

A Guide to Understanding and Preventing School Bullying



Bullying among 12- to 18-year-old students has declined over the past decade, but approximately 1 in 5 students still experience bullying on school property, [the National Center for Education Statistics \(NCES\) reports \(PDF, 4.6 MB\)](#). [↗](#) To create bully-free schools that allow students to focus on learning, administrators and teachers can better understand how bullying occurs. The USC Rossier School of Education, which offers the [MAT online program](#), has put together the following guide to help schools navigate this pressing issue.

What Is Bullying?

The NCES says bullying is often characterized by three of the following elements:

INTENT TO HURT

The aggressor seeks to inflict physical, social and/or emotional harm.

REPETITION

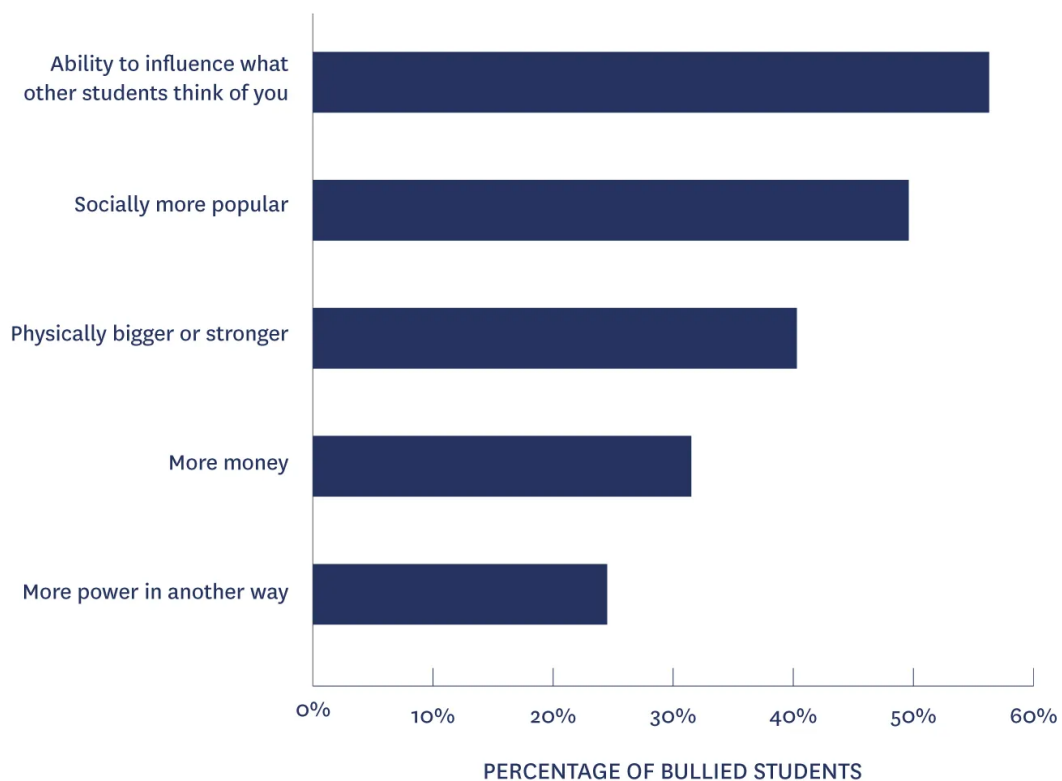
The aggressor's behavior is recurrent.

POWER IMBALANCE

The victim feels inferior to or less powerful than the aggressor.

Perceptions of Power Imbalances for Students Who Are Bullied

Students 12 to 18 who reported being bullied in 2017 identified the following power imbalance in favor of the student who bullied them.



Source: "Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2018," Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics.
<https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/iscs18.pdf>

Created by the USC Rossier School of Education

More than half of bullied students ages 12 to 18 said the student who bullied them had the ability to influence what others thought of them.

Go to the bottom of the page to review tabular data about the perceptions of power imbalances for students who are bullied.

Students were also asked whether bullying was related to specific characteristics. The most common characteristics bullying was related to included:

- Physical appearance
- Race
- Gender
- Disability

- Ethnicity
- Religion
- Sexual orientation

Bullying Statistics: How Prevalent Is the Problem in Schools?

Nearly 12% of public schools reported bullying at school at least once a week in 2017, according to NCES data. That percentage was highest for middle schools (21.8%), followed by high schools (14.7%) and primary schools (8.1%).

[Stopbullying.gov identifies common bullying tactics](#)  students use, including:



Verbal bullying: teasing, making sexual comments, threatening.

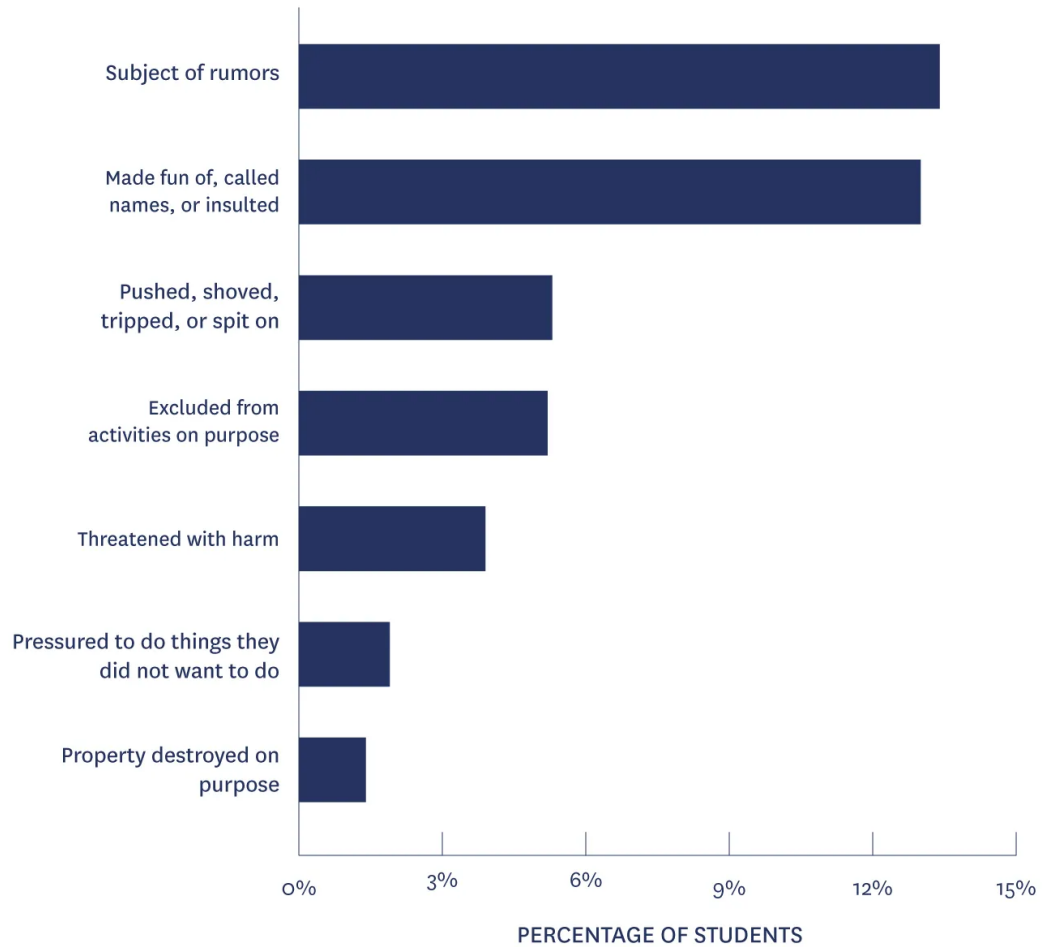


Social bullying: isolating, embarrassing, spreading rumors.



Physical bullying: aggressive gesturing, assaulting, destroying possessions.

How Are Students Being Bullied in Schools?



Source: "Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2018," Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics.
<https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/iscs18.pdf>

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The most common types of bullying experienced by students in 2017 included being the subject of rumors (13.4%) and being insulted or called names (13%).

[Go to the bottom of the page to review tabular data about the types of bullying experienced by students.](#)

Of students who reported bullying, more than 40% said they believed it would occur again.

Cyberbullying Statistics: How Prevalent Is the Problem Among Students?

With more students constantly connected to digital devices and social media, schools are having to address electronic bullying. According to NCES:

15%

of high school students reported being cyberbullied in 2017.

1 in 4

middle and high schools reported cyberbullying problems at least once a week.

15%

of middle and high schools said school environment was affected by cyberbullying.

How Does Bullying Affect Students?

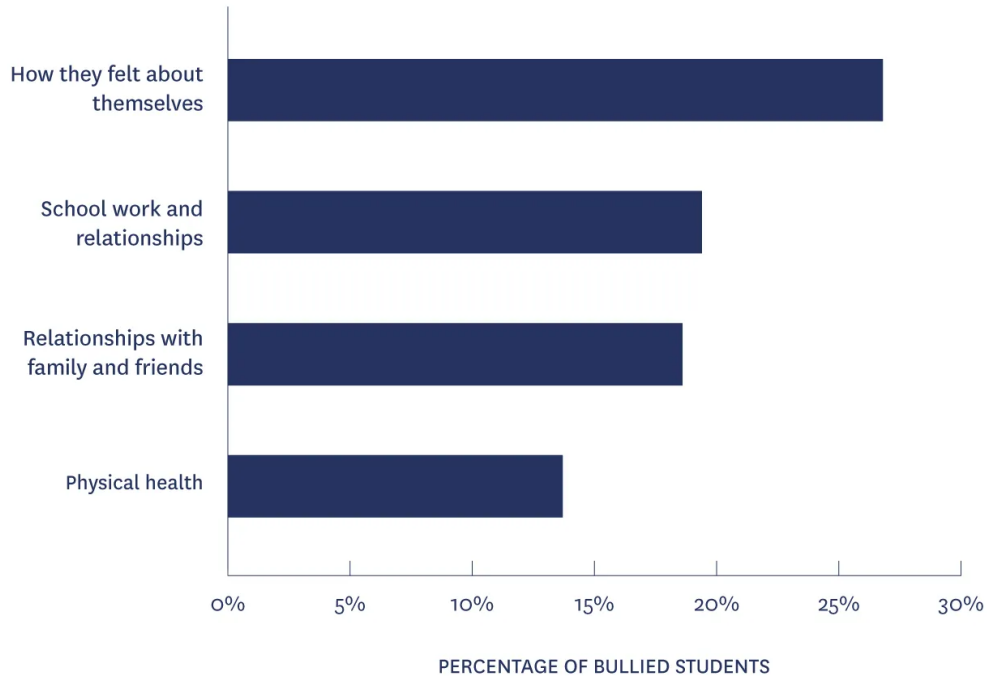
According to a [bullying prevention fact sheet from the Centers for Disease Control \(PDF, 600 KB\)](#), [bullying](#) can have a number of negative outcomes. Students who are bullied may experience:

- Physical injury
 - Social and emotional distress
 - Increased risk of depression and anxiety
 - Difficulties sleeping

 - Lower academic achievement
 - Increased likelihood to drop out of school
 - Self-harm
 - Death
-

Effects of Bullying on Students

Students 12 to 18 who reported being bullied in 2017 said that bullying had negative effects on following aspects of their lives.



Source: "Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2018," Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics.
<https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/iscs18.pdf>

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About a quarter of bullied students ages 12 to 18 said bullying negatively affected how they felt about themselves.

[Go to the bottom of the page to review tabular data about the negative effects of bullying.](#)

However, the harmful effects of bullying are not limited to those who experience it. Students who bully face increased risk of substance misuse, academic problems and violence later in life. Those who bully others and are bullied experience the most serious behavioral and mental health problems.

How Can Schools Address Bullying?

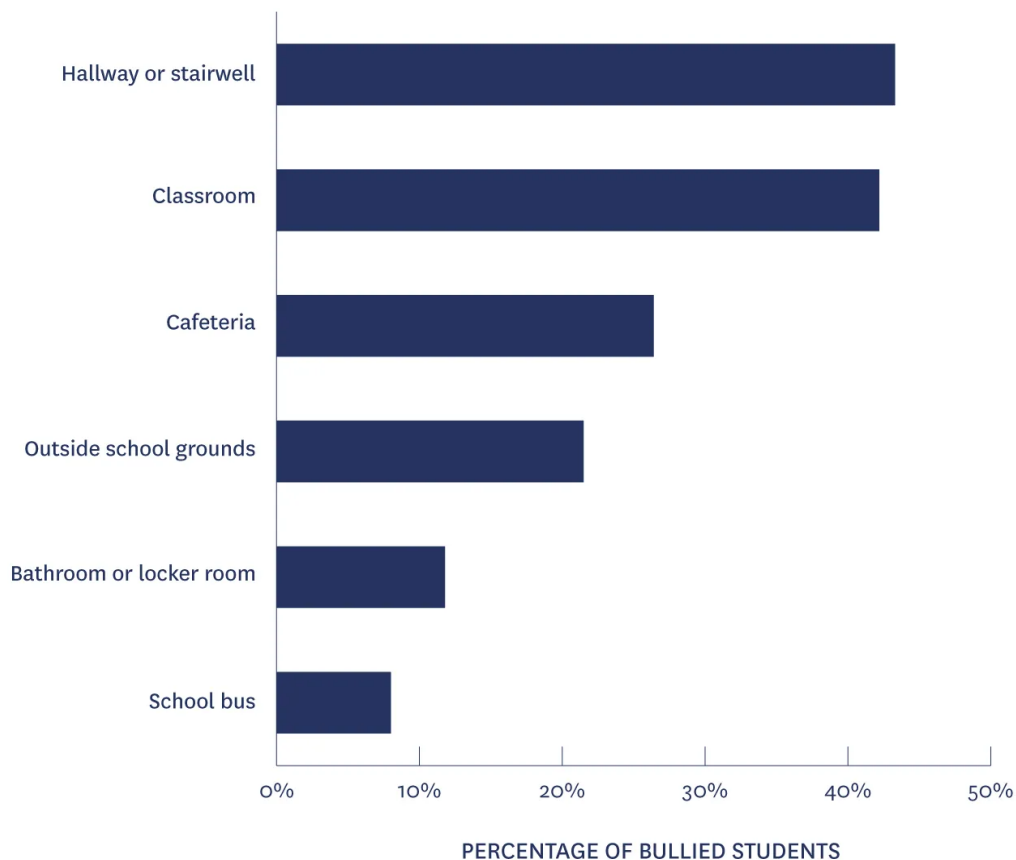
Creating a safe learning space for children requires buy-in from the top down. [Bullying.gov highlights the unique role administrators play in preventing bullying \(PDF, 173 KB\)](#), [including](#):

- Providing bullying prevention training so staff are better equipped to intervene.

- Establishing and consistently enforcing policies against bullying.
- Talking with students about their concerns and helping them build social and emotional skills to help address the issue.
- Collecting data on bullying to understand how frequently and where it's occurring on school grounds.

Where Are Students Being Bullied?

Students 12 to 18 who were being bullied in 2017 were asked to identify where incidents took place.



Source: "Student Reports of Bullying: Results from the 2017 School Crime Supplement to the National Crime Victimization Survey," Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2019/2019054.pdf>

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More than 40% of bullied students said the incidents took place in hallways, stairwells and classrooms.

[Go to the bottom of the page to review tabular data about the locations of bullying.](#)

What Can Teachers Do to Prevent Bullying?

To foster safe and respectful classrooms, the Department of Education advises teachers to focus on respect, inclusion and open communication. The department developed [a training toolkit that identifies the primary features of a supportive classroom \(PDF, 391 KB\):](#) [↗](#)

Engagement: Educators model positive thinking and respectful behavior, while proactively encouraging conversations about tolerance, inclusivity and diversity. They also listen to students' experiences.

Environment: Educators also model appropriate expectations for relationships and work directly with not only students who are being bullied but also students who are bullying others to establish a culture of respect for differences.

Safety: Educators intervene when they see problems and make bully-free culture the norm by teaching positive relationship skills and clear ground rules for behavior.

Teachers can watch for [warning signs of bullying](#), [↗](#) such as unexplained injuries, frequent illness, decline in school attendance, decline in grades, isolation and avoidance of social situations.

How Should Teachers Intervene When Bullying Occurs?

When bullying occurs, teachers should intervene immediately. A [Department of Education toolkit provides a four-step approach \(PDF, 1.1 MB\):](#) [↗](#)

STEP 1

Stop the Behavior

Keep calm, make sure everyone is safe, and reassure all the students involved. Separate them and ask what they need from you, including any medical attention.

STEP 2

Find Out What Happened

Listen to as many sources as you can, document what you hear and see, and collect other evidence that may help you determine whether bullying occurred. Don't make assumptions.

STEP 3

Support the Students Involved

Both the student who is bullied and the student who bullied need support. Allow the student being bullied to share their story and reassure them that bullying is not their fault. The student who bullied needs to understand why their behavior may be problematic, what the consequences are according to school policy and how they can be involved in making amends.

STEP 4

Report and Follow Up

A thorough report of what happened, where the incident took place and other evidence can enable schools to track patterns of behavior and properly address the issue.

Following up ensures that students who are bullied know they are supported and safe.

How Can Students Help Prevent Bullying?

Every student can help make schools safer places to learn for their peers. The Department of Education toolkit on bullying prevention provides tips for students who witness bullying:

How to Help a Targeted Student

Reinforce that bullying is wrong and ask how you can help.

Help the targeted student remove themselves from the situation.

Encourage the targeted student to tell an adult.

Reach out for help from an adult.

How to Create a Safer School Climate

Don't engage in bullying.

Be kind and listen to students that are targeted.

Go out of your way to socially interact with targeted students.

Find ways to promote anti-bullying efforts.

The following section contains tabular data from the graphics in this post.

Perceptions of Power Imbalances for Bullied Students

Students 12 to 18 who reported being bullied in 2017 identified the following power imbalance in favor of the student who bullied them.

Perceived Power Imbalance	Percentage of Bullied Students
Ability to influence what other students think of you	53.3
Socially more popular	49.6
Physically bigger or stronger	40.3
More money	31.5
More power in another way	24.5

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How Are Students Being Bullied in Schools?

Types of Bullying of Students Ages 12 to 18 in 2017	Percentage of Students
Subject of rumors	13.4%
Made fun of, called names, insulted	13%
Pushed, shoved, tripped, spit on	5.3%
Excluded from activities on purpose	5.2%
Threatened with harm	3.9%
Pressured to do things they did not want to do	1.9%

Types of Bullying of Students Ages 12 to 18 in 2017	Percentage of Students
Property destroyed on purpose	1.4%

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Effects of Bullying on Students

Students 12 to 18 who reported being bullied in 2017 said that bullying had negative effects on following aspects of their lives.

Bullying Negatively Affected	Percentage of Bullied Students
How they felt about themselves	26.8%
School work and relationships	19.4%
Relationships with family and friends	18.6%
Physical health	13.7%

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Where Are Students Being Bullied?

Students 12 to 18 who were bullied in 2017 were asked to identify where incidents took place.

Location	Percentage of Bullied Students
Hallway or stairwell	43.3%
Classroom	42.2%
Cafeteria	26.4%
Outside school grounds	21.5%

Location	Percentage of Bullied Students
Bathroom or locker room	11.8%
School bus	8.0%

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Citation for this content: The USC Rossier [MAT online program](#).

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