

# Q&A: Bullying—how can we stop it, or, even better, prevent it?

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The Children's Helpline receives more than 1,000 calls every day, of which the majority are about bullying, says spokesperson Lisette Potman. Children talk on the phone to volunteers and chat and exchange

experiences with other similarly aged children on the Forum.

Potman states, "The bullying can be physical, mental or digital, and ranges from pranks to bullying that lasts for years. One of the most frequently asked questions is: How can I stop it? Many of the children have already tried things themselves, such as ignoring the bullying behavior or telling their parents or teacher about it, but that doesn't always help. Together with our volunteers, the children try to think of the next step, such as how they can discuss it further with people they trust. We are curious to hear the insights of the Leiden researchers."

Educational scientist Mitch van Geel and psychologist Berna Güroğlu share the latest scientific findings on bullying based on issues that children discuss with the Children's Helpline.

## **Why do people bully others?**

Van Geel: Bullying is a form of aggression where an individual or a group repeatedly picks on a relatively weaker victim. That can be physically, by kicking or hitting them, for example, but name-calling and humiliating or excluding people are also forms of bullying. There can be different reasons why people engage in bullying. Many studies currently focus on bullying as targeted aggression, which is a way for the bully to gain status and dominance.

Güroğlu: It's true that gaining status and power often plays a role: it's a way for children to show they are strong. But that can also go hand in hand with uncertainty: some children, for example are bullied at home or elsewhere and they compensate for that by bullying someone from their class. Or they think it's fun. Sometimes children provoke one another and that can turn into bullying. It's like a virus that spreads through the class, one girl said in our documentary [The complex world of bullying](#).

## **What is your best advice for anyone who is being bullied?**

Güroğlu: If you keep it to yourself, there's little chance of getting help, because bullying is often not very visible for parents or teachers. Look for support from several people rather than just one. Ask people who can change the situation for help. Talk about it to your parents, friends or other classmates and teachers at school. Making bullying visible and being able to talk about it is the first step.

Van Geel: I absolutely agree with Berna! It's very sad that bullying is at times not noticed by parents or teachers. We've learned from interviews that some children who are bullied don't talk about it, for example because they think it will make the situation worse, that they won't be taken seriously or they are ashamed about it. Try, as a parent or teacher, to make sure that children feel safe enough to report bullying and show that you're taking the problem seriously.

## **How can we provide a safe environment together?**

Güroğlu: Everyone has to be aware of their own role and what is needed to prevent or tackle bullying. Children who bully need to learn to put themselves in the shoes of their victim and realize how hurtful their behavior is. Get them to talk to the child who is suffering from being bullied. The friends of the bullies and bystanders who look the other way, which includes parents and teachers, also have an important role to play. I don't believe harsher punishment is the answer because punishment generally does nothing to change structural behavior.

Van Geel: Again, I agree with Berna. The whole group together has to make the environment safe. Not turning a blind eye is hugely important. Victims need help and support, and if everyone thinks it's someone else's

responsibility to take action, they will never get the help they need.

## **How effective are anti-bullying programs in schools?**

Van Geel: Studies have shown that programs that have a group approach are effective. In these kinds of programs, you not only look at the roles of the bully and the victim, but also try to make bystanders more willing to support or defend the victim, for example by speaking out against the bully.

It's not been possible yet to completely prevent bullying, but there are certainly programs that reduce bullying and increase the defense of the victim.

Güroğlu: With these anti-bullying programs it is possible to reduce bullying considerably within one school year. We are currently studying what are the effective elements of the program. Programs mainly seem to work when children actually learn to handle socially complex situations, become aware of what is going on in a class and learn to put themselves in someone else's shoes. It is sometimes difficult to gauge whether a joke is teasing or bullying, and how to set boundaries. Unfortunately, even with the better programs, around 3% of children are still bullied.

## **What are other important insights from your own research on bullying?**

Van Geel: We carried out different meta-analyses on bullying. We combined a lot of studies on bullying so that we could analyze what all these studies show. We see that bullying is linked to serious problems in the victim, such as sleeping problems, self-harm and even attempts at suicide. I still sometimes hear people say that the victims shouldn't

dramatize things, or that words don't hurt you, but bullying really is a very unpleasant experience and it's a problem that we should all take very seriously.

Güroğlu: We recently studied using an fMRI scan whether victims of bullying process emotions in a different way from children who aren't bullied. We saw no differences in the processing of emotions at the neural level, in the network of nerve cells in the brain. There was no context in this study: The participants only looked at faces of children who looked happy, angry or sad. In a follow-up project we want to study how children process emotions if there is some context and they can see that something happens between the children.

Our previous studies show that [young people](#) who are rejected by classmates over a long period of time respond differently to new instances of exclusion. There is then higher activity in the areas of the brain linked to earlier suffering caused by exclusion. We can't say whether that reaction is a cause or an effect, but it can indicate sensitivity to social exclusion which makes them interpret situations as more negative than they actually are. It is important that parents, teachers and [children](#) realize this and take it into account.

Provided by Leiden University

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