

## How Important are Bystanders' Interventions in Bullying?

***If you remove the audience bullying should stop.*** (Padget & Notar, 2013)

**B**ullying continues to be a major concern for schools. A considerable literature has focused on perpetrators and victims; less attention has been given to the effects created by and on observers. The emphasis here is on how the reactions of such “bystanders” to a bullying incident can affect both the bully and the victim and what schools can do about negative effects.

Commonly reported is that about 80-85% of in-person or digital forms of bullying incidents happen with a peer bystander present. In 2004, Twemlow, Fonagy, and Sacco defined a bystander “as an active and involved participant in the social architecture of school violence, rather than a passive witness.” and called for bullying to be viewed from “a triadic (bully-victim-bystander) rather than dyadic (bully-victim) perspective.” Padget and Notar (2013) state that such a “bystander usually accepts or even participates in the bullying or they may try to stop the bully and take up for the target.” Of course, some bystanders are uninvolved onlookers. The point for consideration is that any bystander may have an impact on a bully and victim.

### Bystander Effects on Bullying Behavior

Bystanders have been categorized as follows:

*Outsiders* – individuals who witness and do not get involved.

*Defenders* – who intervene when bullying occurs or extend support to the victim(s) or take other actions to address the bullying.

*Reinforcers* – who support the bullies or bullying behavior (e.g., encouraged by cheering or laughing during or after the event).

*Assistants* – who join in (e.g., physically restraining or blocking the individual(s) being bullied from getting away

(Polanin, Espalage, & Pigott, 2012; Salmivalli, 2014; Thornberg, Tenenbaum, Varjas, et al., 2012).

Clearly, these four different bystander roles can have different effects on perpetrators and victims.

### Examples of Negative Outcomes on Victims

Bystanders reinforce and encourage a bully when they join in or react with signals that glorify the actions. They also may influence other bystanders to join in and others not to be defenders. And when many join in, attributions of responsibility and assignment of consequences may be shifted from the instigator to the group. With several supporters and few defenders, the bullying may escalate and may even become life-threatening. This is also the situation when outsiders standby and ignore the bullying.

Examples of bullying and bystander effects on victims include increased feelings of being isolated, deserted, disliked, hopeless, helpless, and undeserving of help, as well as chronic fear and anxiety. Such feelings are prominent among the reasons that many victims do not report being bullied (Janson, Carney, Hazler, & Oh, 2009).

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\*The material in this document builds on work done by Leonard Har as a participant with the national Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA in 2022.

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*A lot of students or bystanders do not realize how their reactions worsen the situation. In middle school, my best friend was bullied. He was a minority at school and was diagnosed with a mental disorder at a young age. He shared that he was being made fun of and isolated because of his differences. I also witnessed this multiple times. He once shared with me that he thinks the bystanders who ignored what happened actually hurt him more and stressed him more than the actual harm done by the bullies. He eventually started skipping school, worsening his mental health. Leonard Har*

## **Examples of Positive Outcomes on Victims**

For the most part, talking about positives related to bullying is an oxymoron. At best, there are moderating influences on the negative effects. For example, researchers report that bystanders who intervened were able to stop a bullying incident within 10 seconds, 57 percent of the time (Polanin, Espalage, & Pigott, 2012). And victims who were defended and supported from bullies were reported as less anxious and depressed and experienced less negative feelings about themselves (Sainio, Veenstra, Huitsing, & Salmivalli, 2011; Salmivalli, 2014).

From: ***Bystanders are Essential to Bullying Prevention and Intervention***

### **Why Bystanders Intervene or Not**

*Some reasons bystanders do not intervene or respond to the bullying include:*

- Fear of retaliation and being bullied themselves.
- Fear of losing their social status.
- They are not friends with the target of the bullying.
- Lack of knowledge about the individuals involved, the incident, and whether they perceive someone to be right or wrong in the situation.
- Awareness about a specific situation that takes into account the people involved and information about their on-going actions.
- They do not believe teachers or school staff will address the bullying.
- They believe that adults will make the bullying worse.
- They do not know what to do to intervene or address bullying.

*Bystanders do intervene or defend the targets of bullying because they:*

- are friends with the target of bullying
- are morally engaged and treat others with respect or believe "bullying is wrong"
- consider how serious or dangerous the behavior is and how frequently it occurs
- view the target of bullying as innocent
- have empathy and sympathy for the target of the bullying
- believe teachers or school staff will appropriately address bullying

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Note: 60% of bystanders are estimated as willing to assist, defend or provide support to bullying victims.

And it has been suggested that the number of witnesses is related to reasons for not intervening. For example, the more witnesses present, the more likely a bystander may reason that someone else will intervene.

## Increasing Positive Bystander Behavior

Review of the research highlights how little really is understood about bystanders. With respect to increasing positive actions by bystanders, the literature suggests that students can be educated to take action against bullying while ensuring their own safety. It remains unclear what is the best way to convince bystander supporters not to encourage bullies.

Parents and teachers are encouraged to be role models related to addressing bullying. There is growing emphasis on promoting social and emotional development in ways that enhance kindness, mutual respect, and empathic responding. Recommendations for schoolwide programs include strategies such as (1) a "buddy" system in which well-adjusted peers are paired with at-risk students, (2) student volunteers who welcome and befriend newcomers and provide them with social support, (3) mentoring, and (4) peer mediation. And anonymous reporting systems are viewed as essential in encouraging students to tell school staff about bullies and victims before or after an event.

From: ***Bystanders are Essential to Bullying Prevention and Intervention***

### **Bystander interventions during a bullying incident may include:**

- Defending the target of the bullying
- Intervening as a group
- Changing the subject
- Questioning the bullying behavior
- Using humor to lighten up a serious situation
- Openly stating an objection to bullying
- Stating approval of the victim and validating his or her social status

### **Bystanders can address bullying after it happens by:**

- Reaching out privately to the target of the bullying to express support or concern.
- Reporting the bullying to a trusted adult, parent, teacher, or school administrator.
- Reaching out privately to the person doing the bullying to express concern, if they feels safe to do so

## Concluding Comments

Nobody denies school bullying is a major problem, and it is clear that bystanders can and do play significant roles related to bullying at school. At schools, however, there is controversy about how best to address the problem and considerable variability in what is done.

We suggest that, rather than pursuing one more discrete problem-focused program, concern about bullying represents an opportunity to catalyze and leverage systemic changes to improve how schools address all factors interfering with learning and teaching. To this end, our Center emphasizes the importance of embedding all problem-focused initiatives into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports. Such a system aims at supporting all students. With respect to bullying, this includes a focus on preventing bullying and intervening in ways designed to turn bullies around, address the needs of victims, and enhance positive responses from bystanders.

(See:

*[Embedding Bullying Interventions into a Comprehensive System of Student and Learning Supports.](#)*)

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