Bullying is a significant public health problem. Twenty-two percent of school-aged youth in the United States have been bullied at school (Robers, Zhang, Morgan, & Musu-Gillette, 2015). Research has shown that there is an increased prevalence of depression and thoughts of suicide among both bullies and victims (Espelage & Holt, 2013; Holt et al., 2015; Klomek, Marrocco, Kleinman, Schonfeld, & Gould, 2007).

How bullying is defined

- Considerable debate has emerged over how to define bullying and how to distinguish the behavior from aggression (Rodkin, Espelage, & Hanish, 2015). Recently, the U.S. Department of Education and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention collaborated to develop a uniform research definition of bullying.

- Drawing heavily from the scholarship of Daniel Olweus (1978), a research definition was put forth: “Bullying is any unwanted aggressive behavior(s) by another youth, or group of youths, who are not siblings or current dating partners that involves an observed or perceived power imbalance and is repeated multiple times or is highly likely to be repeated. Bullying may inflict harm or distress on the targeted youth including physical, psychological, social, or educational harm” (Gladden et al., 2014, p. 7).

Power imbalances and bullying

- Long-term studies are quite clear that victims of bullying suffer in terms of their social and emotional well-being along with their physical health. When strength and power between kids is imbalanced, bullying can occur repeatedly over time, with each negative experience building on previous ones (Copeland et al., 2013; Espelage, 2012; Espelage et al. 2012; Gladden et. al 2014; Ttofi et al., 2011).

- It is important to recognize the repetitive nature of bullying and the presence of a power differential. An imbalance of power exists when the perpetrator or group of perpetrators have more physical, social, or intellectual power than the victim (e.g., stronger, more popular). In a recent examination of a nationally representative study, adolescents that were victimized by individuals that they perceived as having more power reported greater adverse outcomes (e.g., depression) than victims who did not perceive a power differential (Ybarra, Espelage, & Mitchell, 2014).

At-risk populations

- Research findings consistently demonstrate that specific populations are at increased risk of being victimized and/or bullied by their peers, including students with disabilities (Rose & Espelage, 2012), sexual minority youth (Robinson & Espelage, 2012), obese or overweight youth (Adams & Bukowski, 2008), ethnic minority youth, and immigrant populations (Hong, Peguero, Espelage, & Allen-Meares, in press).
• A study of 23 comprehensive anti-bullying programs aimed at middle and high school students found that none of the programs covered issues of sexual orientation, homophobia, sexual harassment, or sexual violence sufficiently, yet a large percentage of bullying among students involves the use of homophobic teasing or slurs, name-calling, or other victimization (Birkett, Espelage, & Stein, 2008).

• Adolescents attending schools with LGB support groups (e.g., Gay-Straight Alliances, or GSAs) have been found to report lower rates of victimization at school and suicide attempts (Goodnow, Szalacha, & Westheimer, 2006; Heck, Flentje, & Cochran, 2011).

**Social emotional learning**

• Social Emotional Learning (SEL) programs focus on the systematic development of a core set of social and emotional skills that help youth more effectively handle life challenges, make better decisions, and thrive in both their learning and their social environments.

• Social emotional learning is a toolbox of skills that we all use to interact with other people around us—skills like self-awareness and management of our feelings; being aware of the world around us and making responsible decisions; and learning how to build and maintain relationships with all kinds of people (Espelage, 2015 for review). While schools have lots of programs and curriculum to teach us math, reading, and other academic knowledge, they often ignore these critical social skills that help us navigate challenging situations and become successful in life.

• A meta-analysis of 213 programs found that if schools implement a quality SEL curriculum, they can expect better student behavior and an 11 percentile increase in test scores (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011).

• SEL programs also showed some promising effects with students with disabilities (Espelage, Rose, & Polanin, 2015; in press).

• A recent large scale clinical trial study of a social emotional learning program in 36 middle schools yielded significant reductions in bullying, homophobic name-calling, and sexual harassment (Espelage et al., 2013, 2015, in press).

• SEL programs yield the strongest effects when implemented with fidelity and when teachers prep the lessons with colleagues (Polanin & Espelage, 2014). Thus, administrators need to prioritize time for prepping and integrating SEL into the day-to-day operations of the school.

**References**


