# Bullying in Primary School

Bullying behaviours can be seen across all developmental stages but it is common for adults to observe an increase in bullying behaviours during primary school (What is bullying? describes the four essential characteristics that define bullying with some concrete examples of bullying behaviours). This research review will help teachers understand how bullying behaviours develop during middle childhood (5-12 years), how to spot them, activities and strategies to prevent bullying from occurring, and effective ways to address bullying when there is a need for intervention.

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**Activity: Does your school have a bullying policy that defines bullying behaviour and outlines the responsibilities of teachers, professionals, students, and parents/whānau in preventing and responding to bullying?**

The purpose of this activity is to set the foundations for what bullying policies and procedures are in place at your school. These policies and procedures will influence the way you prevent, observe and respond to bullying if/when it happens. If you're not sure whether your school has a bullying policy and procedures, this might be the time to ask your principal and start a conversation about this important topic.

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The most effective school-based bullying prevention programmes involve a comprehensive whole-school approach that include staff training, bullying prevention curricula, and a school culture that values relationships and inclusion. Positive Behaviour for Learning (PB4L) is a whole-school approach that explicitly teaches children prosocial behaviours that promote positive relationships and interactions. If your school doesn't have a bullying prevention policy and procedures, you might like to access this resource that provides a step-by-step guide to developing a whole-school approach to bullying prevention. The New Zealand Police programme, Kia Kaha, also has useful information for principals, teachers, parents and whānau to teach bullying prevention and respectful relationships.

## Bullying in middle childhood

During primary school, there is a greater focus on reading, writing, and mathematics as young children transition from early childhood to middle childhood. A critical role of teachers during this developmental period is to lead, role model and mentor students to become kind and confident individuals capable of engaging in problem-solving, developing friendships and showing kindness to their peers. Unfortunately, bullying remains a serious concern during middle childhood. A recent ERO report[1] stated that 46% of primary-age students reported having been bullied at their current school and 61% of primary-age students reported being a bystander or witness to bullying. The majority of these bullying behaviours were relational and social bullying such as students being left out by other students, being called names, and rumour spreading. These behaviours are less obvious and more difficult for adults to see because they can occur in areas hidden from view (such as the wharepaku). These relational bullying behaviours are also often harder for students to talk about.

Another bullying behaviour that primary-age students reported was physical bullying such as being made to do something they didn't want to do, having personal belongings stolen or damaged, and being

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hit, pushed, kicked, and punched. They also reported experiencing cyberbullying including behaviours such as nasty or mean text or online messages. Physical bullying tends to be more obvious and easily observed by adults because of the direct nature of these behaviours, although students can still use these behaviours in areas away from adults' attention. It is important to be aware of these bullying behaviours and the potential for all students to use them in the classroom, in the playground, and at home.

> **Activity: Describe some of the bullying behaviours you observe in your school. Where do these behaviours take place (e.g. classroom, playground etc.)? Are there any strategies in place to monitor the areas where bullying occurs?**
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> The purpose of this activity is to get you to reflect on the types of bullying behaviours you observe at your school or kura and where they take place. The presence of adults is a good strategy to prevent bullying from happening in the first place.

## How can adults spot bullying?

There are many ways adults can spot if a student is affected by bullying. Not all students who are bullied or witness bullying will ask an adult for help, so it is important for adults to be aware of possible warning signs of being bullied. Some bullying behaviours are easy to identify, although many students will use bullying behaviours away from adults to avoid getting caught. The following are signs that might indicate that a student is involved in bullying:

- Unexplainable injuries, or lost or damaged belongings or clothes

- Frequent complaints of headaches or feeling sick, or faking sickness

- Avoiding lessons that require peer interaction or group work

- Avoiding social situations

- Often being seen alone and excluded from friendship groups

- Refusing to go to school or loss of interest in school

- Appearing insecure and lacking self-esteem

- Refusing to talk about what is wrong or blaming themselves

- Unexplainable and unpredictable mood swings and anxiety

It is important that teachers get to know their students and the friendships they develop and maintain throughout the year. Friendship maps can be a useful strategy to identify children who might be regularly left out from friendship groups and implement interventions to support their social relationships and networks. You can collect this data by asking children to write the names of three school friends on a piece of paper. Collecting this data regularly (such as once a term) will help you to identify whether certain children's names are continually absent from friendship groups or circles, allowing you to intervene early.

During early childhood, middle childhood and adolescence, students can use all forms of bullying. This research review describes some examples of physical, verbal, relational, and cyberbullying that adults might observe in primary-age students. Remember that all students can learn how to use all forms of bullying behaviours and ALL bullying behaviours are serious and require intervention. It is the responsibility of adults to protect students from abuse, including bullying. Schools must be a place of

inclusion, safety and healthy relationships, so if teachers suspect that something isn't quite right with a student, it is essential to investigate further.

## Who is involved in bullying behaviours?

Usually, our attention is immediately drawn to the student who has engaged in the bullying behaviour, but the victim and the bystanders also play an important role in a bullying situation. The actions of the bully, victim, and bystander(s) can either stop or escalate the bullying behaviours.

**The bully** is the student who targets another student or adult and instigates the bullying behaviour.

**The victim** is the student or adult who is the receiver of the bullying behaviour.

**The bystanders** are the students or adults who watch the bullying behaviour occur.

**All students can be a bully, victim, or bystander and they can move between these roles.**

**Preventing bullying in primary school**

Bullying is completely preventable. Adults' efforts to prevent bullying will be more effective if there is a whole-school approach to preventing bullying. However, there are lots of practical things teachers can do to promote positive relationships and prevent aggression and bullying.

1. **Positive adult-student relationships** are critical during middle childhood as students develop a sense of belonging and identity. Establishing whanaungatanga and a positive climate of cooperation and kindness will foster healthy social relationships in the classroom and school or kura. Students who have a positive relationship with their teachers are more likely to seek help from them if they experience bullying.

2. **Talk to your students and their parents/whānau about bullying**. Some students don't always know what to do when they are bullied or when they see others being bullied. Talking about bullying openly with our students and their parents/whānau will help establish expectations of behaviour and let them know that bullying will be taken seriously.

3. **Take student's requests for help seriously and intervene immediately**. Unfortunately, in some cases, students have reported that nothing happened when they told their teacher about incidents of bullying. It is the responsibility of adults to protect children from bullying. The United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child addresses the rights of children who are at the victims of bullying and harassment. Article 19 of the Convention states:

4. Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child.

5. **Remember that bullies, victims and bystanders are all important** to the prevention and intervention of bullying behaviours.

6. **Look for teachable moments** to teach your students how to recognise and respond to bullying behaviours. This will help establish a culture in your classroom and school that says 'NO!' to bullying.

7. **Teach and model the skills students need to engage in prosocial, cooperative and supportive interactions**. Strategies to prevent bullying and promote prosocial skills should be embedded across

the entire curriculum, in all contexts, and implemented by all adults. Stand-alone strategies or approaches are less effective.

8. **Prevention is a collective commitment to all students' safety and sense of belonging**. It is important that all adults are aware of the school's policy and approach to preventing bullying. It is best that everyone is consistent in responding and intervening in all bullying behaviours.

**Remember that students' social development is just as important as their academic achievement.**

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**Activity: Our students need adult leaders who are committed to stamping out bullying behaviours. What strategies do you use daily to prevent bullying in your classroom and school or kura? What else do you still need to be better prepared to prevent and respond to bullying behaviours? Set a goal for your classroom that will work towards preventing bullying behaviours (e.g., increase cooperative activities that build friendships and prosocial skills; work towards building a classroom climate that embraces inclusion and kindness).**

The purpose of this activity is to reflect on the daily strategies you currently use to prevent and intervene in bullying behaviours in your classroom and school or kura. There is always more we can do in taking the stand to stamp out bullying, so take your current pedagogical practices one step further by asking yourself 'what other professional development and learning might help me to become an adult leader who is committed to preventing and intervening in bullying behaviours?'

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## Intervening in bullying

A punitive and reactive approach to bullying (such as stand-downs) rarely prevents and stops bullying behaviours. Research shows[2] that an educative and restorative approach for those who engage and witness bullying is likely to be more effective in improving student safety and inclusion and promoting empathetic relationships. In Aotearoa New Zealand, the No-Blame Bullying approach is situated within a bicultural Treaty of Waitangi approach that builds relationships between students through empowerment and contributes to positive cultural and societal patterns of bullying prevention. Professor Angus Macfarlane and Associate Professor Sonja Macfarlane have created this resource to support schools in implementing the No-Blame approach to bullying. Additional bicultural and inclusive resources are listed in the recommendations for further reading.

Recent research shows that adults respond differently to physical aggression and relational aggression[3]. When adults see children and students excluding others (in other words, relational aggression), they are more likely to do nothing or take a lot longer to intervene than if they saw a child hit another peer. When teachers and other adults differ in their intervention responses to students' bullying, they may communicate that some behaviours are more worthy of attention and intervention than others. For instance, when adults intervene in physical aggression immediately, they are saying to students that these behaviours are unacceptable and are worthy of immediate attention. On the other hand, when adults don't intervene in bullying, students might think that these behaviours aren't serious and that they can get away with them. It is important that adults convey the message that they want students to report all bullying behaviours and it is the adult's responsibility to intervene and make the bullying stop. When adults don't intervene, students may stop reporting bullying behaviours or seeking help from adults because they haven't done anything in the past to stop it.

Unfortunately, there will be some students who don't seek help from adults when they experience or witness bullying. Some of the reasons for this include:

- Fear of being judged by adults as weak or a 'snitch'

- The student thinking no one cares about them

- Adults haven't solved the issue in the past

- Fear of the bullying behaviours getting worse and being rejected by peers

- The student wanting to handle the situation themselves to feel in control

## What can students do to prevent and stop bullying?

During middle childhood, peers are important in preventing and intervening in bullying. Peers are likely to watch bullying happen as bystanders in the classroom and school playground. When peers become a captive audience, this can reinforce the bullying behaviour and it can escalate. Similarly, when no one reports the bullying or tries to intervene, the bullying might continue because there were no consequences. However, when peers have the confidence and courage to intervene, bullying stops. Empowering all students with strategies to intervene positively will help stop bullying and communicate the message that acceptance and inclusion are important and bullying behaviours are unacceptable.

- Students should be encouraged to report all bullying behaviours to an adult who will follow through.

- Revenge and retaliation is likely to make bullying behaviours worse. Students shouldn't be encouraged to bully back to 'get back' at the other person. Rather, they should tell the bully to stop, or walk away and seek the support of an adult. Students need to feel that they have a support network of caring friends and adults who can help stop the bullying.

- Students are often more aware of what is going on in social circles than adults. Encourage students to reach out to their peers who might be vulnerable to exclusion and bullying. These relationships and connections are an opportunity for students to show their support and model positive prosocial behaviour and kindness.

- Be an upstander. When students speak up and take action against bullying behaviour, they model that bullying is not acceptable. Encourage students to use their voices and positive actions to be peacemakers in their schools and communities, and to set the example that bullying is unacceptable.

**Intervention is important because it creates an atmosphere that communicates to children that bullying behaviours are unacceptable. Implementing strategies that educate and restore harmony and relationships will build a school culture of inclusion, acceptance and kotahitanga (unity).**

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## Further reading

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Kia Kaha – No Blame Bullying Programme established by the NZ Police

## Endnotes

1 Education Review Office (2019). Bullying prevention and response in New Zealand schools. May 2019 https://www.ero.govt.nz/assets/Uploads/Bullying-Prevention-and-Response-in-New-Zealand-Schools-May-2019.pdf

2 Rigby, K., & Johnson, K. (2016). The prevalence and effectiveness of anti-bullying strategies employed in Australian schools. University of South Australia, Adelaide.

3 Swit, C.S., McMaugh, A.L., & Warburton, W.A. (2018). Teacher and parent perceptions of relational and physical aggression during early childhood. Journal of Child and Family Studies, 27, 118–130. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-017-0861-y

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