

This resource is tailored for Early Education and Child Care Providers as a guide to the StopBullying.gov training module.

For more information on bullying prevention, including the definition, statistics, best practices, and common myths or misdirections, please consult the StopBullying.gov training module at www.stopbullying.gov/communityguide.

Understanding the Roles of Early Education and Child Care Providers in Community-Wide Bullying Prevention Efforts

What is known about bullying among young children and its prevalence in early education and child care settings?

Children as young as 12 months can be aggressive when relating to their peers. Peer aggression has been studied extensively among young children (ages 3-5) and has been found to be very common in preschool and kindergarten. In fact, peer aggression is more likely among young children than any other age group (Hanish, Kochenderfer-Ladd, Fabes, Martin, & Denning, 2004). Researchers generally agree that peer victimization occurs in early social settings but that a young child's understanding of, and experience with, bullying at very young ages differs from school-aged children in several important ways, including:

- **Preschoolers define “bullying” differently:** Younger children view bullying as being hurtful and aggressive, but they typically do not recognize that bullying involves repetitive behavior or a power imbalance (Monks, Smith, & Swettenham, 2005). Young children's ability to understand bullying may also be affected by their somewhat limited understanding about motivation and intention; some may be unable to compare peer responses, reflect on their own behavior, or understand another's point-of-view until they are in early elementary grades.
- **Measuring the extent of bullying and comparing rates across different ages can be challenging.** Commonly used assessment tools (e.g., written surveys, nomination of peers who bully others or are bullied) may not be appropriate or accurate with young children who are unable to read and write, or who are inconsistent in their abilities to express thoughts and feelings about peers.

- **Parents report lower incidents of bullying for boys and girls ages 2-5 compared to ages 6-9.** In telephone interviews with parents in the United States, Finkelhor, Ormrod, and Turner (2009) found that approximately 25% of boys and 18% of girls aged 2-5 had been physically bullied in the past year, while reports of physical bullying were higher for boys and girls aged 6-9 (35% of boys and 25% of girls). In addition, approximately 15% of boys and girls aged 2-5 had been emotionally bullied (compared with 30% among boys and 35% among girls aged 6-9).
- **Very young children are at risk for being bullied.** Young children are especially vulnerable if they lack assertiveness, have difficulty setting limits to demands by peers, or if they tend to withdraw from peers (Alsaker & Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2010). Exposure to aggressive peers increases the likelihood of being bullied for preschoolers and kindergarteners. A protective factor for kindergarteners is being liked by peers and having friends, but this isn't the case for preschoolers (Hanish, Ryan, Martin, & Fabes, 2005).

Early Education and Child Care Providers' Unique Role in Addressing Bullying

Early care settings are often the first context outside of a child's home where children learn how to relate with their peers. Preschool teachers and child care providers, who understand early childhood development, are in crucial positions to assess group interactions and identify children with social emotional difficulties.

How can early education and child care providers help to prevent bullying?

Experiences during the early childhood years are important building blocks to help children develop skills that enable them to form healthy friendships and learn to reduce aggressive behaviors such as bullying (Hanish et al., 2004). By instructing children on pro-social skills, such as sharing, helping, and including others, early education and child care providers may prevent bullying from occurring, reoccurring, or intensifying (Ostrov et al., 2009).

- **Discuss and model positive behavior and other ways young children can make friends and interact with their peers.** Offer the words and actions they need to be successful. Caregivers can assist and reinforce expected behaviors through developmentally appropriate praise (e.g., "catch" children in the act of relating well with peers and quickly reward them with praise), by practicing ways children can join in and take turns playing with others, and by being inclusive. They can correct wrong-doings by discussing the physical and emotional consequences that a child may experience as a result of harmful words and actions. Early education and child care providers can also use stories, such as those presented in the webisodes for kids on StopBullying.gov, or real-life events as teachable moments.

- **Set clear rules for behavior.** Monitor children’s interactions carefully (including at home) and step in quickly to stop aggressive behavior or redirect it before it occurs. Keep in mind that it is not enough to set rules with consequences for inappropriate behavior. Young children need constant reminders of how they are expected to behave and, if they violate rules, should be given matter-of-fact explanations about why their behavior was hurtful. Harsh, inflexible discipline strategies should be avoided. Preschool teachers who are employed with public schools should carefully review the district’s policies and procedures for addressing bullying and, where appropriate, help inform the policies and practices for addressing bullying.
- **Be vigilant.** Monitor for aggression and bullying among preschoolers and kindergartners.
- **Value kindness.** Though young children may not understand the term “bullying” or how it differs from other forms of aggression (or “being mean”), talk about behaviors that hurt others and show that you value kindness. Ultimately, it is most important to reinforce the message that aggression is not acceptable.
- **Use age-appropriate consequences for aggressive behavior.** Ask children to make simple reparations for harm caused by their aggression (whether accidental or “on purpose”). Adults can help children find an action that is intended to “correct” the hurt or damage they may have done (e.g., help rebuild a knocked over block structure, replace a torn paper or crayons, say or do something friendly or kind). When sincere, it may also be appropriate to encourage children to say “I’m sorry.” Teachers and child care providers can help foster sincere apologies.
- **Help children learn to substitute alternative behaviors for aggression.** Model appropriate actions and suggest the use of non-aggressive words with peers, and liberally praise children for appropriate behavior.
- **Teach them to report to an adult.** Explain often what children should do if they are treated in a way that makes them feel uncomfortable, upset or unhappy, or if they witness other children being harmed or bullied. At this age, children should be taught to say “STOP” and to immediately go get an adult. Teachers may need to discuss why reporting bullying is not “tattling.” Reporting is necessary to keep children safe and help everyone learn how to get along together.

Challenges & Opportunities for Early Education and Child Care Professionals

Disruptive behavior of young children ranks high as a priority for training and support by child care professionals. Early childhood experts estimate that even among children without developmental delays, 10% to 15% have mildly chronic to moderate problem behaviors

(Cimino, Forrest, Smith, & Stainback-Tracy, 2007). This presents some unique challenges and opportunities for early care and educational professionals in their bullying prevention efforts. Among the challenges:

- **Distinguishing between friendly teasing and bullying.** The overlap of harmless teasing and verbal bullying can be confusing to caregivers who are not trained in detecting cruel intent. An example of harmless teasing might be a friendly exchange that represents an awkward expression of affection (Mills & Carwile, 2009). Such acts are distinctly separate from cruel teasing and bullying.
- **High co-occurrence of bullying and being bullied (referred to as bully-victims).** Some research finds that often, though not always, preschool children who bully others are themselves bullied. Aggression and victimization occur together at higher rates among young children than children in middle- or late- childhood (Hanish et al., 2004) and young children who are victimized can become aggressive during preschool years (Ostrov, 2010). Managing the behaviors of these children requires specific techniques to address physical aggressiveness and problem behaviors that may arise from being bullied.

There are also important opportunities for early care providers to make a difference.

- **School success in elementary grades is closely tied to the development of social skills.** This includes cooperation, getting along with others, and the ability to self-regulate one's emotions (Child Trends, 2000; Cimino et al., 2007). Therefore, the early detection of persistent involvement in bullying can, with appropriate interventions, overcome aggressive and self-destructive behaviors that will improve the social, emotional and learning outcomes for children.
- **Quality child care enlists the support of parents in the daily care of young children and in monitoring each child's progress in meeting physical and cognitive milestones.** Communication between parents and child care providers should also include the sharing of social and emotional skills and deficits, including aggressive and bullying behavior. As child care providers are often the first to notice problem behaviors in relating to peers, they could advise parents when referrals should be made to qualified mental health professionals to ensure children receive the services they need.

How Early Education and Child Care Providers Can Engage and Include Others in Community Bullying Prevention Strategies

Networks of early care and education (ECE) professionals at a federal, state, and community level have a history of collaborating in initiatives that are aimed at improving the social and emotional health and educational outcomes of young children. Child care providers, center

directors, preschool teachers, and other ECE professionals can support community-wide bullying prevention by informing and involving their existing collaborative partners. Ways to engage with others include:

- School readiness, as defined by the National Education Goals Panel, includes social-emotional development. ECE professionals are partnering with health, mental health, and other professionals in assessments and interventions to help promote healthy development and prepare children to enter school ready to learn. They could expand these efforts to detect and better manage bullying behaviors in young children.
- State agencies, involved in regulating child care facilities and administering child care subsidies for qualified low-income families, support ECE professional development to build the capacity of the child care workforce. High-quality training in how to teach young children pro-social and emotional skills can be added to in-service and college courses for child care providers and preschool teachers.
- Mental health interventions targeted at young children with personal or social difficulties commonly involve collaborative efforts with ECE providers, service staff, and parents. Mental health consultations that occur on-site at child care facilities can advise and support staff in the care of children with challenging behaviors.
- The organizations and stakeholders in these initiatives and educational venues can be informed by ECE professionals about the consequences that bullying presents to young children, and the mutual benefits of planning community-wide strategies of prevention.

Ideas for Next Steps

- Learn more about bullying prevention through [StopBullying.gov](https://www.stopbullying.gov) and the resources listed below. Review the research presented in the training modules and how it is best communicated among motivated audiences.
- Consult the [Community Action Toolkit](#) and collaborate with others in the community to perform a landscape assessment that will help identify relevant data, as well as the broader needs and opportunities within the community. Use this as a starting point for developing a strategic plan, beginning with the action planning matrix included in the toolkit.
- Plan a bullying prevention event that will inform a broader network of early education and child care professionals, parents, caregivers, or other members of the community to help dispel common myths and misdirections. This will also shed light on the importance of a holistic, community-based effort.

Resources and References

Sample of Resources Available

National Association for the Education of Young Children – NAEYC’s mission is to strive for the provision of high-quality care and developmentally appropriate services and resources. For more information, visit www.naeyc.org.

Sesame Street Workshop – This website provides a helpful video of Big Bird addressing the topic of bullying. The website also provides helpful materials for having a conversation with younger children about bullying and appropriate behavior in school and social settings. For more information, visit www.sesamestreet.org.

Technical Assistance Center on Social Emotional Intervention for Young Children – TACSEI provides research-based information and free, downloadable resources on effective practices to improve the social-emotional outcomes for young children with, or at risk for, delays or disabilities. Teaching Tools for Young Children with Challenging Behaviors is a product designed for teachers. TACSEI is also working with states to build the competencies in teaching social-emotional skills (Cimino et al., 2007). For more information, visit www.challengingbehavior.org.

Zero to Three, National Center for Infants, Toddlers and Families – This nonprofit advocacy organization is committed to improving the lives of infants and toddlers with information, training and support for professionals, policymakers, and parents. Downloadable resources and brochures, and instructional webinars are available on how to develop social emotional skills and manage aggressive behaviors in young children. For more information, visit www.zerotothree.org.

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