

BULLYING AND HARASSMENT: MYTHS AND FACTS

The effects of bullying and harassment can have serious and long-lasting implications both for victims and those who bully. Despite the fact that bullying affects nearly one in three kids, there are a lot of misconceptions about it. We encourage you to engage girls in a discussion about the myths and facts that surround bullying and harassment.

These myths and facts can form the basis of a discussion with girls during programming time, or you might convene a conversation with girls, their parents, board members or donors to discuss bullying and harassment, and demonstrate to girls that there is an entire community of adults who care about their well-being.

MYTH: Bullying is just “kids being kids” and we should stop making it such a big deal.

FACT: Bullying can cause lasting harm. Repeated or severe conduct based on sex or other protected categories is unlawful harassment.

Bullying is not a harmless rite of passage or an inevitable part of growing up. Be careful not to dismiss conduct based on stereotypes that “boys will be boys” or “girls are catty.” Bullying should be understood as a public health problem faced by a third of our children.

Young people who are bullied or harassed can experience many severe negative physical and mental health consequences. Researchers have shown that those who are bullied are more likely to experience depression, anxiety and low self-esteem. Some may even contemplate or commit suicide. Bullying and harassment also can impact success in school. Young people who are bullied are more likely to have decreased academic achievement—lower GPA and standardized test scores, and are more likely to miss, skip, or drop out of school.

Additionally, unwelcome conduct that is severe or pervasive and is based on sex, gender identity, race, disability, or other protected categories is discriminatory harassment, and schools that don’t handle it properly may violate federal civil rights laws.

MYTH: To address bullying or harassment, schools have to catch the aggressor in the act.

FACT: Schools have a responsibility to take steps to prevent students from harm, address conduct they know or should know about, and investigate all allegations of bullying and harassment.

Schools have a moral and legal responsibility to protect young people from harassment that they know or reasonably should know about.

Schools that are federally funded are legally required to prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex—including harassment and bullying—by Title IX, a federal civil rights law that has been around since 1972. School districts can be liable under Title IX when sex-based harassment by peers is severe, persistent, or pervasive that it creates a hostile environment for the victim and such harassment is encouraged, tolerated, not adequately addressed, or ignored by school employees.

When it comes to bullying, many states have their own laws regarding schools’ obligations. To find out your state’s policies on bullying, please consult the following resource put together by the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services: <https://www.stopbullying.gov/laws/#listing>.

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MYTH: Sexual harassment has to involve touching or propositioning sexual activity.

FACT: Sexual harassment can take many forms.

Sexual harassment is unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature. It can be verbal acts like name-calling, requests for sexual favors, sexual comments, jokes, gestures, images and graphics, graffiti, and other written statements or actions that may be physically threatening, harmful, or humiliating. For the harassment to be prohibited by Title IX, the federal civil rights law prohibiting sex discrimination in education, it must be “on the basis of sex,” which includes sexual harassment and gender-based harassment. Gender-based harassment is unwelcome conduct based on a student’s failure to conform to gender stereotypes—for example, harassing a girl because she does not act the way her peers think girls should act.

Harassment can include the use of cell phones or the internet (known as “cyberbullying”). It does not matter whether the harasser intends to cause harm and harassment does not necessarily require repeated incidents. Under Title IX, if the harassment is severe, persistent, or pervasive, schools have an obligation to do something about it so that the victim does not have to endure a “hostile learning environment.”

MYTH: If it happens off school grounds, it’s not the school’s responsibility.

FACT: Under Title IX, schools have to address conduct they know or should know about that leads to a hostile environment or impedes a student’s ability to benefit from the educational program.

Some schools question whether they can get involved in cyberbullying that is done “off campus,” from home computers, cell phones, or elsewhere, because of concerns about students’ rights to free speech. However, Title IX requires schools to respond to hostile environments in their education programs caused by sexual harassment, regardless of where—or in what form—the conduct occurs. So, if sexual harassment in the form of off-campus cyberbullying creates a hostile environment for a student, the school would be required to intervene under Title IX and would be constitutionally able to address the harmful conduct without impermissibly violating its students’ rights to free speech.

MYTH: Bullies are “problem kids” who have aggression issues and should be punished.

FACT: Actually, it is quite common for those who bully to be victims themselves.

It is important to remember that those who bully are acting that way for a reason, and they, too, need help and guidance. Bullies may not have healthy social behaviors, empathy, or coping skills. This can lead to a lifetime of relationship problems and even problems with the law. Additionally, researchers have found that elementary school bullies are more likely than non-bullies to have witnessed domestic violence during their preschool years.

There is no one simple approach to combatting bullying and harassment, and “zero tolerance” discipline policies are not the answer. School personnel, parents, and community leaders need training on how to identify the symptoms of trauma so that young people can get the mental health resources they need to heal instead of just getting kicked out of the learning environment.

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MYTH: Bullying will only stop if the victim stands up to the bully.

FACT: Just as society does not expect victims of other types of abuse to “deal with it on their own,” we should not expect this from victims of bullying or harassment.

It is important to remember that bullying and harassment are forms of victimization or peer abuse. There are many situations in which the victim cannot simply stand up to the harasser and end the problem. The very nature of bullying renders victims fearful, frozen and incapable of defending themselves. When multiple individuals are targeting one child, the situation can feel completely overwhelming. When a parent or a teacher tells a child who is being bullied to stop squealing and “fight back,” it can make the situation worse, as those who are unable to fight back may end up feeling blamed for the bullying.

Adults have a critical role and responsibility to stop bullying, as do other children who witness or observe bullying. Bystanders can directly intervene, by discouraging the bully, defending the victim, or redirecting the situation away from the bully. Other bystanders can get help, by rallying support from peers to stand up against bullying, or by reporting the bullying to an adult.

Potential Discussion Questions:

- Have you noticed a difference between bullying patterns among boys and girls?
- Why do you think kids might bully others when they, themselves, were once bullied? How might this pattern be interrupted?
- Has anyone ever responded, when you complained about bullying behaviors, that it’s just “boys being boys” or “girls being girls”? How did that make you feel? What would be a good response to that?
- Have you ever been in a position where you were too scared to step up and challenge a bully? How did you feel afterward?
- Only about 20 to 30% of students who are bullied report what happened to an adult. Why do you think this is?
- What stereotypes are there about bullies? Do you think these stereotypes are accurate?
- Do you think the adults in your school are aware of the bullying that occurs?
- Is there an adult at school who you would feel comfortable telling about bullying?
- You see a friend getting repeated messages on social media calling her offensive names. What should you do?

Resources:

- [Nine Fast Facts About Sexual Assault and Title IX](#)
- [Title IX Protections for LGBT Students](#)
- [Cyberbullying and Title IX](#)
- [Title IX Frequently Asked Questions for Students](#)
- [Policies and Laws](#)