



www.nifi.org



**DAVID MATHEWS**  
CENTER *for* CIVIC LIFE



©iStockphoto.com/gemenacom

## >> Bullying

### How Do We Prevent It?

**L**ESS THAN TWO DAYS BEFORE BULLYING VICTIM Felicia Garcia committed suicide in 2012, the Staten Island 15-year-old posted the following Twitter message: “I cant, Im done, I give up.”

“They just wouldn’t stop,” one classmate said of the athletes at Tottenville High School who had harassed Felicia. Students told the *New York Times* that bullying was common at their school, but administrators were usually quick to intervene. They had arranged for mediation between Felicia and her tormenters. But it was evidently too little and too late.

This tragedy and others like it have shed light on bullying as a major public issue. Bullying occurs at every age and in many different environments, but it is an all-too-ordinary childhood event. At least one out of every five students has reported being bullied at school. The behavior involves key characteristics: repeated, aggressive, and unwelcome actions towards another, and an imbalance of power between the attacker and the victim.

Although most bullying doesn’t result in the suicide of the victim, it is a clear risk factor in depression and suicidal thinking, researchers say.

## INTRODUCTION

It extracts a high price from the victims, who often suffer from loneliness and feelings of inadequacy, even years later. It's costly for the nation, because if left unchecked, bullies often have significantly higher rates of arrest and incarceration.

While bullying can occur anywhere, most childhood bullying takes place in school. Ominously, bullying was a contributing factor in many school shootings. Most of the attackers in school shootings felt persecuted and attacked by others, according to a 2001 report. In one case, the attacker's schoolmates described the attacker as "the kid everyone teased." Such harassment has always been a terrible experience for the victims, but now the stakes seem higher than ever.

### Zero-Tolerance Policies

Some schools employ police officers in their buildings as a way to deter threatening behavior and make students feel safe. If bullying doesn't stop, police can, as a last resort, make an arrest. That's what happened in the California town of Morgan Hill in January 2013. A middle school student repeatedly sent menacing cell phone messages to two other students. When he assaulted the two boys after ignoring police warnings to leave them alone, police arrested him.

Many schools, whether or not they employ police, adopt zero-tolerance policies on bullying, with a predetermined set of severe consequences

that feature suspending or expelling those involved. This approach sends a clear message that bullying is unacceptable. But some worry that it doesn't change the lack of empathy that is usually at the root of a bully's intimidating behavior. Others say zero tolerance puts too much focus on the perpetrator, and not enough on the overwhelming majority of onlookers who see what is happening and who may often want to help but don't know how.

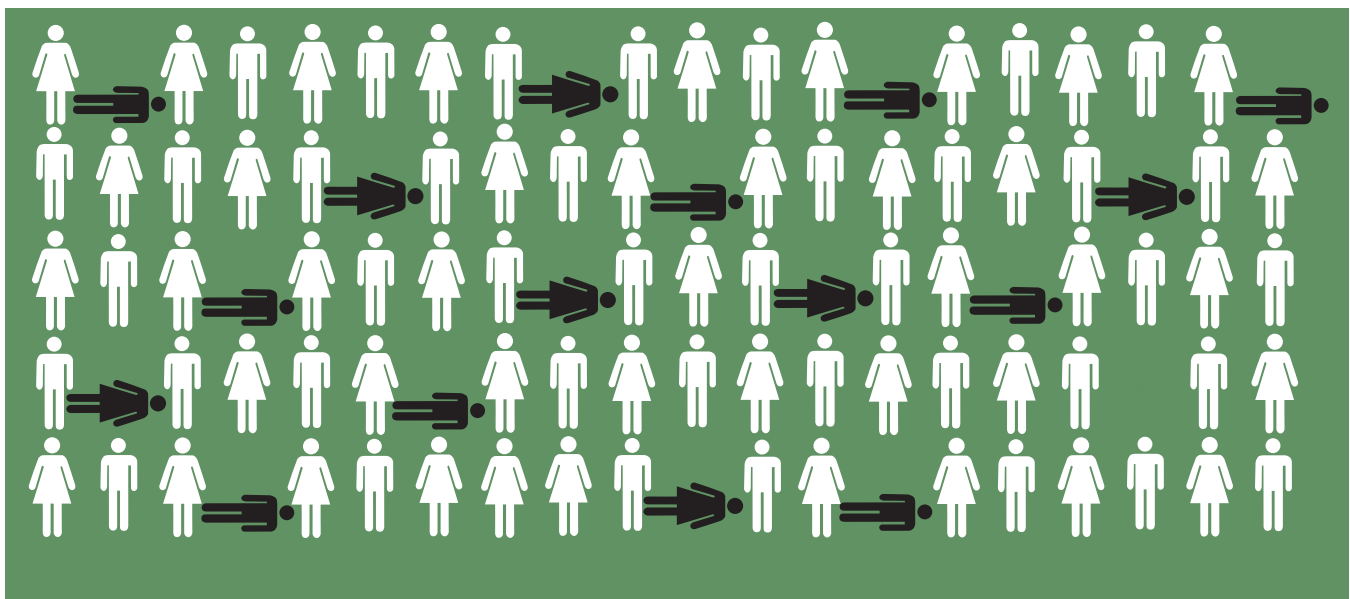
Addressing such issues is at the heart of the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, named for Dan Olweus, who began research into bullying in Norway during the 1970s. The Olweus approach, which teaches students not to be passive bystanders, is used around the world. Students learn when and how to intervene and how to be helpful to a person who is being bullied.

But students can't fight bullying alone. Interventions at every level of a school are needed. To be successful, schools must do more than counter obvious bullying, such as physical aggression. They must also address subtle bullying, like spreading rumors and excluding people, and cyberbullying, which involves using the Internet to harass others.

### Making a Plan

Preventing bullying can't be accomplished, experts say, without a comprehensive strategy that involves teachers, parents, and students, with leadership from top-level administrators. An

## 17% of all students reported having been bullied within a school term



©Ideogram

information program is one place to start. Such a program can help victims of bullying learn different ways to respond, such as walking away, using humor to deflect bullies, engaging friends for support, and reporting the behavior.

The same program would give student bystanders, who may feel reluctant to “tell” on a bully, the confidence to report on the incident. New Kent County schools in Virginia, for example, provide students a variety of ways to let adults know about bullying, with a 24-hour tip line, suggestion boxes at school, and clear information on who children can talk to if they or others are bullied. The schools also make it clear that informing doesn’t make a student a snitch.

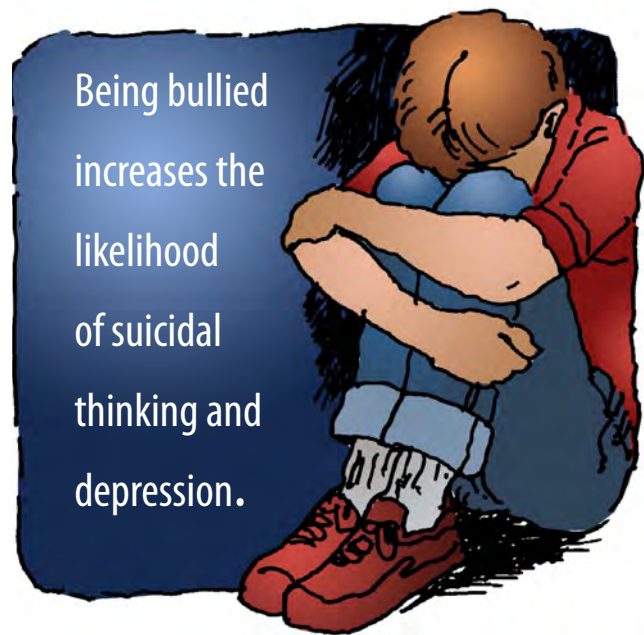
Helping the bully change is also part of many successful anti-bullying strategies. Often, bullies are blind to the feelings of others. They are aggressive, perceive the actions of others as threatening when they are not, and avoid responsibility for the consequences of their actions. Yet their aggressive behavior doesn’t just hurt victims—bullies will suffer, too, if they don’t change.

Some bullying is hard for parents, teachers, and other adults to detect, making them slow to react. Bullies are not always playground hotheads who get poor grades and are habitual troublemakers. Sometimes it’s the more popular students, with strong social skills, who bully others by socially excluding them, spreading vicious rumors, and manipulating relationships.

### A Community Problem

Other kinds of bullying are not limited to schoolhouse walls. Bullying follows children home, on their Facebook pages and in cell phone text messages. It happens in the neighborhood and in the community at large.

That’s why some say this is not a problem to be solved through education. After all, shouldn’t parents monitor their children’s behavior, both to ensure that their children are neither picked on nor harassing others? Many parents who monitor their kids’ desktop computers don’t monitor how they are using their cell phones, even though many smart phones are, essentially, hand-held computers. The reluctance of parents to “snoop” is waning, as more parents make use of software in their kids’



phones to track all activity that takes place on the devices. Advocates say that this protects children from sexual predators, keeps parents aware of bullying behavior, and keeps their children from “sexting”—the practice of sending sexual photos through cell phones that can become a way to bully others.

But bullying is not just a family issue. Workplace bullying costs businesses time and money and leads to higher employee turnover. If communities addressed bullying in a serious way through civic organizations and business groups, the threat of intimidation and harassment could go down for everyone—young and old alike.

There have been some successful efforts against bullying. The Kiwanis Club, an international service organization, for example, began a nationwide push to fight bullying in communities, using volunteer opportunities to give confidence to victims of bullying and to teach empathy to bullies. Community forums, such as those in Albuquerque, New Mexico, in October 2012 and Gonzales, California, in May 2013 asked participants to help develop a communitywide plan to fight harassing and threatening behavior. And in 2009, the University of Minnesota School of Nursing ran an 18-month-long program for girls based on mentoring, service, and leadership training. It had a significant impact on reducing the girls’ aggressive behavior and improving their communication skills.

## A Framework for Deliberation

This issue guide offers three options for approaching this difficult and critical problem. It provides the framework for public deliberation of the issue designed to avoid divisive debate, in favor of highlighting concerns that many share. Each concern suggests actions we might take to address the problem, as well as the drawbacks such actions might have.

**Option One** suggests that getting tough on bullying, with strict consequences and zero-tolerance policies, is the best course to take. This approach suggests a clear message and punishing wrongdoers.

**Option Two** says that bullying is best addressed by focusing on preventive measures in schools. This could be done by helping schools foster a culture of respect and equipping them with programs that are proven to reduce bullying.

**Option Three** argues that bullying is found everywhere in society, not just in our schools. The issue should be addressed in families *and* in the community as a whole.

## NINE TYPES OF BULLYING

1. Verbal
2. Intentional social exclusion or isolation
3. Physical, such as hitting, kicking, spitting, or shoving
4. Telling lies or rumors
5. Taking money or others' belongings or intentional damage to belongings
6. Threats or forcing others to do what they don't want to do
7. Racial
8. Sexually, particularly with regard to sexual identity
9. Cyberbullying, disseminating bullying via the Internet or through cell phones

SOURCE: Olweus Bullying Prevention Program

### The David Mathews Center for Civic Life

The David Mathews Center is a 501 (c) (3) nonprofit organization that works with citizens who want to make positive, innovative decisions that lead to action in their communities on issues that concern them. The center works to encourage sustainable community practices that are aimed at building and preserving a healthy democracy.

### The National Issues Forums Institute

This issue guide was prepared for the National Issues Forums Institute in collaboration with the Kettering Foundation and the David Mathews Center for Civic Life in Montevallo, Alabama. Issue guides in this series are used by civic and educational organizations interested in addressing public issues. These organizations use the books in locally initiated forums convened each year in hundreds of communities. For a description of the National Issues Forums, log on to the website: [www.nifi.org](http://www.nifi.org).

### Other Topics and Ordering Information

Recent topics in this series include US politics, economic security, America's role in the world, and immigration. For more information, please visit [www.nifi.org](http://www.nifi.org).

### Writers: David Mathews Center for Civic Life:

Robert McKenzie, President  
Chris McCauley, Executive Director  
Cristin Foster, Assistant Program Director

### Auburn University:

Mark Wilson, College of Liberal Arts  
Cynthia Reed, Professor of Educational  
Leadership; Director, Truman Pierce Institute

NIFI: Maura Casey

**Executive Editor:** Brad Rourke

**Managing Editor:** Ilse Tebbetts

**Design and Production:** Long's Graphic Design, Inc.

**Copy Editor:** Lisa Boone-Berry

*Bullying: How Do We Prevent It?*

Copyright 2013

National Issues Forums Institute

All rights reserved.

ISBN: 978-1-943028-16-0

**This publication may not be reproduced or copied without written permission of National Issues Forums Institute. For permission to reproduce or copy, please write to [NIFI@nifi.org](mailto:NIFI@nifi.org).**

Founded in 1927, the Kettering Foundation of Dayton, Ohio (with an office in Washington, DC), is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research institute that studies the public's role in democracy. It provides issue guides and other research for the National Issues Forums. For information about the Kettering Foundation, please visit [www.kettering.org](http://www.kettering.org) or contact the foundation at 200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459.

## Get Tough on Bullying

Bullying incidents are reaching epidemic proportions. Bullying is unacceptable. It must be treated with zero tolerance. Increased reports of bullying in our schools demand that teachers, principals, and school districts do more to help prevent bullying and provide tougher consequences for those who engage in it. We must ensure that school district anti-harassment policies and student codes of conduct are in place and strictly enforced.



© William Gottlieb/CORBIS

*While bullying can occur anywhere, most childhood bullying takes place in school.*

Examples of What Might Be Done	Consequences to Consider
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implement zero-tolerance policies and procedures.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Zero-tolerance policies may push some students out of school prematurely.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Institute tougher consequences for bullying in student codes of conduct to communicate that bullying is unacceptable.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Imposing tougher consequences ignores the underlying issues that incite young people to bully.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Station a police officer in each school to reinforce that bullying and violence have severe consequences.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Police efforts are better focused on criminal behavior outside of the schools. Stationing police officers in every school is costly.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Require teachers and staff members to report bullying within 24 hours of an incident.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers would be forced to turn playground spats into formal bullying reports; overreacting may create more problems.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emphasize the need for bystanders to communicate that bullying is unacceptable. Teach young people what to do when they see bullying.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This may cause those who intervene to become victims of retaliation. And many kinds of harassment, such as cyberbullying, occur outside the school.</li> </ul>

## Equip Schools to Address Bullying

Not every young person understands what constitutes bullying and how to respond to it. We need to educate our children about bullying and effective ways to deal with it. Many feel powerless as victims or as bystanders. At the same time, many bullies do not understand the effects of their actions. The lines between victims and bullies often become blurred when circumstances change or victims retaliate. We should create supportive, enriching school cultures that equip teachers and students to address the root causes of bullying.



Many schools actively involve their students in anti-bullying programs.

Examples of What Might Be Done	Consequences to Consider
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implement a schoolwide information program about bullying that includes self-confidence training to teach young people how to respond to bullies.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assertive actions by victims could bring on greater torment from bullies.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure that young people know whom they should contact if bullying occurs.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers and other school personnel do not have the time and resources to adequately address every instance of bullying.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage peaceful solutions and peer mediation programs to help bullies build social skills.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Without tough consequences for bullies, young people may not take the problem seriously.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Educate school counselors, teachers, staff, coaches, and administrators to address root causes of bullying and to serve as role models for positive interactions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Addressing the complex root causes of bullying is best left to the expertise of mental health and behavioral professionals.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create a culture of respect in our schools.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It is the responsibility of parents and community members to instill strong character in young people and determine moral standards.</li> </ul>

OPTION THREE

## Engage the Community and Parents

Bullying is a widespread behavior that is not limited to educational settings, so schools should not bear the entire responsibility for addressing what is a public issue. Parents and the community should talk about bullying and discuss ways of preventing it. A lot of bullying and violent behavior begins in the home. We must reach out to parents. And must reach out to young people, some of whom do not have supportive home environments and need community help.



Teachers, teachers' aides, administrative staff, and community members gathered in Batavia, New York's Jackson School for education on anti-bullying initiatives.

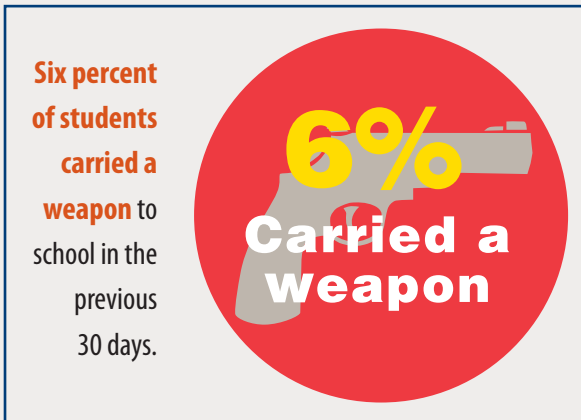
Examples of What Might Be Done	Consequences to Consider
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage greater parental monitoring of their children's cell phones and Internet use and promote acceptable policies for using social media and the Internet.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This requires that parents spend much more time and energy monitoring their children, time some parents do not have. It may also invade their childrens' privacy.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conduct presentations about bullying in PTA and community meetings—its nature, its impact, and its warning signs.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• These meetings may not reach people in troubled homes or those too busy to attend.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Civic groups and businesses can address bullying in meetings and service projects.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• These community initiatives may be unequally distributed and may vary in cost and effectiveness.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Equip community members and parents to be able to identify the signs that a child is bullying or being bullied.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Schools, not the community, should be responsible for addressing the problem, as most childhood bullying occurs in the school environment.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage community mentoring and character education programs to reinforce positive behavior and combat bullying.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focusing on mentoring and character education may result in neglecting other important community problems.</li> </ul>



For youth between the ages of 10 and 24, **suicide** is the **third leading cause of death**.



**20% of high school students reported being bullied at school in the previous 12 months in 2011.**



Sources: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; U.S. Secret Service

## About This Guide

This issue guide is meant to support deliberation on a contentious topic. Rather than present competing partisan viewpoints, the document is framed in such a way that each option presented turns on things individuals hold deeply valuable. Participants may find themselves drawn in varying degrees to each option—this is by design.

Each option diagnoses the problem differently and suggests a different course of action in line with that diagnosis. But, every action also has trade-offs or drawbacks. As we make choices about what we should do about the problem, we need to recognize and work through the trade-offs of each option, as well as the tensions that are inherent between them.

There is no right way to deliberate. Many groups find it best to begin with an exploration of how this

problem personally affects the participants. In this way people will often raise the concerns that are reflected in the options.

If there is a moderator present, this person may best be relied on to encourage the exploration of tensions between the options, as well as an exploration of the drawbacks inherent in people's favorite solutions.

The deliberation may not always go smoothly. This is to be expected when our communities face difficult problems so closely connected with things we hold valuable and about which we may be deeply conflicted both within and among ourselves. We encourage people using this guide to deliberation not to shy away from such difficult exchanges. It is only by working through these differences that we can arrive at common ground for action.