to bring students, schools, families and communities together to build the skills, strategies and capabilities of all involved (for more information see the **W@S research brief: whole-school approach to change using the Wellbeing@School tools**). This is the approach recommended and modelled through the Wellbeing@School tools and self-review cycle.

Further information

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