

Bullying - A Threat to Mental Well-being

The Mary Foundation. A Royal Initiative Against Bullying in Denmark.

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About Bullying

Bullying is an ongoing and deliberate misuse of power in relationships through repeated verbal, physical and/or social behaviour that intends to cause physical, social and/or psychological harm. It can involve an individual or a group misusing their power, or perceived power, over one or more persons who feel unable to stop it from happening.¹

Bullying can happen in person or online, via various digital platforms and devices, and it can be obvious (overt) or hidden (covert). Bullying behaviour is repeated, or has the potential to be repeated, over time (for example, through sharing of digital records). A bullying culture can develop in any context, such as school, family or workplace, in which humans interact with each other.

Bullying of any form or for any reason can have immediate, medium and long-term effects on those involved, including bystanders.

Bullying can have serious consequences for the development and well-being of an individual, both in childhood and adulthood. Persons who have been side-lined and marginalised in childhood often develop mental problems later in life. Social isolation, homelessness, drug addictions, and psychiatric problems are often seen in these people when they are adults.

Bullying on social media is a specific problem that is very difficult to tackle. Cyberbullying is verbally threatening or harassing behaviour conducted through electronic technology such as cell phones, email, social media, or text messaging. Cyberbullying can happen anywhere with an internet connection.

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bullying>

Cyberbullying² occurs when someone uses technology to demean, inflict harm, or cause pain to another person. It is “wilful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices.” Perpetrators bully victims in any online setting, including social media, video or computer games, discussion boards, or text messaging on mobile devices.

Online harassment between adults can involve different terms, depending on the relationship and context. For example, dating violence, sexual harassment, workplace harassment, and scamming - more common among adults - can all happen on the internet.

Cyberbullying can also cause educational harm, affecting a student’s attendance or academic performance, especially when bullying occurs both online and in school or when a student has to face their online bully in the classroom.

A Royal Danish Initiative

In 2007 Her Royal Highness, the Danish Crown Princess Mary, took a praiseworthy initiative primarily against bullying but also aiming to reduce domestic violence and loneliness. She established the Mary Foundation which has launched several major programmes³ with a range of activities across sectors, ages, social classes, everywhere where these important issues related to human well-being exist.

Denmark is a social welfare State with a high level of internal cohesion, security, general well-being and equity and ranges among the most developed and happy countries in the world together with the other Nordic countries. The welfare that is seen in these countries is anchored in social values that are shared across many levels of communities. That is why the term welfare State is used to characterise these countries. The achievement in social welfare, and in community and individual security, is brought about by a broad range of rules and regulations as well as communal actions that guarantee social protection and freedom of speech, among others. However, no society is perfect; there are individuals and sections of society who fall though the safety net and are marginalised or ostracised.

² <https://www.apa.org/topics/bullying/cyberbullying-online-social-media>

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The goal of the Mary Foundation is to strive to fight social isolation, based on the belief that everyone has a right to belong. The feeling of belonging to a community where you feel acknowledged and accepted is crucial for all.

The Foundation works in three areas: 1) bullying and well-being; 2) domestic violence; 3) loneliness. Each of these action areas was identified on the basis of a comprehensive analysis of the social sector in Denmark and based on HRH Crown Princess Mary's particular interest in these areas. The activities include projects, analyses and communication efforts as well as contributions to increase knowledge and create awareness about the overall purpose. Each of the intervention areas is guided and overseen by an expert panel.

Bullying is a serious problem for many children.

- 10% of all 11-15-year-olds are often bullied in Denmark;
- Bullying can be prevented from as early as pre-school;
- Bullying is not about individuals but about the dynamics in the group;

Much of the work of the foundation around bullying is based on research, notably by Danish and Norwegian researchers. This research work which has contributed to the understanding of the dynamics driving bullying, and pointing to areas of intervention which are consequently addressed through the projects that are being implemented. These projects are operated in partnership with other organisations. The project - "Free of bullying" - is thus spearheaded by the Foundation together with the Danish Save the Children.⁴

The fight against bullying contributes to the Social Development Goals (SDG) for 2030, especially SDG 4 - Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote life-long learning opportunities for all. Learning and well-being go hand in hand, to ensure children thrive and are embraced by their communities which, in turn, contributes to SDG 4.

Research and Results

Bullying is seen in all age groups, even among kindergarten kids, but Danish research suggests that bullying peaks in Grades 4 to 6. However,

⁴ <https://www.freeofbullying.com/the-free-of-bullying-programme/>

earlier intervention is essential. A Norwegian study found that relational bullying (which refers to indirect bullying involving destruction of friendships, spreading rumours, ignoring and exclusion from play) starts from as early as three years of age. An American study similarly showed that both indirect and direct forms of bullying could be observed among children as young as 30 months.

While in-person bullying is still more common, data from the American Cyber-bullying Research Centre shows about one in every four teens has experienced cyberbullying, and about one in six has been a perpetrator. About one in five tweens, or kids aged nine to 12, has been involved in cyberbullying. Psychological research has shown that being victimised by a cyberbully increases stress and may result in anxiety and depression.

Danish researchers and others have found that bullying stems from children's innate need to feel they belong to their class or group community. And if they feel unsafe and sense potential isolation from their community, social exclusion and anxiety can arise. Affected children may attempt to deal with their fear of exclusion by forming new groups, whose shared insecurities and need to belong lead them to exclude others.

That is why bullying tends to recur in groups where children feel insecure and excluded. By contrast, children's communities that are characterised by tolerance and inclusion leave little room for bullying. Therefore, the key to *preventing* bullying – instead of only trying in vain to *cure* the problem after the fact - lies in focusing on developing a caring, tolerant and inclusive culture.

Kids and teens may rely on negative coping mechanisms, such as substance abuse, to deal with the stress of cyberbullying. In extreme cases, kids and teens may struggle with self-harm or suicidal thoughts

A New Definition of Bullying

Historically, educators and scholars predominantly approached bullying as a problem limited to the children perceived to be involved. As bullying research took root in the 1970s, it focused exclusively on the “bully” and the “victim” as stereotypes characterised by identifiable personality traits.

In the 1990s, this perspective evolved to include the impact of “bystanders” who may have witnessed the bullying episode. Meanwhile, the potential influence of other children or adults in their community, or of their shared culture, remained largely unexplored.

However, a growing body of research shows that even the post-90s perspective is too narrow. It also shows that bullying is caused by dysfunctional group dynamics, where children develop a community which is based on excluding others from it.

Based on a meticulous analysis of available research results, the Foundation has come to this definition of bullying: *Bullying is defined as behaviour or actions that exclude people from a community to which they have the right to belong.* It is also implied that bullying is a social phenomenon in communities and not merely an individual issue.

Danish researcher, Helle Rabøl Hansen of the Danish University of Education,⁵ describes bullying in terms that accurately reflect the new community-centric perspective. She highlights that bullying is characterised by all of the following:

- Bullying is a group phenomenon;
- Bullying is systematic acts of exclusion;
- Bullying can be direct and victimising or indirectly exclusionary. Hitting and pushing are direct forms of bullying, while bad-mouthing and ignoring are examples of indirect bullying;
- Bullying takes place in a social context, such as among a group of children in a pre-school or primary school;
- Bullying occurs only when there is an imbalance of power;

A key tenet in this new community-based view of bullying is that bullying can never be explained in individual terms alone. It is not simply about dysfunctional children acting out, and vulnerable individuals being targeted because of some aspect of their personality or physicality.

What is Done

The key to stop bullying is to prevent it. And this requires proactive steps to create positive, inclusive, and tolerant communities where children

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nxQVldsV9Xg>

can flourish. Childcare professionals and teachers must constantly ask themselves what more they can do to help each child in their care feel more included, seen, and heard. They must evaluate and implement initiatives to improve the culture in their children community. In doing so, they should aim to foster a shared set of attitudes, values, beliefs and behavioural norms that motivates every child to feel they belong to and are safe in the group.

Within the area of bullying, the foundation aims to work on 1) projects, 2) knowledge and 3) communications. It will take the following initiatives:

- Share the community-based view of bullying with organisations in other countries who share our commitment to improving the lives of children;
- Provide empirical information about the causes of and effective measures to prevent bullying, so that these organisations may learn from and spread this knowledge in their own countries;
- Support organisations who want to join our efforts to eradicate bullying among children, through our Free of Bullying programme and Competence Centre.

This has resulted in the anti-bullying programme “Free of Bullying”. The programme aims at preventing bullying among 0 to 9-years-old children. The programme consists of tools, methods, and materials that childcare professionals can easily incorporate into children’s daily routine in childcare facilities, pre-schools and primary schools. A Free of Bullying competence centre offers guidance and material to institutions and groups who wish to strengthen their anti-bullying efforts.

In the work with bullying and well-being, the Mary Foundation has contributed to professionals shifting their understanding of what bullying is and why it is so important to work with group dynamics. Today, the Mary Foundation’s project, Free of Bullying, is present in 60% of nurseries/ day care facilities, 62% of pre-schools, and 46% of primary schools and after-school clubs in Denmark, where it has proven highly effective.

It has also been rolled out in Estonia, Iceland, Romania, Greenland and the Faroe Islands. The Mary Foundation encourages new partners in other countries to contact the Free of Bullying competence centre. The Foundation offers to share its expertise and enter into a dialogue about anti-bullying programmes with organisations in other countries, who are interested in establishing their own programme.