

Research snapshot from a literature review

by Australia's Safe and Supportive School Communities Working Group



What is bullying, including online bullying?

- The way that schools and the community respond to bullying and other forms of conflict will be influenced directly by their underlying understanding of the phenomenon.
- There is general consensus on the defining features of bullying, despite ongoing discussion in academic circles.
- Online bullying has the same defining features as bullying in face-to-face (offline) contexts, with some added specific attributes.
- Contemporary definitions include both face-to-face and online bullying.
- Research has highlighted that children and young people can hold very different ideas from adults about what bullying is and why it happens.
- There is limited research on including students in the schools' work toward establishing a common understanding of bullying for the school community.
- The two main ways to consider bullying are the 'individual' perspective and the 'social-ecological' perspective. Each leads to different recommendations about best practice.
- The individual perspective locates the source of the 'problem' within the individual rather than anything about that individual's context. It leads to solutions which focus on identifying who is involved in bullying and modifying their behaviour.
- The social-ecological perspective locates the source of the 'problem' within the relationships between people as they interact within the values and norms of the wider culture. It leads to solutions which focus on modifying the attitudes and social norms in the school and wider culture.
- The different contexts of research, the law and education use slightly different ways of defining bullying. While the core concepts are shared, the definitions differ slightly in relation to what aspect is emphasised.

- The national definition of bullying for Australian schools is:

Bullying is an ongoing misuse of power in relationships through repeated verbal, physical and/or social behaviour that causes physical and/or psychological harm. It can involve an individual or a group misusing their power over one or more persons. Bullying can happen in person or online, and it can be obvious (overt) or hidden (covert).

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

Single incidents and conflict or fights between equals, whether in person or online, are not defined as bullying. However, these conflicts still need to be addressed and resolved.

- The national definition draws on decades of research, and considers the educational context and the aims and needs of schools. It places an emphasis on the relationships involved, and working with students and the whole school community to promote respectful relationships.

Implications for schools

- It is important for schools to ensure a common understanding of bullying is shared by all school community members (staff, students, parents and carers).
- A collaborative and inclusive process of establishing a shared understanding of bullying within the school community is an investment in positive and lasting solutions.
- Positive school-home collaboration is more likely to be achieved by involving parents and carers and students in the discussion about what bullying is and how it can be changed. Respecting and including students' ideas and views about bullying leads to a shared understanding.
- A shared definition of bullying in the school's policy underpins school action.
- School approaches to bullying need to encompass both face-to-face and online bullying.
- Schools can benefit from considering both the individual and the social-ecological perspectives so that they focus both on individual characteristics and behaviours, and school social and cultural norms related to behaviour, aggression and power.

- The national definition of bullying for Australian schools recognises the needs of the educational context for a definition that emphasises relationships and potential areas for action. It provides a starting point for discussion within schools. The national definition is found on the Safe Schools Hub and on the Bullying. No Way! websites.
- Some attributes specific to the online social context may generate additional concerns, but may also provide schools and families with broader options for supporting students to self-manage, protect themselves, report incidents, and learn appropriate ways to relate to other people in the online context.
- Schools need to respond to all types of inappropriate behaviour of students, not just bullying. When school communities have a shared understanding of bullying and how it differs from other types of conflict or aggression, they are able to respond appropriately.

Want to know more?

This research snapshot is based on *A review of literature (2010–2014) on student bullying by Australia's Safe and Supportive School Communities Working Group*. (2015).

Other research snapshots on student bullying are available at Bullying. No Way!

Further information on bullying and on student safety and wellbeing can be found at: www.bullyingnoway.gov.au and www.safeschoolshub.edu.au