

Bullying

Why Students May Exhibit This Behavior

ACADEMIC In general, bullying behavior is an expression of some frustration or insecurity on the part of the perpetrator. Students who experience academic frustration may bully other students because they cannot succeed at schoolwork as they know others can. They are displacing their anger toward those who are weaker.

ENVIRONMENTAL Some adolescents may become bullies as a result of stressors experienced at home. These may include unrealistic expectations from parents, inability to live up to a sibling's success, or—in the most serious cases—physical abuse. Adolescents may also imitate the aggressive behavior of parents or siblings, or bullying actions may be supported by cultural or community norms.

INTELLECTUAL Students with limited intelligence may feel very inadequate and may seek to gain status by picking on students who are weaker than they.

LINGUISTIC Students who have difficulty communicating as a result of language limitations may vent their frustrations through bullying behavior instead of through words.

MEDICAL Some adolescents may be predisposed toward aggression due to neurological impairments or chemical imbalances. Also, some medications may increase aggressive tendencies, possibly leading to bullying behavior.

PERCEPTUAL Students who have difficulty perceiving the world as others do may experience frustration. They become the school bullies to release conflict, anxiety, and tension.

PSYCHOLOGICAL Certain psychological states (e.g., low self-esteem, anxiety, depressed mood) can create a feeling of inadequacy in some students and increase their levels of tension. They may attempt to relieve the tension through aggressive behavior toward smaller, weaker, nonthreatening peers. They become bul-

lies not from high confidence but rather from insecurities that need to be vented.

SOCIAL Some adolescents may feel socially rejected and socially inadequate; they feel that they do not fit in. They may act out their frustrations physically by bullying. Also, bullying may be a sign of status and power within a peer group. Adolescents may become bullies to get peer recognition and show their friends just how “powerful” they are.

What to Do

- We suggest a three-step approach for dealing with bullying:
 1. Set boundaries around the inappropriate behavior. Start by talking privately with the student. Keeping in mind that bullying behavior is a sign not of strength but rather of a fragile ego, do not hesitate to establish yourself as the benevolent authority. Discuss the seriousness of the situation and the consequences if it continues. Make clear that although you understand that certain issues may be prompting the student’s behavior—and you will help her try to understand them—you will not tolerate the behavior.
 2. Try to understand the behavior and help the student understand it. Invite her to verbalize what she is feeling and why she behaves as she does. If she is unable to label her feelings, you may want to provide her with some labels. For example, you may want to say that you have seen other students bully because they felt they were not doing well in school, had problems at home, or felt rejected by other students.
 3. Help the student change the behavior. Suggest alternate means of resolving future conflicts. Many students who persist in bullying know no other way to handle difficult and stressful situations.
- If bullying is a consistent pattern of behavior, talk to the school psychologist about setting up a meeting with the parent(s) or developing a behavioral contract for the student.
- If the problem is severe and persists, consult with the school’s pupil personnel team.

Inability to Handle Criticism

Why Students May Exhibit This Behavior

ACADEMIC Some adolescents believe that they are always right where schoolwork is concerned and, because of their academic success, feel as though they are right in everything. When offered constructive criticism, they can become extremely defensive. Others may have had negative experiences with teachers whom they may have perceived as too critical. These adolescents are very afraid of academic criticism because they cannot take it constructively.

ENVIRONMENTAL At home, some adolescents hear only negative words and criticism. Consequently, they become extremely self-protective. When they receive constructive criticism about schoolwork, they immediately put up barriers.

INTELLECTUAL Students with limited intelligence may not be able to do things as fast or as well as their peers. They may become very sensitive to criticism because of their inability to succeed.

LINGUISTIC Students who feel insecure about their expressive language ability may become very defensive and lose perspective when they receive constructive criticism aimed at improving their language skills.

PERCEPTUAL See *Linguistic*.

PSYCHOLOGICAL Students who have low self-esteem and fragile egos commonly distort what is being said. They can be very sensitive and take everything personally. When such students receive constructive criticism they often take it quite hard, believing that criticism reflects on them as people rather than on specific aspects of their work.

SOCIAL If adolescents receive constructive criticism in front of peers, they may react very defensively, fearing teasing or ridicule.

Because of their social need for acceptance, they react to the criticism in a very negative manner.

What to Do

- Speak privately with the student to discuss how he is doing and how he feels about himself. Explain the purpose of constructive criticism and assure him that your criticism is not aimed at him or his ability.
- Discuss with the student how you hope to make him feel better through successful experiences that will help him see himself as capable and adequate.
- Give the student tasks at which you know he can excel. In the process, boost the student's academic self-confidence so that he is motivated toward future learning. Because confidence is a result of repeated successful experiences, you may want to begin with tasks that ensure 100 percent success: shorter but more frequent assignments; less demanding problems; alternative means of responding, such as audio-tapes or charts; a daily progress report that focuses on the positives; and classroom duties that place the student in a positive light with his classmates, such as collecting or handing out papers or leading the class in some activity.
- If necessary, consult with the school counseling or social work staff or the school psychologist about the possibility of including the student in a self-esteem group.
- If the problem is severe and persists, consult with the school's pupil personnel team.

Teasing

Why Students May Exhibit This Behavior

ACADEMIC Students who feel academically inadequate may displace their inadequacy on others whom they perceive as more competent by teasing and picking on them. This behavior takes the spotlight off their academic limitations.

ENVIRONMENTAL To a degree, teasing is part of everyday life. However, when an adolescent teases frequently or with a constant need to upset others, then the motivation may be problematic. If teasing is frequent and intense, the adolescent may well be venting some tension, frustration, or anger. Parents who tease at the expense of someone's self-esteem or pick on an adolescent to vent their own frustration can contribute to this. Also, when older siblings indulge in intense teasing of a younger student, this student in turn seeks out her own victim.

INTELLECTUAL Students with limited intellectual ability may lack the social skills and maturity to understand fully the consequences of their teasing behavior.

LINGUISTIC See *Perceptual*.

PERCEPTUAL Students with perceptual deficits may not always capture the social nuances or have the social skills to monitor feedback from peers. They may tease innocently, in attempts to be funny or liked, without realizing that what they say may negatively affect others.

PSYCHOLOGICAL Frequent and intense teasing is usually an outlet for suppressed anger or frustration. Although a student may sometimes tease the individual with whom she is angry, she may also displace her anger through teasing directed at others.

SOCIAL Some students may tease others to gain the social spotlight and look more important in the eyes of their peers. Others may tease to elicit attention from particular individuals.

However, the teasing—depending on its extent and nature—may provoke rejection, increasing the student’s social anxiety.

What to Do

- Speak with the student privately. Let her know that inappropriate teasing will not be tolerated in your classroom. Review the class rules and remind her that she must respect others.
- Speak to the class about considering other people’s feelings and treating everyone with kindness.
- Remove the student from group activities when she teases inappropriately. Act immediately so that she understands that the behavior is unacceptable and she is being reprimanded for it.
- Have the student engage in self-esteem building activities.
- Consult with the school counseling or social work staff, the school psychologist, or, if necessary, the pupil personnel team.