



## Preventing the bullying of foster children in our schools

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines the difficulties that the foster care child has with bullying in school, and it asks the question, “What is currently known about the bullying of foster children?” Furthermore, this article examines what the research believes can be done to solve these problems and improve the chances that a foster child will not be bullied in school. It asks and answers the questions, “What can schools do to help eliminate the bullying of foster children?” and “What can be concluded about how schools can help foster children improve their overall success in school?”

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### 1. Introduction

Anthony is a sixteen year old student who has been in foster care since he was twelve years old. He is now in the tenth grade and for the past three years he has been attending school in Brooklyn, New York, as a student in the New York City schools.

In September, at the beginning of tenth grade, Anthony was placed in a new foster home in a suburban school district in Long Island, New York. On his first day in school, Anthony was sitting in the school cafeteria during his lunch period. While eating, he was verbally harassed by a group of boys. One of the boys in the group, the leader, was well-known as a bully by the teachers and administrators at the school. The boys did not leave Anthony alone. They called Anthony names and made comments about his appearance. They also threatened to beat him up after school and even brushed up against him several times to try to instigate a fight.

At the end of the lunch period, Anthony got out of his seat and proceeded to leave the cafeteria. The boys did not let him leave and blocked his pathway out of the cafeteria. Anthony felt threatened and felt that it was necessary to protect himself from harm. He proceeded to hit the group leader several times on the face and body. The fight caused a disturbance and it attracted a crowd of watching students. Several teachers and administrators broke up the fight and took Anthony and the group of other boys to the Principal's office.

Anthony and the group leader received a five day out of school suspension. The other boys received a three day suspension for instigating

the fight. The boys were warned to stay away from each other outside of school during their suspension. During the five day suspension, however, Anthony received harassing telephone calls from the other boys, and on at least three occasions was followed by the leader and his friends when he went grocery shopping with his foster mother.

The situation outside of school got so bad that Anthony confronted the leader and his gang at a local park. A fight took place and the police were called in to break up the disturbance. The police proceeded to notify school officials and both Anthony and the gang leader were advised by the Superintendent that they would be required to attend a Superintendent's Hearing to determine further punishment outside of school.

At the Superintendent's Hearing, Anthony was advised that he would be suspended for the remainder of the quarter, about two months, and would receive home instruction. The hearing officer also told Anthony that he would be readmitted to school at the conclusion of the suspension. So, he never attended more than one day at his new high school. He received home instruction for the remainder of the school year and was placed the following year in an Alternate High School program in a neighboring school district. The gang leader also received home instruction; however, he was permitted to reenter the high school the next school year.

Anthony's situation is not unlike those experienced by many other foster children. They are the new kids in school with no friends, no support system, and a distrust of teachers and other school officials. They generally live in what they often think is a temporary home and have no permanent roots in the community. Many foster children believe that returning to school is a terror.

This study examines the difficulties that the foster care child has with bullying in school, and it asks the question, “What is currently

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known about the bullying of foster children?" Furthermore, this article examines what the research believes can be done to solve these problems and improve the chances that a foster child will not be bullied in school. It asks and answers the questions, "What can schools do to help eliminate the bullying of foster children?" and "What can be concluded about how schools can help foster children improve their overall success in school?"

According to the [Michigan Childhood Welfare Training Institute \(2011\)](#), more than 150,000 children miss school every day because they are afraid of being bullied. In addition, more than half of all schoolchildren, in general, have witnessed a bullying incident, and three of every four students say bullying is a problem at their school. The authors point out that a child has a 50–50 chance of being involved with bullying in school, online, or in the community. Furthermore, victims of cyber-bullying, the authors state, are less likely to inform an adult due to fear of consequences, such as losing their cell phone or internet access.

For foster children, the problems associated with bullying are far worse. Foster children may be particularly vulnerable to bullying because of racial differences, differences in family structure, perceived sexual orientation, disabilities, religious differences, and poor self-esteem. In general, schools treat their foster children with less respect and concern than other students in the school. School districts are very territorial and they see foster children as a transplanted problem. There is no sensitivity training for teachers and school administrators and they are slow to recognize the needs of children in care ([Brighton & Hove, 2012](#)).

### 1.1. Definition of bullying

According to Webster's Dictionary ([Webster, 2012](#)), bullying is defined as an act of aggression that can cause embarrassment, pain or discomfort to another person. It can take many forms: physical, verbal, gestural, or as instances of extortion and exclusion. It is an abuse of power. Bullies, the definition states, engage in aggressive behavior which appears as abusive treatment, force, or coercion to affect others — particularly when habitual and involving an imbalance of power. [Ericson \(2001\)](#) maintains that the act of bullying may involve verbal harassment, physical assault, or coercion and may be directed persistently toward particular victims, perhaps on grounds of race, religion, gender, sexuality, or ability. The "imbalance of power," the Department of Justice says, may be social power and/or physical power. The victim of bullying is sometimes referred to as a "target."

According to [Dougherty and Wolff \(2011\)](#), bullies are present in every school and community. The authors maintain that every child must deal with bullying and teasing from some standpoint either as the bully, the victim, or both, or the bystander who see a bullying incident. For children involved in the child welfare system, [Dougherty and Wolff \(2011\)](#) state, bullying and teasing may be not only a more prevalent, constant, and serious problem, but they may have fewer supports available to help them deal with these issues.

The definition of bullying is very unclear, as no single definition covers all aspects of bullying ([Aluedse, 2006](#)). It has been called a headstrong, conscious desire to hurt another or put him/her under stress. This stress is created not only by what actually happens, but also by fear of what might happen. However, bullying is not the same as harassment or assault. It tends to involve many incidents that accumulate over time, rather than a single or a few incidents ([Aluedse, 2006](#)).

Bullying can be as direct as teasing, hitting or threatening, or as indirect as exclusion, rumors or manipulations ([Garrett, 2003](#)). According to the [Cambridgeshire County Council \(2011\)](#) bullying may take various forms, including:

- Physical — e.g. kicking, hitting, pushing, intimidating behavior or interference with personal property

- Verbal/psychological — e.g. threats, taunts, shunning/ostracism, name-calling/verbal abuse or spreading of rumors
- Racist bullying — e.g. physical, verbal, written, on-line or text abuse or ridicule based on differences of race, color, ethnicity, nationality, culture or language
- Faith-based bullying — e.g. negative stereotyping, name-calling or ridiculing based on religion
- Sexist bullying — e.g. use of sexist language or negative stereotyping based on gender
- Sexual bullying — e.g. unwanted/inappropriate physical contact or sexual innuendo
- Homophobic bullying — e.g. name-calling, innuendo or negative stereotyping based on sexual orientation or use of homophobic language
- Disability bullying — e.g. name-calling, innuendo, negative stereotyping or excluding from activity based on disability or learning difficulties
- Gifted/talented bullying — e.g. name-calling, innuendo, ostracism or negative peer pressure based on high levels of ability or effort
- Cyber bullying — e.g. abuse on-line or via text message, interfering with electronic files, setting up or promoting inappropriate websites, and inappropriate sharing of images from webcams/mobile phones

Some examples of bullying include ([Cambridgeshire County Council, 2011](#)):

- Any form of physical violence, such as, hitting, pushing or spitting on others;
- Interfering with another's property by stealing, hiding, damaging or destroying it;
- Using offensive names, texting or spreading rumors about others or their families;
- Using put-downs or belittling others' abilities and achievements;
- Writing offensive notes or graffiti about others;
- Making degrading comments about another's cultural, religious or social background.

While bullying is often associated with what happens either with-in or on the way to and from school, professionals also need to consider the likelihood of bullying within the home, (between foster children or between the younger members of the family and foster children) or within the neighborhood/community, and about how foster children might respond.

Professionals also need to be aware of how technology can provide new and different opportunities for children to bully or be bullied by the use of malicious e-mails, chat, instant messaging or texting with mobile phones.

### 1.2. What is currently known about the bullying of foster children?

The problems associated with bullying of foster children are frequent and often very disturbing. According to the [American Bar Association \(2011\)](#) virtually all lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender children in group homes had reported verbal harassment; 70% had been subjected to violence; and 78% had either run away or been removed from a foster placement for reasons related to their sexuality. Dr. Gerald Mallon (2011) says, "They are the one population thrown out of their home because of who they are."

Typically, foster children have no continuity of educational experience. These children typically attend several schools before they graduate, and often move during the school year. Their education is frequently interrupted by these changes because they often move when classes are in session. They also have no consistency in the development of their educational plan of study because they see several guidance counselors, who, for the most part, will be unfamiliar with the foster child's social history, background and ability. Foster children also frequently experience breaks in their direct instruction,

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