

# SCHOOL BULLYING, AN INCLUSIVE DEFINITION



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### **In 2020, UNESCO and the French Minister of Education, Youth, and Sports convened a Scientific Committee to prepare recommendation on preventing and addressing school bullying and cyberbullying, that were presented during an International Conference on School Bullying in November 2020.**

These Recommendations by the Scientific Committee on preventing and addressing school bullying and cyberbullying included a series of suggestions on how to revise the commonly used definition of bullying and adopt a more inclusive definition of school bullying that would reflect the growth of understanding in bullying prevention and intervention, and help researchers, practitioners, and policy makers to develop more comprehensive and targeted initiatives to tackle bullying in all of its forms.

Specifically, an inclusive definition of bullying can be developed by moving beyond the specifics of individual behaviour to bring greater awareness of the way that aggressive acts are normalised and reinforced within a social context supported by societal structures and norms.

As such it was recommended that a revised definition should reflect a 'whole-education' approach to bullying and that the definition should make clear that:

- Bullying and cyberbullying involve power imbalances and occur within a given network of school and community relationships, and is enabled or inhibited by the social and institutional context of schools and the education system.
- Bullying and cyberbullying are relational phenomena that occur within a network of people.
- Bullying and cyberbullying often imply an absence of effective or positive responses and care towards targets by peers and/or adults.
- Bullying and cyberbullying often cause emotional, social, and/or physical harm.
- Repetition is not only linked to the number of times that incidents of bullying and cyberbullying occur, but it also relates to the effect on the target who may fear that a once-off event might be repeated or re-shared online.
- Not all perpetrators of bullying act intentionally. Students involved in bullying may do it because of group dynamics rather than because they want to harm the student who is targeted.

After these recommendations, in 2021, UNESCO and the World Anti-Bullying Forum (WABF) decided to partner and created a Working Group to propose a revised definition of school bullying (including cyberbullying), building on the recommendations made by the Scientific Committee convened by UNESCO in 2020. An initial proposed definition was presented at the World Anti-Bullying Forum in Stockholm in October 2021, and delegates were invited to provide feedback on the proposal to the Working Group.

Subsequently, UNESCO and WABF expanded the membership of the Working Group and invited the UNESCO Chair on Bullying and Cyberbullying at Dublin City University, to engaged members in a process of further development on the definition which considered feedback on the initial revision.

The expanded working group was composed of:

- **James O'Higgins Norman** (Chair),  
Dublin City University
- **Christian Berger**,  
Pontificia Universidad Catolica de Chile, Chile
- **Donna Cross**, Telethon Kids Institute, Australia
- **Elizabeth Payne**,  
Queering Education Research Institute USA
- **Dorte Marie Søndergaard**,  
Aarhus University, Denmark
- **Shoko Yoneyama**,  
University of Adelaide, Australia
- **Christopher Donoghue**,  
Montclair State University, USA
- **Dorothy Espelage**,  
University of North Carolina, USA
- **Peter Smith**, Goldsmiths College, UK
- **Izabela Zych**, University of Cordoba, Spain
- **Yong Feng Liu**, UNESCO, France
- **Claudia Cappa**, UNICEF, Italy
- **Magnus Loftsson**, FRIENDS, Sweden
- **Frida Warg**, FRIENDS Sweden

In June 2023, the Working Group, meeting at UNESCO in Paris, agreed a final revised definition of school bullying. This document presents the revised definition of school bullying, based on the recommendations made by the Working Group convened by UNESCO and WABF in 2021 and expanded in 2022. The new definition was presented to delegates at the World Anti-Bullying Forum when it met in Raleigh, North Carolina in October 2023. The document explains what is different in the proposed new definition and why, and it describes some of the implications of using this new definition for bullying prevention policies and programmes.

It is hoped that this revised definition of school bullying will contribute to opening a new chapter in the global conversation on the nature of bullying and cyberbullying and how best to respond to these phenomena.

### The Established Definition

**School Bullying is unwanted aggressive behaviour that is repeated over time and involves an imbalance of power or strength.**

### The Inclusive Definition

**School bullying is a damaging social process that is characterized by an imbalance of power driven by social (societal) and institutional norms. It is often repeated and manifests as unwanted interpersonal behaviour among students or school personnel that causes physical, social, and emotional harm to the targeted individuals or groups, and the wider school community.**

The new definition moves away from a focus on individual or group behaviour exclusively and stresses that school bullying is a behaviour that always occurs within a given social network of school and community relationships. This approach to bullying means that power imbalances between those who bully, and their targets are linked to their social network and to norms that structure relationships in that network. Power imbalances that characterize bullying are therefore enabled or inhibited by both:

- The institutional and social context of schools and the whole education system - including teachers, principals, other school staff, peers, parents.
- Society more broadly, including in many cases social norms that produce and maintain bullying behaviours, particularly in terms of social hierarchies and social exclusion.

The core elements of the definition are further described below:

### **Damaging Social Process**

In school contexts, the formal community of learning integrates with the informal social belonging among students. Students are formed in and by the contexts and norms they encounter as conditions for their recognition and integration.

It has a formative effect on student relationships and behavior, if the norms of a social group, a school community and/ or a wider societal context demand hierarchical behavior and contempt produced as part of setting group boundaries. It also has a formative effect on relationships and behavior, when norms, whether societal or locally situated demand physical or psychological violence in return for recognition and acceptance from peers and potentially also adults in school. Bullying occurs from within such conditions.

### **Imbalance of Power Driven by Societal and Institutional norms**

The imbalance of power between a bully and a victim is often depicted as one of individual physical strength, with the bully aggressing against a victim much weaker by comparison.

The new definition acknowledges bullying behaviors as social acts, relying on and reinforcing norms that maintain the boundaries of belonging and exclusion and calling attention to the oppressive and institutional nature of systemic biases (e.g., ableism, heteronormativity and cisnormativity, etc.), which also foster conditions of power imbalance.

### Repeated

“Bullying takes the form of a systematic pattern of behaviour enacted by individuals or groups in a school community”. The behaviour may be repeated over time but not necessarily by the same persons or via the exact same kinds of action. However, single offline incidents of intentional negative behaviour involving an imbalance of power are not necessarily considered bullying but must still be addressed under the school’s code of behaviour.

Posting a single harmful message/image/video online which is highly likely to be reposted or shared with others can however be seen as bullying behaviour.

### Unwanted Interpersonal Behaviour

Bullying manifests as unwelcome behaviour between individuals and/or groups that causes harm to others. Often the child or young person displaying bullying behaviour knows that their behaviour is or will be perceived as harmful by the child or young person experiencing the behaviour. Sometimes the child or young person simply act within the frames and norms available and out of loyalty to the group, they belong to or aspire to belong to. The harm can be physical, social, and/or emotional and can have a serious and long-term negative impact on the child or young person experiencing the bullying behaviour.

The above definition and component explanations is intended to support researchers, policy makers and practitioners in addressing bullying behaviour in its entirety. This definition moves beyond individual behaviours to consider underlying social processes and norms that operate at a contextual and societal level and influence how students and staff in schools relate to each other. However, this definition is not meant to be complete or prescriptive. It is important that we consider bullying as it continues to evolve and our understanding of the phenomenon grows in depth and scope. Furthermore, it is our hope that this inclusive definition will provide a platform for the development of new methods of research and intervention that will support a deeper understanding of bullying behaviour on an individual, contextual, and societal level.

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