

Part of the Toolbox on

BULLYING AMONG MINORS



**An ecological
approach towards
effective anti-bullying
interventions**

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Firstly, this paper provides an overview of the phenomenon, the many types of anti-social behaviour that can be categorised as bullying, and the players involved. Secondly, the paper promotes an ecological approach, meaning it will focus on bullying at every level of a minor's life: individual level, family level, school level, and community level.

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Author

Sarah Bosman, Research
Officer, EUCPN Secretariat.

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**All the papers which make up the EUCPN toolbox on
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<https://eucpn.org/toolbox-bullying>

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PREFACE

This theoretical paper is part of the EUCPN Toolbox on Bullying Among Minors written under the Slovenian Presidency of the EUCPN. Firstly, it provides an overview of the phenomenon, the many types of anti-social behaviour that can be categorised as bullying, and the players involved. Secondly, the paper promotes an ecological approach, meaning it will focus on bullying at every level of a minor's life: individual level, family level, school level, and community level. Possible effects of bullying involvement will be discussed at every one of these levels, as well as possible risk- and protective factors that are associated with bullying.

This is one of three parts of the toolbox on Bullying Among Minors. A second paper provides an overview of effective prevention strategies for bullying, while a third paper offers an overview of the participants of the 2021 European Crime Prevention Award. They are available for download at <https://eucpn.org/toolbox-bullying>.

INTRODUCTION

Bullying is a widespread social phenomenon that affects minors all over the world.¹ It refers to repeated aggressive behaviour (physical, emotional or sexual) that originates from an imbalance of power and negatively affects or victimises another person.² This means various types of behaviour can be categorised as bullying, for instance hitting and intimidation but also spreading rumours or social exclusion.³ Bullying often results from negative group dynamics in schools, clubs or communities that allow it to occur. Besides victims and perpetrators, bystanders (both peers and adults) also play a key role in sustaining bullying behaviour by ignoring or (implicitly) allowing it.⁴

“Bullying is like the canaries that were used in the coalmines. They alarmed miners when toxic gasses were released. Bullying serves as a warning sign for an entire society, that something is wrong with the general interactions and perceptions within that school, neighbourhood or society.”⁵

Despite bullying being a common phenomenon, the public, schools and governments are often not fully aware of the severe and long-lasting consequences it can cause for the individuals involved and their surroundings. Victims as well as perpetrators and bystanders can experience negative effects on an individual level (e.g. feelings of anxiety), family level (e.g. deteriorating social bonds), school level (e.g. educational underachievement), and community level (e.g. negative community atmosphere).⁶ It is therefore essential for families, schools, communities and governments to acknowledge possible risk factors on each level and implement anti-bullying strategies accordingly.

This part of the toolbox provides a theoretical overview of the phenomenon. The first chapter describes bullying in all its forms, from little to possibly very violent behaviour. In the second chapter, the different types of players will be discussed along with their possible involvement in bullying situations. The third chapter explains the ecological approach used in this paper and the diverse effects bullying can have on victims but also on perpetrators and bystanders. The final chapter discusses the risk- and protective factors that are often associated with bullying among minors.

01

BULLYING AMONG MINORS

Regardless of which definition of bullying is used, international surveys estimate that 29% to 46% of children at one point have been involved in a bullying situation.⁷ These numbers portray how comprehensive and universal this phenomenon is. It is considered a serious social issue in many countries all over the world. Therefore, it is often difficult to formulate a uniform definition of bullying since it is interpreted and translated differently in many countries. Certain languages do not even have a specific term for bullying, meaning they have to describe or name it differently which can increase the misperception.⁸ For this reason, it is essential to clearly define what behaviours will be considered as bullying in this toolbox.

A leading definition of bullying is “A person is being bullied or victimised when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative acts on the part of one or more persons. It is a negative action when someone intentionally inflicts, or attempts to inflict, injury or discomfort upon another”. Three essential characteristics can be added to this definition: the behaviour is aggressive, it is repetitive and continuous, and it represents an interpersonal relationship characterised by an imbalance of power.⁹

This imbalance of power implies that if two people of the same status are victimising each other, this is not considered bullying.¹⁰ Yet it remains difficult to clearly define the distinctions between similar behaviours. The same applies regarding the difference between bullying and teasing. The latter usually occurs between friends or in friendly situations and does not involve any type of physical or psychological pain. Nonetheless, teasing can easily develop into bullying when it becomes ongoing hurtful behaviour.¹¹

Due to its comprehensive character, bullying can occur in many different forms and settings. It can be individual or self-directed, collective, interpersonal, institutional, symbolic or structural. It can occur in a private or public context and the motives can vary widely (e.g. anger and revenge).¹² All of these behaviours can also occur chronically. In this case, the minor sometimes displays signs of learning disabilities, behavioural issues, school fatigue or anti-social behaviour. These minors are often labelled as ‘problem children’ or ‘problem students’ when the anti-social behaviours occur within a school environment. Labelling specific minors who already experience difficulties is, however, not a beneficial way of dealing with bullying and often aggravates the situation.¹³

In general, bullying can be compared to a spreading oil slick. It can take place and expand on many occasions and in various circumstances. It is not just limited to the school perimeters, such as classrooms and playgrounds. It can also occur during community activities and create negative pressure within a society, for instance regarding the health care systems or social workers dealing with the involved minors. It can likewise unfold in the online world in which case it is referred to as cyberbullying.¹⁴

Cyberbullying takes place in numerous forms. For instance, outing occurs when the perpetrator publicly shares private information or media of the victim. Masquerading is a technique in which the perpetrator creates a fake profile to anonymously bully the victim. The opposite phenomenon is impersonating in which

case the perpetrator steals the virtual identity of the victim. A final example is cyber bashing or 'happy slapping' where a video of aggression or assault is spread online.¹⁵ Regardless of these specific concepts, cyberbullying fundamentally concerns the same behaviours as offline bullying (e.g. spreading rumours or social exclusion). Therefore, it requires the same prevention strategies that are used against traditional bullying. There are, however, two important differences between both types of bullying that should be acknowledged.

The most prominent difference is the element of technology that is automatically present in cyberbullying. Communication devices (e.g. smartphone or computer) and communication channels (e.g. social media and text messages) have a very dominant place in the modern world.¹⁶ Most teenagers have a smartphone and therefore almost constant access to the online world, making cyberbullying easier, more anonymous and more accessible than traditional bullying. This means cyberbullying can happen on any day at any time, which causes a serious invasion of the victim's private sphere.¹⁷

Secondly, there is less social control in the online world making it is more difficult for bystanders (e.g. peers, parents or teachers) to notice or intervene when cyberbullying occurs.¹⁸

Despite these variances, bullying and cyberbullying are very much alike and they often occur simultaneously.¹⁹ Cyberbullying can, for instance, occur as a reaction to traditional bullying. For example, a victim can take revenge on their bully through the anonymity of social media. Cyberbullying can, however, also give rise to traditional bullying when a victim or perpetrator wants to retaliate in the offline world.²⁰

From bullying to violence among minors

Bullying both online and offline involves a continuum of different behaviours of a different severity. A distinction can be made between direct and indirect bullying. Direct bullying behaviour requires direct contact between the bully and the victim, in the form of physical bullying (e.g. hitting or stealing) or verbal bullying (e.g. threatening or insulting).²¹ Indirect bullying entails indirect types of behaviour, such as name calling, excluding the victim or spreading rumours about them.²²

The level of severity refers to mild, moderate and severe degrees of bullying. Mild bullying behaviours include pushing the victim or spreading rumours. Moderate behaviours refer to intimidation or being rude. Severe types of bullying behaviour include any type of bodily harm or threatening to do harm. It is important, however, to recognise that, even though some bullying behaviours are categorised as mild, these can still be traumatic for the victims and even have negative consequences for the perpetrator and bystanders.²³ The moderate and severe types of bullying are more visible and therefore more frequently addressed by adults or schools. Meanwhile, mild bullying behaviour often remains a dark number.²⁴

When bullying turns into severe violent behaviour, it can be categorised as violence among minors. This category includes all behaviours, displayed by children under the age of 18, that use or threaten to use of physical/psychological force that can lead to injury, psychological harm, underdevelopment, or deprivation.²⁵ It is behaviour that is intentional as well as non-essential.²⁶

Although violence among minors can be considered as a severe type of bullying, it does not always originate from mild bullying. There is a complicated and variable dynamic between both ends of the continuum. Violence among minors can be the result of previous mild bullying behaviour, such as intimidation that escalates to physical harm in the long run. Yet vice versa, violence can lead to bullying behaviours, such as humiliating or cyberbullying as retaliation from the victim. It can also be a periodic occurrence with physical attacks interspersed by periods of threatening and intimidating behaviour.²⁷

Bullying among different age groups

Bullying does not only differ in severity and types of behaviour. It also varies according to the age of the minors that are involved. The term ‘minor’ refers to a child or adolescent up to the age of 17. Children in this age group undergo a cognitive and emotional development and experience different life-phases in a short period of time. Therefore, it is important to address this general group of minors and the prevalence of specific bullying behaviours for each group.

The first age group are children up to the age of six who are enrolled in early education (e.g. day-care or kindergarten).²⁸ This group is more likely to display direct and physical types of bullying, such as violence or name calling. It is

important, however, to distinguish bullying from conflicts. Young children often do not know how to deal with conflicts and therefore act in a violent manner that might resemble bullying behaviour.²⁹

The second age group are children aged six to twelve.³⁰ Within this group, offline bullying, such as physical violence, occurs most frequently. Yet the older these children become, the more often cyberbullying occurs. It mostly takes place on online (gaming) platforms; however, these children are getting involved in social media at an increasingly early age. Using these devices and platforms increases the likelihood of being exposed to cyberbullying, since children at this age often lack necessary information regarding online information sharing.³¹

Finally, within the group of adolescents aged 12 to 17,³² a significant drop in offline bullying can be observed. This group is more likely to be involved in cyberbullying through social media. Due to the use of social media and electronic devices, adolescents are often better and more frequently connected than younger children. Furthermore, adolescents are more susceptible to peer pressure, making them often think less about the consequences of their behaviour and prone to cyberbullying involvement.³³

Despite these differences between the age groups, it is important to remember that it is normal for most schools and communities to deal with bullying. Personal development is an individual process that does not run smoothly for every child, especially considering that adolescents are faced with transitions through adolescence and early adulthood.³⁴ This creates socially complicated situations during which youngsters are often also struggling to find their own identity.³⁵

Furthermore, it is normal for the prevalence of anti-social behaviour to increase during adolescence. Anti-social behaviour, and therefore also bullying, reaches its highest point around the age of 17, and then drops again when adolescents pass into early adulthood (see Figure 1).³⁶ In some cases or areas, the rates of anti-social behaviour are so high that it becomes a normal part of adolescent life.³⁷ This demonstrates the difficulty of fully preventing bullying among minors from occurring in society.

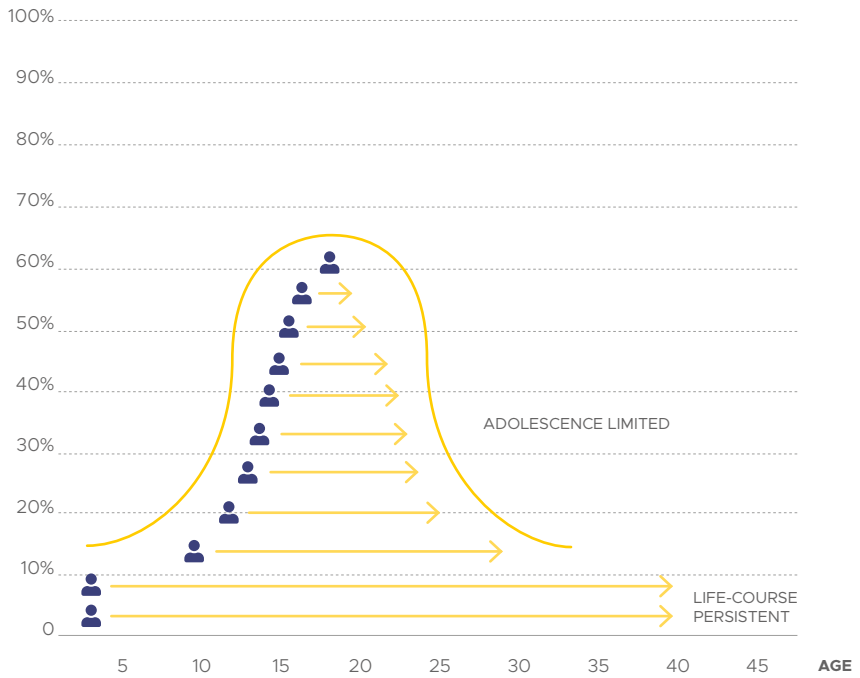


Figure 1. The taxonomy of anti-social behaviour (after Moffitt, 1993).

02

THE PLAYERS AND THEIR ROLES

Bullying is not just an issue between a perpetrator and a victim. It is a dynamic group phenomenon that occurs in social contexts in which certain factors promote, maintain or minimise this behaviour. Three players are generally involved in bullying: a perpetrator, a victim, and bystanders.³⁸

Perpetrators

The reasons for bullying differ from person to person. Some perpetrators bully in order to deal with difficult personal situations (e.g. rejection by peers or difficult family situations). Others have previously been victims of bullying themselves. They are called bully-victims. There is a prominent link between victimisation and perpetration that occurs both ways. Perpetrators have often been victimised in the past, yet anti-social behaviour also increases the chances of becoming a victim. Among younger people in particular, victimisation can be a strong indicator for later bullying and even criminal behaviour.³⁹ It is important to understand who bully-victims are and why they act the way they do, especially considering the many negative consequences both perpetrators and victims can experience in later life.⁴⁰

It is, however, too restrictive to try to assign perpetrators to well-defined categories.⁴¹ Perpetrators are often portrayed as aggressive and confident characters with low school performance who have no empathy for their victims. On the contrary, some perpetrators might display a lack of social skills, making it difficult for them to engage in social situations, and they turn to bullying as a result. Yet other perpetrators are highly socially developed and are therefore able to manipulate others and use them. This reflects the many varieties of perpetrators and how much bullying situations can differ from one other.⁴²

Victims

By the same token, there are no obvious well-defined categories of victims. Some victims are insecure or sensitive and will act passively in response to bullying. Others might be more proactive by standing up for themselves and reacting against bullies.⁴³ Yet, one important general assumption regarding victims is that perpetrators usually target children that have certain characteristics that differ from the general norm.⁴⁴ This can occur in various ways, for instance due to their appearance, social identity or their family- or cultural background.⁴⁵

Groups at heightened risk

It is important to acknowledge that certain groups of people are at higher risk of becoming a victim than others. This usually includes children or adolescents from vulnerable or minority groups, such as children from disadvantaged backgrounds, with disabilities, who belong to ethnic, racial, cultural or religious minorities, who are refugees or who are part of the LGBTQ+ community. This type of bullying is often based on a personal bias and can even be categorised as a hate crime.⁴⁶ It can have more severe consequences for the victims due to a specific hostility from the perpetrator and an attack on the self of the victim. This hostility can furthermore affect the entire group of people with whom the victim identifies, which creates a certain interchangeability between people sharing similar identity characteristics.⁴⁷

Despite the difficulty of categorising victims, it is possible to define four categories of victimisation. Firstly, there are the primary (or direct) victims who experience the anti-social behaviour first-hand. The second category includes family members and friends of the victim, who feel empathy, anger and sadness. The third group refers to the witnesses or bystanders that are not involved in the victim's life. They might feel fear or guilt for not intervening, or they encourage this behaviour. Finally, the environment and wider society is added as a fourth category, since bullying creates an increase in unwanted actions that can cause a negative atmosphere in schools and communities.⁴⁸

Bystanders

Bullying often originates from a negative group dynamic, which means that bystanders also play an important role in bullying. Bystanders are the people who witness bullying behaviour, either by seeing or by hearing it.⁴⁹ Although they are not always actively involved, they can still influence the situation in a positive way by intervening, or in a negative way by ignoring it or participating in it. Bystanders are often peers and friends of minors, but nonetheless adults (e.g. teachers, school counsellors, cafeteria staff or passing strangers) can also act as bystanders. Adults who ignore or minimise bullying situations indirectly allow the behaviour to take place or continue.⁵⁰

Several types of bystander can be identified, as illustrated in the Olweus bullying circle (see Figure 2).⁵¹ Firstly, there are the followers of the bully who play an active part in the bullying behaviour yet do not initiate it themselves. Then there are two types of supporters: the supporters who endorse the behaviour but do not play an active part; and the passive supporters who approve of the bullying yet who do not display any visible support. They are followed by the disengaged onlookers. This group witnesses the bullying happening, yet do not take a stand. Finally, there are two groups of defenders: the possible defenders dislike the bullying behaviour but do not help even though they believe they should; and the actual defenders who also dislike the bullying and (try to) help the victim.⁵² These categories provide an overview of the many types of bystanders and their possible motives. It also portrays how easily a peer-bystander can become a victim or perpetrator of their own. A bystander showing support for the perpetrator and (indirectly) encouraging them can sometimes also be seen as a perpetrator. Another example is when defenders might also become victims themselves if they stand up against bullying. This is only the case for peer-bystanders, however. An adult-bystander, especially school staff, have a moral obligation to stand up against bullying and protect their students from any harm.⁵³



Figure 2: Bullying circle (after Clemson University, 2003).

These categories of bystanders can likewise be applied to cyberbullying. Though the lack of social control in cyberbullying makes it more difficult to distinguish the various bystander categories, it does not mean they do not exist. About a third of bystanders that observe cyberbullying act passively, due to a lack of awareness, insecurity or not wanting to get involved. This group of people can therefore probably be categorised as either passive supporters, disengaged onlookers or possible defenders.⁵⁴

03

ECOLOGICAL APPROACH TOWARDS BULLYING AND ITS EFFECTS

During the recent years, bullying research has shifted its paradigm from an individual to a more contextual approach. Instead of solely focusing on perpetrators and their individual risk factors, bullying is now generally considered as the outcome of various processes on the level of the individual, the family and the general community. More subtly, it can also be indicative of violent attitudes and values that are present within a society. Although evidence is clear regarding the diversity and complexity of bullying, analyses and interventions sometimes remain too focused on one particular subcategory of bullying. This ultimately leads to a fragmented and isolated approach to bullying without tackling the common threads and root causes. Thus, it is important to approach this phenomenon with an interdisciplinary wide-angle lens to be able to prevent bullying in all its forms.⁵⁵

The ecological framework explains bullying by referring to the interplay of individual-, social-, cultural- and community-level factors that create anti-social behaviour.⁵⁶ It clarifies how different settings in a minor's life (e.g. school, friends and family) can interact with personal vulnerabilities, such as mental health issues or inadequate cognitive skills. Consequently, the framework provides

an explanation for bullying through a dynamic and holistic outline that portrays the interplay of personal vulnerability, environmental stressors, and the values of the environment (e.g. school and the community).⁵⁷ This toolbox will follow the ecological framework. The effects and risk- and protective factors will all be categorised according to the individual, family, school and community level (see Figure 3).

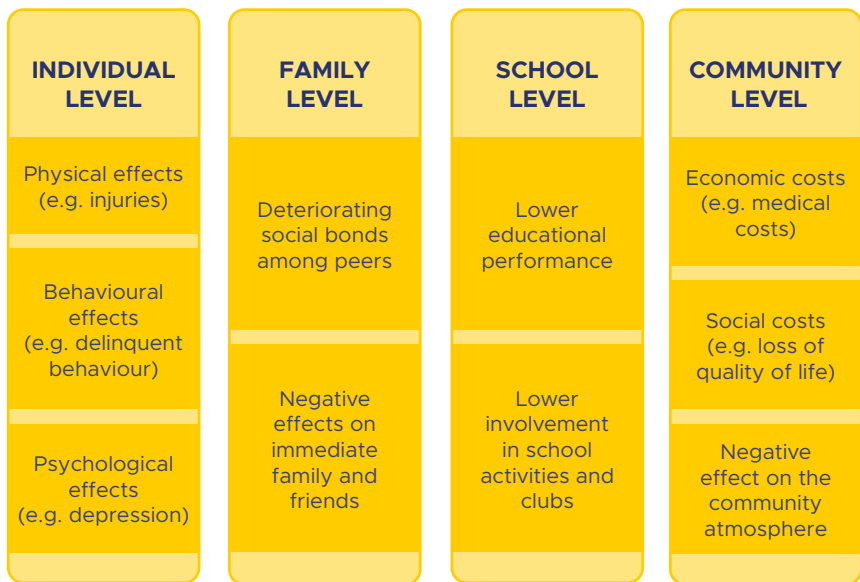


Figure 3: The effects of bullying.

Bullying negatively effects each one of these levels, yet the effects can also reinforce each other. For instance, bullying can cause feelings of anxiety and school-related fears, which might cause minors to isolate and reduce the social bonds with their peers. These low levels of social bonding can also occur in respect of the school environment, making minors hesitant to go to school and creating low educational performance.⁵⁸ The following sections describe the possible effects of bullying on each level of a minors' life (individual, family, school and community level).

Effects on individual level

Bullying can have various negative effects on an individual level. **Physical effects** (e.g. physical injuries) are the most apparent consequences known among the general public. These can range from 'mild' injuries such as scratches or bruises, to severe injuries such as fractures or open wounds (e.g. blunt or penetrating trauma). In serious cases of bullying, severe injuries can also have long lasting consequences, for instance a temporary or permanent disability.⁵⁹

Another prominent effect is a **behavioural change** in perpetrators, victims and bystanders. There is an increased risk that minors will further engage in bullying or other anti-social behaviour. This can result in numerous negative outcomes: criminal behaviour (e.g. vandalism or shoplifting), frequent drug use, truancy or low academic achievement. When this behaviour is not dealt with correctly, it can even continue during their adult life. They might have difficulties keeping jobs or fail at maintaining close relationships.⁶⁰ A specific behavioural effect can be found with cyberbullying victims. This type of victimisation can result in more frequent internet use, defiant behaviour and even self-harm.⁶¹

Finally, it can also be the cause of various **psychological issues**, of which mental health problems are the most common. Bullying-related mental health issues include: depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), school-related fears, anxiety, suicidal thoughts and a wide range of psychological dysfunction. These issues can, in their turn, lead to impulsiveness and deteriorating social bonds with others, which can affect the minor's social life. Without an intervention, these can also persist throughout the adult lives of the perpetrator, victim and bystanders.⁶²

Effects on family level

On a family level, bullying is associated with **deteriorating social bonds among peers**, for instance, due to feelings of shame or isolation. Having few or weak social ties might create the feeling they have 'nothing to lose', which can lead to anti-social behaviour. This can be the case for perpetrators, victims and bystanders alike; they might feel ashamed or isolate themselves as a form of self-protection.⁶³

Bullying not only affects the social lives of minors, it also **affects their social surroundings**. Immediate family and friends of victims are more likely to develop

depression and anti-social behaviours such as disobeying rules, aggression, vandalism, and substance use.⁶⁴

Effects on school level

On a school level, (educational) **underachievement** is the main effect of bullying. Minors involved in bullying often show a lower educational performance and a higher risk of truancy (for instance, due to a fear of going to school). They particularly display lower levels of attachment, commitment and belief, which are essential elements for social bonding. Low levels of social bonding to the school can result in lower educational outcomes.⁶⁵

This can also occur during extracurricular activities, such as sport clubs or other associations. Although involvement in extracurricular associations can have many social benefits for minors, social bonding to an association can decrease due to bullying and this can have an effect on sporting achievements or personal involvement in other associations.⁶⁶

Educational or other types of underachievement can furthermore **affect the school climate**. Unmotivated minors without academic ambitions or who are often truant, can negatively affect a classroom or sports club atmosphere, which can have an adverse effect on their peers and teachers.⁶⁷

Effects on community level

Finally, bullying comes at an **economic cost** for society (e.g. medical costs, treatment programme costs and earning losses). When bullying involves violence, it can cause destruction of property or even infrastructure. There are also many **indirect costs** that are borne by the community, such as reduced job performance due to long-term disability or other health problems.⁶⁸

Bullying can have a **negative effect on the community atmosphere**. Members of the general community, such as student guidance services, social services or volunteers within organisations, can all experience negative effects such as feelings of fear, concern or discouragement.⁶⁹

04 RISK- AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS FOR BULLYING INVOLVEMENT

In order to prevent bullying, the risk factors that are associated with this phenomenon (see Table 2) have to be eliminated or controlled. It is also important, however, to identify and promote protective factors that correlate with pro-social behaviours. By identifying these factors (see Table 3), interventions can be designed to foster resilience against bullying in minors and their surroundings. Since not everyone with risk factors becomes a bully, it is important not to stigmatise, and focus more on protective factors instead of risk factors.⁷⁰

The interplay of individual and situational variables can both increase or reduce the risk of bullying.⁷¹ For instance, minors growing up in a negative family environment can go to a school with a positive climate and may never get involved in bullying due to supportive teachers and positive friendships.

Ecological framework of risk factors regarding bullying	
Individual factors	Deficits in social, psychological and cognitive skills
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > High levels of anxiety, stress and suicidal thoughts, having anti-social personality traits and moral disengagement; > Inadequate social skills and a lack of empathy.
Family factors	Inadequate parenting skills
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Damaging parental discipline and supervision; > Negative family environment; > Poor child-rearing techniques; > Anti-social friends or a lack of social ties.
School factors	Negative school climate
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Incapable school staff; > Unsafe school environment.
Community factors	Vulnerable neighbourhoods
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Weak social cohesion; > Low social guardianship; > Too strict enforcement of rules.

Table 2: Ecological framework of risk factors regarding bullying.

Ecological framework of protective factors regarding bullying	
Individual factors	Thriving
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Resilience; > Competence; > Autonomy; > Relatedness.
Family factors	Consistency and quality of parental care
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Positive child-rearing techniques; > Supportive friendships and positive peer interactions.
School factors	Positive school climate
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Social guardianship due to involved teachers and good teacher-student relationships; > Clear and fairly enforced school rules combined with a certainty of punishment.
Community factors	Positive community with social guardians
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > National anti-bullying strategies; > Social guardianship.

Table 3: Ecological framework of protective factors regarding bullying.

Individual risk factors

On an individual level, the risk factors can be broadly categorised as **deficits in social, psychological and cognitive skills**, such as: poor problem solving and conflict coping skills, inadequate communication skills, and a poor ability to cope with anger and frustration.

In general, being different from the norm is the main individual risk factor for bullying involvement. Yet being ‘different’ can occur in myriad ways: due to

certain discrepancies in psychological and cognitive skills, for instance, such as **high levels of anxiety, stress and suicidal thoughts**, having **anti-social personality traits** and **moral disengagement**.⁷² Minors with higher stress levels for instance might need more time or support to deal with stressful situations. Similarly, minors with a flawed morality might have disrupted self-regulatory mechanisms and might therefore react differently to certain situations. Additionally, moral disengagement can cause bystanders not to stand up against bullying.⁷³ Anti-social personality traits together with moral disengagement can occur in many different ways. For instance, aggression and the inability to cope with this can possibly develop into bullying involvement. Especially when combined with other risk factors on different levels such as a negative school climate or anti-social friend groups.⁷⁴

Deficits in social skills are also common individual risk factors. This can manifest as **inadequate social skills** such as social withdrawal or a low self-esteem and having **a lack of empathy**. Minors with moderate social skills might find it difficult to navigate social relations with peers and feel more isolated. Combined with risk factors from other levels, such as a lack of social support from family or teachers, it might even lead to a complete withdrawal from all social situations, creating an easier target. On the other hand, these discrepancies can entail very strong social skills that can be used for bullying in the form of manipulation, particularly when the minor exhibits a lack of empathy or moral disengagement. All these risk factors contribute to social behaviour that differs from the general norm and can increase the risk of bullying involvement of any kind.⁷⁵

Finally, there are certain behavioural tendencies or external attributes that can also be considered as individual risk factors for bullying involvement. In particular, the **endorsement of stereotypical masculine traits**, such as having a need to dominate others might increase chances of bullying perpetration. Conversely, minors who have a disability, who are part of a minority group (e.g. LGBTQ+ community) or that have elevated weight or poor physical health become more susceptible to bullying victimisation.⁷⁶

Individual protective factors

In order to prevent bullying and counter these risk factors, it is important to help minors thrive in their environment. **Thriving** refers to an optimal youth development across all life domains (e.g. social, academic and professional). This entails that there are effective developmental factors and no problem behaviours. Minors who are thriving are discovering themselves and their interests. They know how to be flexible and adapt according to changing circumstances.⁷⁷ In order to achieve this, they have to build up resilience, competence, autonomy, and relatedness.

Resilience implies there is a healthy personal development despite the presence of risk factors. This healthy development entails the ability to deal with stress, misfortune, and trauma. This is not an individual trait, but a continuing process.⁷⁸

Competence concerns knowing how to successfully manage difficult situations. It indicates the presence of developed personal, intellectual, emotional, social skills and abilities regarding human functioning. There are five competence paradigms: cognitive, emotional, social, behavioural, and moral competence. It can generate strong emotional intelligence and management within minors. This entails that potential perpetrators might be more empathic towards others, preventing both bullying perpetration and victimisation.⁷⁹

Autonomy implies that a person can choose how they behave and what choices to make. It can be divided into two dimensions: independent behaviour and opinions without relying on others; and willpower to act according to personal interests and values. It can contribute to a high self-esteem within minors, which helps them stand up for themselves and serves as a protective factor against bullying.⁸⁰

Finally, **relatedness** can be defined as the need to connect and fit in with others. This can include supportive relationships with friends, the feeling of belonging, and integration within family. Originally, it develops through a positive parent-child relationship. When a child becomes older, attachments towards peers become equally important. Relatedness is possibly essential in order for minors to develop strong connections and have a positive personal and social development. It is therefore a strong protective factor that provides potential perpetrators, victims and bystanders with social competences, such as being able to navigate social situations and find pro-social friends.⁸¹

Family risk factors

In addition to individual aspects, family and peers can have a major impact on the lives of minors. Therefore, the main risk factor on a family level is **inadequate parenting skills**. This can manifest itself in various ways. Firstly, there can be **damaging parental discipline and supervision**. Parents can be too involved with their children, by being overprotective, strict or even portray dismissive or belittling behaviour in order to better control their children. This might result in rebellious minors who renounce any authority by displaying anti-social behaviour such as bullying. On the other hand, parents can have too little involvement in the lives of their children, leaving them with little to no guidance or sense of authority.⁸²

A **negative family environment** is another risk factor. When faced with a lack of (emotional) support, minors might struggle to cope with their emotions and may seek help elsewhere; making them more susceptible for bullying involvement.⁸³

Thirdly, inadequate parenting skills can include teaching children **poor child-rearing techniques**. Parents are supposed to help minors navigate through different situations in life, such as social or traumatic events. They should learn how to solve problems, how to cope with different emotions and how to successfully communicate with others. If these techniques are not taught by parents, it might present struggles, such as bullying involvement in later life.

Furthermore, a lack of effective child-rearing techniques can influence a minor's social life. It might cause them to end up in the wrong social circles with **anti-social friends** or with **a lack of social ties** in general. This occurs in several ways. As a result of experiencing peer rejection and not knowing how to successfully communicate, minors might be more desperate to fit in, which can result in being subject to peer pressure from the wrong people. This can result in bullying victimisation within the social group and even bullying perpetration when they are dragged along to bully others. On the other hand, minors with a lack of social ties might have a low self-esteem, which puts them at risk of bullying involvement.⁸⁴

Family protective factors

Consistency and quality of parental care and support are protective factors. This includes parental support and warmth, family cohesion and an overall absence of discord. Parents and families who support minors encourage and reinforce their general coping skills making them better prepared for challenging life situations. Furthermore, effective parental supervision can prevent minors from cyberbullying involvement due to better social media supervision and provision of support in the event of victimisation.⁸⁵ Effective parental care and support can be reinforced by implementing parental training and providing new parents with sufficient parental leave so they can create a strong primary bond with their children at an early stage.⁸⁶

Another protective factor is **positive child-rearing techniques**. These techniques help reduce minors' behavioural and psychological issues and promote positive personality features such as autonomy, a healthy self-esteem, and positive social competences. This can protect minors from bullying involvement whether as a perpetrator or victim.⁸⁷

A positive home environment with quality parental support can also influence a minor's social relationships. It can help minors navigate social situations and find **supportive friendships and positive peer interactions**. It is very important for minors to be able to find support with each other. It will allow them to feel safe and share experiences that can help their personal development. Therefore peer support is a strong protective factor that can help minors to avoid getting involved in bullying.⁸⁸

School risk factors

The main risk factor on school level is a **negative school climate**. A school climate can turn negative for many reasons.

At the organisational level, incapable teachers, principal or supporting staff are detrimental for a school climate. Examples include having poor teacher-student relationships, a lack of teacher support or inappropriate teacher/principal responses. When there is a lack of teacher support, victims might not feel

safe enough to share their experiences and victimisation might go unnoticed. Conversely, perpetrators have more opportunities to bully when teachers do not care what happens in their classroom or on the playground. It can make students feel alienated or rejected at school, which might result in poor academic achievement, poor social bonding and bullying involvement. Another organisational risk factor is too strict enforcement of disciplinary rules. Evidence suggests too much discipline or the unfair enforcement of school rules is an ineffective approach to achieve a positive school climate. An example is target-hardening strategies, such as the use of metal detectors or police officers at the entrance of schools. These techniques have proven unsuccessful in reducing bullying. It is better to implement preventative interventions that focus on pro-social behaviour and social engagement in respect of others and the school.⁸⁹

These risk factors can also occur during extra-curricular activities such as sport clubs and within other associations. A negative club climate can lead to underachievement and feelings of rejection, which can increase the chance of bullying involvement.⁹⁰

Furthermore, a negative school climate can also result from the presence of an **unsafe school environment**. For instance, having a certain proportion of delinquents in a school can increase the chance of bullying involvement. It can expose other minors to violence or other anti-social behaviours at a very early age. The presence of anti-social peers can ruin a positive school climate and decrease minors' school performance and their engagement in school activities. Participation in school- or extracurricular activities can strengthen pro-social bonds between peers. However, the presence of anti-social peers might reverse this effect and can increase both the exposure to bullying perpetration and the chances of being victimised.⁹¹

School protective factors

As a protective factor, a **positive school climate with capable guardianship** can reduce chances of bullying involvement. A positive school climate means that minors are motivated to learn and are satisfied with their school environment. This includes well-educated and caring teachers that are involved in their students' lives and make an effort to create a positive class- and school environment.

These teachers can even teach pro-social skills (e.g. resilience) or child-rearing techniques (e.g. conflict solving skills) that minors sometimes do not learn at home, therefore reducing family level risk factors.⁹²

Attentive school staff can also increase the level of social guardianship. Good teacher-student relationships enhance social protection of potential victims. It can help those minors to feel more confident and create stronger social bonds and commitment to their school, which reduces bullying involvement. In order to support teachers in this cause, there is a need for continuing training and evaluation in order to strengthen their pedagogical skills and abilities.⁹³

A positive school climate also depends on the minors' perceptions of **clear and fairly enforced school rules** combined with a certainty of punishment. If minors do not think the school rules are fair or they believe them to be too strict, they will generally not obey them. This also applies to punishment. When minors perceive punishment as unfair or if not every violation is punished the same way, it will create feelings of disapproval. It might encourage them not to obey the rules themselves or not to report any rule breaking since they do not think there will be a fair follow-up.⁹⁴

Community risk factors

Risk factors on a community level are just as important as individual factors, particularly since people live in different communities with different contexts.⁹⁵

The main risk factor on community level is a **vulnerable community**. This can manifest itself in several ways, such as unsafe, divided, disorganised or violent neighbourhoods. Vulnerable communities have little social cohesion, which often allows more anti-social behaviours, such as bullying, to take place. For instance, both rich poor vulnerable communities can have little social guardianship in the form of neighbours or peers surveying anti-social behaviour. This can cause feelings of alienation or exclusion and can prevent minors from seeking social support with others. Furthermore, a lack of social guardianship can increase the presence of violence within a community, which consequently can increase the chances of bullying perpetration and victimisation among minors.⁹⁶

Additionally, growing up in a vulnerable community can have an effect on minors going to school in a different community. When minors go to a school outside their community, they can experience a lack of social guardianship and protection from peers. What is more, it might be challenging for teachers to relate to these minors, which can create feelings of alienation.⁹⁷

Similarly to the school level, a **too strict enforcement of rules** a risk factor on community level. When minors in a community are targeted, they will often rebel or resist due to feelings of unfairness. It is important for rules to be enforced while also taking into account the sense of norms and morality of a rule violation. Moreover, strict rule enforcement can reduce the distinction between serious and less serious acts, creating frustration among minors.⁹⁸

CONCLUSION

Bullying is a complex social phenomenon influenced by negative group dynamics. It is important that people are able to recognise the many different types of bullying behaviours, ranging from mild to very violent, in order to be able to prevent it from happening. Besides victims and perpetrators, bystanders can play an important part in this. They can influence bullying negatively by ignoring or encouraging it and therefore allowing it to happen. Conversely, they can prevent it from happening by intervening, which is something that adult-bystanders (such as teachers) are morally obliged to do. Peer-bystanders, however, could become victims themselves when intervening, making it unsafe to put them in this situation.

It is clear that bullying has serious and long-lasting effects on the lives of minors and their surroundings (e.g. physical and psychological issues, deteriorating social bonds and social costs). It is therefore essential to identify risk- and protective factors that are associated with bullying and that can help to identify potential problematic situations. These risk- and protective factors are different on every level. Individual risk factors are difficulties in social, psychological and cognitive skills, such as moral disengagement or having inadequate social skills. On a family level, inadequate parenting skills can cause a weak parent-child relationship, which might be a potential risk factor. Having a negative school climate is the biggest risk factor on school level. For instance, having indifferent or incapable teachers might cause students to feel neglected and unmotivated. Finally, on a community level, it is important for authorities to support vulnerable neighbourhoods and ensure the presence of social guardians (e.g. social workers, neighbours or parents) that can improve the community climate.



PREVENTING BULLYING AMONG MINORS

Bullying among minors is a complex social issue, often caused by complicated group dynamics and negative social attitudes.

Comprehensive strategies that focus on risk- and protective factors at every level of a minor's life can prevent the long-lasting consequences of bullying and promote positive interactions:



INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

Cognitive behavioural therapy can help minors to self-regulate their emotions and behaviour or in dealing with psychological and social difficulties



FAMILY LEVEL

parenting training can improve parenting skills, ameliorate the parent-child relationship and lead to a better child development



SCHOOL LEVEL

involvement of all school staff can create a positive environment in which minors feel safe and supported



SOCIETAL LEVEL

implementing a multisector anti-bullying strategy to support schools and communities



By involving the actors on all levels, bullying can be prevented.

Discover more in our toolbox: eucpn.org/toolbox-bullying

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CONTACT DETAILS

EUCPN Secretariat

Email: eucpn@ibz.eu

Website: www.eucpn.org



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