

The Difference between Bullying and Conflict

Bullying is not a new phenomenon. It's been around since the beginning of time. Most adults can usually recall incidents of bullying from their own schooldays. Either, they were bullied, they were the bully, or they were the bystander. For most of us, it's not a pleasant memory. In addition, historically, bullying was thought of as "kids being kids," "it's normal behavior," or "they probably deserved it." Fortunately, in today's world, those beliefs have changed. There's nothing "normal" about people intentionally hurting each other and no one deserves to be bullied. It's deviant, destructive, and wrong. Due to this paradigm shift, schools across the country take proactive measures in responding to bullying. In Frisco ISD, all campuses are trained to use the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (<http://www.violencepreventionworks.org/>). As part of the program, staff and students are trained annually, each campus has a bullying prevention committee and there is a heavy focus placed on building a positive school climate.

No bullying prevention program will completely eliminate bullying, but our goal is to decrease the possibility that it does occur and respond appropriately when an incident takes place.

It seems today the media, and often educators, label any type of aggression or disagreement between people as bullying. If two students fight . . . it's bullying. If one football team beats the other team too badly, it's bullying. If one student doesn't want to play with another student, it's bullying. But, many times, what's called bullying is not bullying at all. For example, bullying is not actually about conflict or anger. You do not have to be angry at someone to bully them. Bullying tends to be more about arrogance, control, and power. It's the feeling that I'm better than you and I have a right to treat you this way. All bullying is mean, but not all mean behavior is bullying. So, if bullying is not the same as pure peer aggression or conflict, what is it?

What is Conflict?

Conflict is a struggle between two or more people who appear to have different goals or desires. Conflict occurs naturally as we interact with one another. It is a normal part of life that we will not always agree with other people about the things we want, what we think, or what we want to do.

Most conflicts arise in the moment, because people of the same relative amount of power see the same situation from two different points of view. Here are a few examples:

- Two students are on a committee together and they don't agree on how to decorate for a banquet.
- Two boys get into a fight after a rough play in a football game.
- Students disagree over who should do clean-up after a group project.
- Two girls get into an argument when they realize they've worn the same outfit to a party.
- Two students who used to be friends bash each other online daily.
- A girl wanted to attend another girl's birthday party, but she wasn't invited.

- Two boys argue over who could win in a fight between Batman and Superman.
- Girls on a drill team disagree over what routine they will do for a pep rally.
- A student athlete believes he/she should start and the coach doesn't.
- Students begin spreading bad rumors about each other, because they disagree on which band director is the best . . . last years or this years.

Think of some of the ways we describe people in conflict – *“they were butting heads,” “she gave as good as she got,” “they were going back and forth at each other,” “it was he said she said.”* Both people are equally *“telling their side of the story.”* In conflict, the incident is usually *“two sided”* – each student is being aggressive toward the other one. In bullying, it tends to be one sided.

In a conflict people may get frustrated and angry. Chances are the amount of emotion each person feels will be relatively equal, because both are trying to get what they want. In the heat of the moment, one or both people's emotions can escalate into a heated conflict. We've all been involved in conflicts where we lost control and said something we later regret. People engaged in a conflict want the issue to be resolved. The “back and forth” that occurs is each person trying to make the case for what she/he wants.

When one or both people have the skills to resolve the dispute so both sets of needs are met, the same conflict between the same two people most likely will not be repeated. If not, conflict might possibly continue for a long time.

In bullying, there's usually not a conflict or disagreement. One person or a group of people, are targeting another individual because they can. As we said earlier, it's about arrogance, power, and control.

Defining Bullying

At first glance, it might appear it would be easy to tell the difference between bullying and conflict. But, it's often not that simple. Obviously, whether school administrators decide the aggressive behavior is bullying or conflict it's wrong, and they will take steps to stop it. But in order to differentiate between the two, you'll need to have a solid definition of what bullying actually is.

Most states require their schools have a definition of bullying in their school policy. There's often an “operational definition” which students could clearly understand and a more legalistic “statutory” definition. One example of an “operational” definition used worldwide was developed by bullying prevention pioneer researcher Dr. Dan Olweus. He describes bullying as:

“Bullying is when a person is exposed repeatedly and over time (or severely) to the negative actions of one or more individuals and the person has a difficult time defending him or herself.”

Most school definitions of bullying tend to be variations of Dr. Olweus original work. There was one major change the state of Texas made to the definition that occurred with the passing of David's Law (Senate Bill 179) in 2017. For an aggressive act to be considered bullying it no longer has to meet the requirement of being "repeatedly and over time." A single significant/severe act can now be considered bullying. Ch.37 of the Texas Education Code now defines bullying as:

"A single significant act or a pattern of acts by one or more students directed at another student that exploits an imbalance of power and involves engaging in written or verbal expression, expression through electronic means, or physical conduct and that:

- *has the effect or will have the effect of physically harming a student, damaging a student's property, or placing a student in reasonable fear of harm to the student's person or of damage to the student's property;*
- *is sufficiently severe, persistent, or pervasive enough that the action or threat creates an intimidating, threatening, or abusive educational environment for a student;*
- *materially and substantially disrupts the educational process or the orderly operation of a classroom or school; or*
- *infringes on the rights of the victim at school; and*
- *includes cyberbullying.*

Two Key Components of Bullying

Although definitions vary from school to school, most definitions of bullying have two key components:

- Aggressive behavior
- An imbalance of power

Aggressive Behavior Component

One or more people are directing aggression to another person who is unable to stand up for him/herself. The aggressive behavior is unwanted and unprovoked. The only person feeling emotionally upset is the person who is targeted. Whereas the aggressor appears to get some kind of pleasure out of his/her behavior and often feels no regret or remorse.

Examples:

- A student intentionally bumps into a classmate whenever they pass in the hallway and encourages other students to laugh.
- A very strong, large student taunts and makes fun of a smaller student in the locker room.
- Classmates make fun of a student's clothes or mock a student's accent or taunt the student about his/her grades.

Imbalance of Power Component

A key determining factor in bullying involves the imbalance of power. This could be physical size and power, relation to social status, multiple students “ganging up” on an individual, or sheer volume of information used against someone in a cyberbullying scenario. It could also be when a student is just vulnerable in some way making it difficult to defend him/herself.

Examples:

- An older student verbally abuses younger students on the bus and does not let them sit where they want to.
- A bigger child threatens a smaller child for his lunch.
- A very popular teenager intimidates others to do his/her bidding.
- Girls in a high social status clique humiliate and repeatedly make fun of a girl from a lower social status group.

When does bullying become harassment?

There are two ways bullying can become harassment:

- 1) The Office for Civil Rights and the Department of Justice have stated that bullying becomes harassment when the aggressive behavior is based on a student’s race, color, national origin, sex, religion, or disability.
- 2) When the same person is repeatedly targeted by another student (or group of students).

Harassing behaviors may include:

- Unwelcome conduct such as: verbal abuse, i.e., name-calling, epithets, slurs, etc.
- Graphic or written statements
- Threats
- Physical assault
- Other conduct that may be physically threatening, harmful, or humiliating.

Scenarios

Using the definitions given and the two key components of bullying, determine if the following scenarios would be considered bullying or conflict.

Scenario 1

On Thursday afternoon, the results of who made cheerleader are posted. On Friday during lunch, a group of girls who made the cheerleading squad walk by a girl who did not make it. One of the girls says, “See you in cheerleading practice today.” They all start laughing and walk off. Later that day, they repeat the aggressive behavior at lunch and in Spanish class. The target goes to the counselor’s office in tears. Is this bullying?

Yes. Due to the nature of the “group” bullying there is a definite imbalance of power.

Scenario 2

Julie's mother calls the school because she claims her daughter is being bullied, because Laura doesn't want to be her daughter's friend anymore. She goes on to say that Julie hasn't been invited to a birthday party at Laura's house and rarely talks to her anymore. Mom reports, "this situation has devastated Julie . . . she can't do her school work . . . I just don't know what we're going to do." Is this bullying?

No. The fact that one student doesn't want to play with another student is not bullying. If there was a case where a student was trying to get others to not play with someone, then that would be. For example, organized exclusion of another student would be bullying. But it's not bullying if a student simply does not want to play with someone. Instead, encourage the child to play with someone else.

Scenario 3

While walking through the cafeteria, Jessie pulled out Mark's seat from under him and he fell to the floor. Mark hit really hard and everyone started laughing. Is this bullying?

It's difficult to tell from the information given. If there **is** an imbalance of power between the two students, then it **would be considered bullying**. If there **is not** an imbalance of power, it **would be labeled as peer aggression**. For example, both boys might be the same size and power, have similar social status, consider each other friends and be on the baseball team together. Both scenarios are wrong, but in that particular case it would be labeled as peer aggression instead of bullying.

Note: Consequences will be given either way. Just because an aggressive act is not called bullying doesn't mean the aggressor won't receive a consequence or that the consequence will be any less than if it had been called bullying. It's just documented in a different way.

Scenario 4

Every time Trevor speaks in class, Howard makes comments about how "gay" he sounds. He's also commented about other student's ethnicity and religious beliefs. Is this bullying?

It's beyond bullying. Due to the nature of the comments, this scenario would be considered harassment.

Scenario 5

It seems as if every day Collin (extreme ADHD) and Matthew (Autism Spectrum Disorder) start calling each other names, taking each other's things, and both often lose control of their anger. Both Collin and Matthew, who consider each other friends, are about the same size and hang out with the same group at school. Is this bullying?

No. This would be considered peer aggression/conflict. Both students should be held accountable for their actions, but it would not be considered bullying.

Another way to determine if an incident is bullying or peer conflict is to ask yourself, "Would this student say or do the same thing he did to this student, to another student who is bigger and stronger than he is?" If the answer is no, it's probably bullying.

In summary, let's go over the major differences between Bullying and Conflict/Peer Aggression:

Bullying

- Aggression is one sided.
- No disagreement
- Imbalance of power

- One side enjoys interaction and the other doesn't
- Not angry at the person

Conflict

- Both sides are aggressive.
- There is a disagreement.
- No obvious imbalance of power
- Neither side usually enjoys the interaction
- Often angry or frustrated the person

How Do I Make a Report of Bullying?

In our district, students and parents have the ability to file an online or offline incident report. Students are informed at the beginning of school, as well as periodically during the school year, how to file a report of bullying. Here's a closer look at the two:

1) Offline (in person)

- a. Students can report to their teacher (in person or written) or other staff members in the building.
- b. Students can report directly to the Assistant Principal or Counselor. This exact procedure varies from campus to campus, but school officials do make students aware of the process. Most campuses have a "Bullying Incident Report" (might have another name) form. These can usually be found in the administrator's or counselor's office.

2) Online

- a. www.choosetocare.com – click on "Safety Hotline" and follow prompts.
- b. Frisco ISD App – Steps for making a report of bullying:
 - i. Click on the "schools" icon.
 - ii. Click on the "Bully Reports" icon.
 - iii. Select your child's campus.
 - iv. Follow prompts.
- c. Once you submit your online report, the message will be sent to the campus administrators to begin the investigative process.
- d. Campus administrators will contact the students and parents involved in the report.
- e. Interim steps will be taken to insure safety of the students involved while the investigation is taking place.
- f. Once the investigation and a plan of action have been determined, the investigator will inform all parties involved of the findings.
- g. Students and parents are encouraged to report all forms of bullying or retaliation to the staff member conducting the investigation.