

# What Does Bullying Look Like?

By: Signe Whitson, Author & School Counselor

Whenever I give a presentation on the topic of [Understanding & Ending Bullying](#) -- whether to students, teachers, counselors or parents--I always begin by defining key differences between [rude, mean, and bullying](#) behavior. The ability to distinguish between degrees of bad behavior may seem like splitting hairs at first, but truly, when adults and young people become well-versed in recognizing gradations of behaviors, they are better equipped to respond to specific situations effectively.

That's why after teaching the differences between rude, mean, and bullying behaviors to students, I empower them further by helping them recognize the four most common types of bullying and talking to them about the everyday ways they see each type occurring among their peers. If you are looking to equip your child with skills to readily recognize and effectively respond to bullying, these steps are a great way to begin:

First, it's helpful for kiddos to know that bullying behaviors extend far beyond the "sticks and stones" methods of physical aggression. Bullying also includes verbal, relational, and online cruelty. These four categories are an effective catch-all to teach young people (Whitson, 2014):

**Physical bullying:** This kind of bullying includes a range of aggressive behaviors in which one person aims to cause bodily harm to another person.

**Verbal bullying:** Some people say that "words will never hurt you," but anyone who has been on the receiving end of verbal bullying knows that cruel words and scary threats can, indeed, be very painful.

**Relational bullying:** In relational bullying, kids use friendship -- and the threat of taking their friendship away -- to hurt others. This is the type of bullying most often referred to as "drama." Because it often happens within the context of a once trusting friendship, drama can be especially confusing and hurtful.

**Cyberbullying** is a specific form of bullying that involves technology. Cyberbullying can be especially destructive because of how quickly and how widely cruel messages can spread.

Next, I challenge kids to make a list of the ways they see each type of bullying play out in their everyday lives. Usually, students need little to no prompting; they call out (or scrawl out, when we are making paper lists) dozens of behaviors they see, hear, feel, and experience regularly. For the more reticent, or if I am doing this as a one-to-one conversation with a child, I challenge each young person to come up with at least three examples for each category. The most common ones kids talk about include:

## Physical bullying:

- Hitting
- Kicking
- Shoving



- Tripping
- Spitting

### **Verbal Bullying:**

- Teasing
- Threatening
- Name calling
- Yelling
- Harassing

### **Relational Bullying**

- Starting rumors
- Excluding
- Silent treatment
- Gossiping
- Following up a purposely cruel statement with "just joking."

### **Cyberbullying**

- Mocking someone online
- Posting embarrassing photos online
- Harassing someone on social media
- Making fun of someone in a group chat
- Setting up fake social media accounts

After the lists are complete, I have kids put a star by the behaviors which happen most commonly or that they find most painful. These high-frequency behaviors merit extra attention and responsiveness from caring adults. Moreover, the stars help adults pinpoint skills and targeted strategies to teach young people, so that kids can respond effectively to the specific types of aggression that are most prominent in their lives.

Lastly, I like to make it clear to kids that they are the ultimate experts in their own experiences. Using open-ended questions, I encourage kids to dig deeper into their encounters with bullying and to develop important insights into its impact. Sometimes I engage kids in one-on-one conversations. Whenever possible, I like to facilitate discussions among small groups of supportive students, so that young people gain the comforting understanding that they are not alone in coping with cruelty and that strategies and solutions are within their grasp. Some of the most important questions I pose to kids include:

1. Are there bullying behaviors on your list that occur less frequently but inflict more physical or emotional pain? Explain.
2. Are there behaviors on your list that you would be likely to report to a trustworthy adult?



3. Do certain bullying behaviors cause more confusion or humiliation and therefore you would be less likely to report them to adults?
4. I often explain to kids that from the vantage point of most adults, physical and verbal aggression are much easier to actually see happening than relational and online aggression. Then, I ask kids to think through how they can make helping adults aware of the subtle and hidden forms of bullying.
5. Lastly, to end any conversation on an empowering note, I encourage kids to brainstorm specific actions they can take to effectively respond to the different types of behavior on their lists. We discuss the advantages and disadvantages of various strategies, and establish a Plan A, a Plan B, and often a Plan C for how they will respond to any bullying they encounter-- whether as a victim or as a witness.

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