



Communities
In Schools®

Chicago

BULLYING BRIEF 2024

Informed perspectives on a *timely and timeless issue* and the three steps you can take this school year to create spaces where young people thrive.

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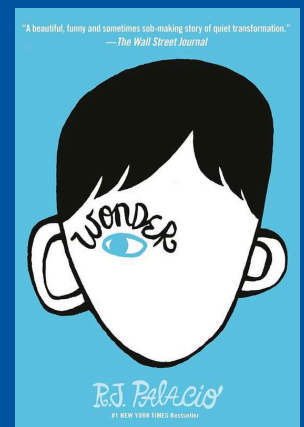
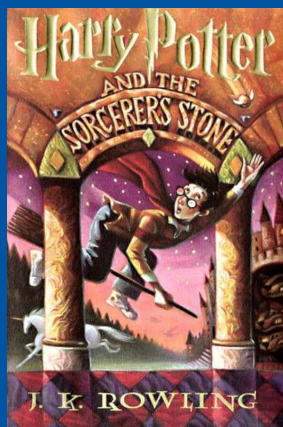
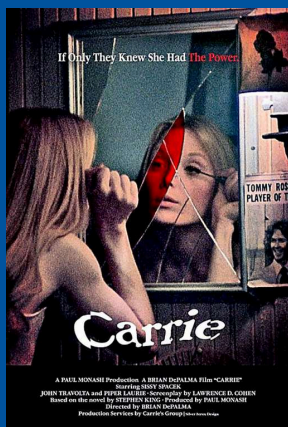
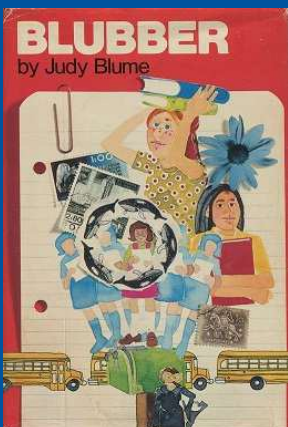
Pop culture is filled with images of the bully and the bullied.

50 years ago, Judy Blume's *Blubber* showcased elementary school bullying – and just how fickle those dynamics can be. Stephen King's *Carrie* took a sci-fi spin on the horrors of in-school harassment.

A generation ago, the *Harry Potter* series made an orphaned, bullied boy its protagonist and hero. *Mean Girls* created a comedy out of teenage social cliques. And more recently, *Wonder* examined the effects of identity-based bullying for a young student with a facial deformity.

For some, these stories provide a window into what it's like to be ostracized and harassed as a young person. For some, these stories offer a sense of release for the viewer – a world where the bullied gets their revenge. At the same time, these stories can be very narrow windows of the youth experience.

Watching these movies or reading these books nowadays is like traveling back in time, to an era where insults were hurled and punches were thrown directly at your face. They don't capture, however, what it's like to be a young person today.



We've all seen the headlines.

Youth mental health crisis is overwhelming ERs

US Surgeon General calls for warning labels on social media amid mental health 'emergency'

The youth mental health crisis needs urgent care. What will it take?

The Youth Mental Health Crisis Worsens amid a Shortage of Professional Help Providers

Global Issues Are Taking a Major Toll on Young People's Mental Health

These headlines tell a clear and worrisome tale about the state of youth in America.

One issue contributing to the nationwide mental health crisis is bullying. It is just as prevalent and detrimental as it was a generation ago, but it doesn't look the same as it used to.

According to the Anti-Bullying Alliance, bullying is the repetitive, intentional hurting of one person or group, where the relationship involves an imbalance of power.

The Center for Disease Control's Youth Risk Behavior Survey, administered during the pandemic, found that 42 percent of high school students "felt so sad or hopeless almost every day for at least two weeks in a row that they stopped doing their usual activities."

The survey also found that 16 percent of high school students were electronically bullied during the preceding year. This means they were harassed by a person or group of people through texting, Instagram, Facebook, or other form of social media. Female students and LGBTQ+ students were more likely to be electronically bullied.

The negative effects found from social media use prompted the U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy to issue an advisory on Social Media and Youth Mental Health in 2023. Then this year, Dr. Murthy went further, calling for a warning label on social media platforms associating social media use with significant mental health harms for adolescents.



These national statistics paint a grim picture, and they echo what our team at Communities In Schools (CIS) of Chicago is seeing in our local communities.

When CIS' team asks principals and guidance counselors each year what types of resources and support their students, teachers, and families would most benefit from, they ask for help with bullying more than anything else.



We wanted to hear directly from individuals on the ground at our schools why bullying prevention is such a high priority, as well as what's driving the behaviors and impacting their efforts to reduce the problem.

So we asked Chicago's school counselors, community organizations, and our own school-based CIS team members to give us their take on the issue.



“Hurt people *hurt* people.”

For nearly a decade, Mr. W.* has worked in public schools on the South Side of Chicago, supporting students with their attendance and creating a culture where they feel welcomed and accepted.

During his tenure, Mr. W. has seen many negative behaviors labeled as bullying, but he’s always quick to question – is this really bullying? Or is it actually peer conflict?

For Mr. W., peer conflict is pervasive. Young people are continually experiencing disagreements and disputes, and they need to develop the skills to manage these situations.

Some disagreements come with the territory – for example, adolescents navigating friendships and relationships as they simultaneously try to understand themselves or kids getting into an argument on the playground during recess.

Bullying, in Mr. W.’s opinion, is more persistent than those examples, and it can include everything from aggressive actions to verbal threats and harassment.

Students are smart, Mr. W. said. They know that physical fights lead to immediate consequences. But other forms of aggression are not so obvious. The real concern for him and his colleagues is that cellphones provide a one-stop-shop for aggressors.

**Names of interviewees are blurred throughout to protect school and student privacy.*



Name-calling, threats, mobbing (bullying behavior perpetrated by a group rather than an individual) – all can happen within the confines of a 6" x 4" phone. Even more concerning, it can all happen anonymously. “Cyber[bullying] is the new kid on the block, and he’s massive,” Mr. W. said.

At Mr. W.’s school, fake Instagram and Snapchat accounts provide a way for students to hide their identity – and attack their peers – through one-on-one chats, group threads, or even on fully public accounts, spreading rumors with relentless fervor.

“Hurt people hurt people,” Mr. W. said. Oftentimes, young people are managing personal challenges that cause them to lash out at others around them, to regain some control in their lives, he said.

Mr. W. tells parents to check their child’s social media and make sure that there’s no secret places they can hide online. And he tells his students to hold themselves accountable – to own their opinions from social media accounts in their own names – not from fake ones.

When it comes to bullying and even conflict resolution, Mr. W. believes in students being part of the solution. His mantra is “strive to be in the right place at the right time doing the right thing.”

Chicago Public Schools’ Policy for Addressing Bullying and Bias-Based Behaviors

In Chicago Public Schools’ Student Code of Conduct is a detailed policy that defines how the district prevents bullying, addresses allegations of bullying, and intervenes.

Visit [Chicago Public Schools’ website](#) to see steps outlined for parents and guardians, students, and CPS employees.





“A very US vs. THEM mentality.”

Ms. D. just completed her second year at a West Side elementary school. For her, student conflict has only increased.

Name-calling and body-shaming are common occurrences in the hallways. When one student says something about another student’s family members, a fight often breaks out.

Her school, once majority African American, is now evenly split as community demographics have rapidly shifted. Nearly half of the students are Latinx, including many recent arrivals from Latin America who are still learning English.

This divide in the student population between born-and-raised Chicagoans and students new to the city has created a “very us vs. them mentality,” Ms. D. said. When one student insults another student, the reaction is to fight back. Ms. D. tries to break the cycle of retaliation.

Her work reducing conflict in the school is multi-faceted. She talks with students one-on-one about empathy – imagining what their peers are experiencing and how they would feel if they walked in their shoes. She hosts talking circles with students to teach them the history of discriminatory terms they sometimes use casually. She educates them on the context and implications of the words they use.

Much of the name-calling is learned behavior, Ms. D. said. Using words as weapons without knowing the history behind them.

Ms. D. tries to instill in her students that caring adults in the building, like herself and her fellow teachers, are there to help. If students at her school are being bullied or are struggling with peer conflict, she says they know they can and should reach out for help.

“Kids are the easiest part of my day, every day.”

Ms. P. has been an elementary school counselor for more than 15 years – at three different Chicago public schools on the South, Southwest, and Northwest Sides.

Throughout her time in education, she has experienced dramatic shifts in social norms that have impacted her work; the rise of social media and smartphone use; a global pandemic that shut school doors for more than a year; and increases in students experiencing mental health challenges.

Despite these shifts, Ms. P. says her experience with bullying has remained consistent. At each school she’s worked at, addressing bullying has been a top priority, whether the behaviors are taking place on social media, through online gaming, or in the hallway. According to Ms. P., the biggest change she’s experienced is her partnership with adults.

“Kids behavior hasn’t changed,” she said. “Kids are the easiest part of my day, every single day.” But the adults in our students’ lives are sometimes more guarded, Ms. P. said.

When principals, teachers, and school counselors like Ms. P. can come together to better understand any context for issues happening at home or in school, then they can better collaborate on strategies to address the behaviors – and ultimately, better support the students.





“If we can teach students how to resolve conflict without harm, we’ve done our job.”

Mr. C. is Chicago through and through. He grew up in Little Village and attended Chicago Public Schools. Nowadays, he’s not only a parent to a Chicago Public Schools student. He supports thousands of young people on the South and West Sides through his role at a peace education organization.

Mr. C.’s organization teaches elementary students how to avoid and resolve conflicts peacefully, and it gives high school students opportunities to become leaders in peace and nonviolence. Through this work, Mr. C. understands the challenges that the city’s young people face, and he’s deeply connected to the communities he serves.

Bullying is a pernicious form of violence, Mr. C. said, that causes emotional, psychological, and sometimes physical harm. What starts out as young people joking with each other or teasing can escalate quickly. “At core, it’s people’s feelings getting hurt,” he said.

Mr. C. works with his colleagues to help students identify these feelings to begin resolving conflicts constructively.

One of the ways Mr. C. models conflict resolution is through skits. The conflict escalation part is easy for young people, he said. They have no trouble acting out instances of threats or bullying. It’s the de-escalating that’s hard. Students have to read their lines for that part of the skit because it doesn’t come as naturally to them.

Conflict and violence are often the norm in communities in which his program operates, Mr. C. said. Mr. C. tries to present students with other options for how to handle interpersonal conflict, rather than to physically fight back. “If we can teach students how to resolve conflict without harm, we’ve done our job,” he said.

Community trauma, increased stress and anxiety from the pandemic, and students re-learning how to engage with their peers and teachers in person all contribute to the increased need for peace education, he said.

On top of those factors, Mr. C. believes that our society has become desensitized to violence. Teaching nonviolent communication, tolerance, and peacemaking is critical to breaking the cycle of violence, he said. We can't accept the status quo.

“The time to fix the roof is when the sun is shining.”

For three years, Ms. D. served as an assistant education director, where she supported public schools with creating positive cultures and climates. The program she guided teaches students how to have intentional conversations about identity and empowers them to become agents of change in their school buildings.

In Ms. D's experience, the need for schools to address culture and climate has only increased post-pandemic. Harmful words shared by students online trickle over to the classroom.

Moreover, she said, instances of identity-based bullying among young people are on the rise. This could be verbal slurs and physical threats directed at their peers based on their racial, ethnic, or religious background, sexual orientation, gender, immigration status, and more.

If you view hate as a pyramid, Ms. D. said, with biased thoughts as the base, you can see how thoughts and attitudes escalate to biased acts (like bullying) and even more extreme forms of violent behavior.

Ms. D.'s work in anti-bias education centers around interrupting the biases at the base level before they manifest into action. “The time to fix the roof is when the sun is shining,” Ms. D. said. The program also provides bias incident response training for school staff so they can serve as allies for students – and not label them as a “bully” or a “victim.” “You're talking about the behavior,” Ms. D. said, “not the person.”



“Fake Instagram accounts have become a big problem. They spread like wildfire.”

Ms. K. provides individual and group support to students at a high school on the Southwest Side. At her high school, it can be easy for students to get lost in the shuffle – disconnected from their classroom and after-school activities.

That’s why Ms. K. focuses on being a connector at her school. She is someone the students can turn to when they are struggling and someone who can link them with programs and resources like sports clubs and student groups that provide extra reasons for them to come to school each day.

One challenge that undercuts Ms. K.’s efforts to build a strong, positive community, though, is the rise of fake social media accounts. Even as she tries to create cohesion among the students and teachers, these accounts sow division and distrust. The fake accounts post disparaging rumors about students and teachers to swathes of followers – and more discouraging, the people who post remain anonymous.

“Fake Instagram accounts have become a big problem,” Ms. K. said. “They spread like wildfire, and no one knows who’s running them.” At a team meeting last year, Ms. K. and her counseling colleagues at the school all took out their phones to report a new fake account to Instagram that was targeting some students. But when one account gets taken down, another account is often created to fill the void, she said.

Kids don’t always understand what they’re doing is bullying, Ms. K. said. They feel emboldened to tear each other down because they feel like their actions are justified, like one perceived slight against them gives them free rein to pass judgment in a public forum.

Ms. K.’s anti-bullying work goes beyond reporting fake social media accounts. It’s about building positive relationships with students, one-on-one, to understand the challenges they’re facing. It’s about helping them understand their digital footprint and how their actions can sometimes lead to negative, unintended consequences. And, above all, it’s about connecting them with a supportive community.

“The importance of community.”

At the beginning of last school year, Mr. A. convened student leaders from across grade levels at his Northwest Side elementary school. His goal? Empower the young people to create positive change in the school building.

He had noticed a stark need at his school to build a stronger sense of community. Most of his students didn't live in the immediate neighborhood. That meant they not only commuted each day to class, but they also hadn't created deep connections with their peers. In response, Mr. A. put the young people in the driver's seat.

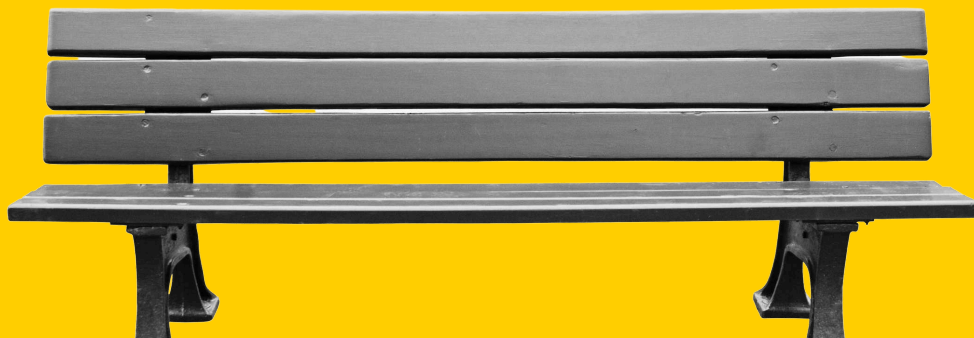
He launched a student-led school climate improvement program designed by a Communities In Schools of Chicago community partner.

At Mr. A.'s school, identity-based bullying had increased, and so had conflicts on TikTok and Instagram. His students acted. They coordinated a kindness mail initiative, placing a mailbox in each class and encouraging young people to leave each other words of kindness.

They also hosted an identity-based bullying training for fourth and fifth graders where students reflected on their own identities and explored personal biases. “Talking about identity can be difficult,” Mr. A. said, “but everyone was respectful.”

His vision for this year is to train the students in peer mediation so they can help facilitate conflict resolution among their peers – and stem conflicts from snowballing into instances of bullying or harassment.

Mr. A. also wants to create a ‘buddy bench’ at his school's recess area where a student can come sit if they are feeling scared, sad, or lonely and a student leader would come sit next to them, letting them know they are not alone.





“Bullying is not just hitting or being malicious, it’s also the breaking down of character.”

For nearly 25 years, the [Do the Write Thing challenge](#) has empowered Chicago middle-schoolers to examine the impact that youth violence has on their lives through written word and share what they think should be done to reduce violence.

Do the Write Thing is a national program, active in 27 communities across the country. Each year, student ambassadors are selected to represent their communities at a Summit in Washington, D.C.

In 2024, the most prevalent theme of student ambassador essays, including the Chicago student ambassador, was cyberbullying.

“Bullying is not just hitting or being malicious, it’s also the breaking down of character,” the Chicago student wrote. “People I see getting bullied are the ones who don’t fit the norm, people who are overweight, insecure, and people facing traumatic experiences.”

“These are the people who are picked on, and the ones who usually commit the most violent acts... It is important to understand that not all children are the root of the problem, but a product of their environments.”

At the summit, the student was able to share her change ideas with state legislators and have her voice be heard on the national scale.





HOW DID WE GET HERE?

Bullying is an age-old issue, but how it manifests itself has changed over the last quarter century. Let's look at some key, recent events that have created breeding grounds for cyberbullying to thrive.

1999

Columbine shooting makes school safety paramount – and highlights concern for extreme violence from bullying.

Early reports after the massacre at Columbine High School cited bullying as the primary cause (although those reports were later debunked), but the shooting forever changed schools' focus on school safety. A 2001 U.S. Secret Service report of school attacks found that attackers frequently have a sense of personal grievance or a perception of bullying and social isolation. State and federal reviews recommended schools create threat assessment teams and practice regular safety drills.

2002

Federal No Child Left Behind Law puts increased focus on academic achievement, leaving little time for social and emotional development.

To decrease the achievement gap and ensure that American students could compete with young people on an international scale, the No Child Left Behind law mandated standardized testing in reading and math in grades 3 through 8, forcing many schools to spend less time on other subjects like social studies and the arts – and less time in unstructured social spaces like recess.

**In December 2015, NCLB was replaced by the Every Student Succeeds Act, which focused on less federal involvement in K-12 education.*

2004

Cell phone policies are relaxed in schools.

With the decrease in cell phone prices and increase in 'family plans,' more and more youth acquired cell phones. After school shootings and acts of terrorism, including the September 11 attacks, parents argued that cell phones provided a way to communicate with their children throughout the day.

2010

Schools start integrating cell phones into their curriculum for learning purposes.

Under the premise that students needed to be prepared for 21st century work – which focused on technology – many districts started allowing cell phone use during classroom learning.

2020

The pandemic shuts school doors and moves instruction to remote learning.

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic closed schools across the country, with the majority of districts moving instruction online. For students, this meant an increase in technology use, compounded by stress, fear, and isolation from the pandemic.

2023

Hate and harassment in online gaming becomes the norm for young gamers.

Despite increased pressure on major gaming companies to curb hate and harassment, surveys of the U.S. gamer population found that three out of four young people experience harassment when playing video games. Moreover, identity-based harassment of 10- to 17-year-olds in online games increased to 37 percent in 2023, compared with 29 percent in 2022.

2024

States and districts begin to reevaluate cell phones in the classroom.

With ongoing concerns about the effects of cell phone use on young people's mental health, districts are now looking at policies that ban or limit phone use. California's Governor Newsom called for a statewide ban, and Indiana and Florida have passed bipartisan legislation. Illinois has not, and Chicago Public Schools leaves it up to individual campuses to create their own policies. Many schools, though, are considering stricter measures.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

What once involved fights in the hallway or name-calling on the playground is now more subtle and pervasive. Chats through popular video games, group texts, and direct messages on social media can all be sites for harassment and exclusion.

Bullying is a complex, multi-dimensional issue in 2024, one that requires complex, multi-dimensional strategies to address.

The counselors, community organizations, and support staff we spoke with agreed that when instances of bullying occur, **it's crucial to provide students with a safe person they can speak with and a safe place they can go.**

This type of care is built on trusting relationships with students and with their families, and it can address the underlying issues contributing to the behavior.

They also agreed, though, that **the strategies to address bullying must begin before any expression of bullying arises.** These include:

- Teaching young people about impulse control, accountability, and empathy.
- Modeling the skills to resolve conflicts peacefully.
- Creating safe environments to practice positive behaviors and build healthy relationships.
- Educating young people on digital literacy, online safety and responsibility, and the effects that extended technology use can have on their mental health.

RESOURCES

- [Addressing Bullying and Bias-Based Behaviors](#), Chicago Public Schools
- [What Parents Should Know About Bullying](#), PACER's National Bullying Prevention Center
- [Get Help Now](#), StopBullying.gov
- Recent young adult and children's books that address bullying:
 - *New Kid* by Jerry Craft
 - *Felix Ever After* by Kacen Callender
 - *Zara Hossain Is Here* by Sabina Khan
 - *Each Kindness* by Jacqueline Woodson
 - *Count Me In* by Varsha Bajaj

Our team at Communities In Schools of Chicago invites you to engage in three concrete actions we believe support young people.

Sign up for CIS' Youth Mental Health First Aid course.

Youth Mental Health First Aid is a training that gives participants the skills to recognize and respond to a young person experiencing a mental health challenge. Attendees learn to “say something” when they “see something,” along with a five-step action plan, so they can help intervene in times of crisis and create safety nets around young people. Communities In Schools of Chicago encourages any caring adult to [sign up for the training here](#).

Create phone-free zones or times with your family, and support phone-free schools.

As the Surgeon General outlined in his report, social media may have some benefits for youth, but it can also have a profound risk of harm to youth mental health. Setting aside phone-free times at home and encouraging the young people in your life to be phone-free during their learning has strong benefits for their academic growth, as well as their social and emotional development.

Model healthy behavior for the young people in your life.

Modeling healthy behavior and positive relationships with your friends, co-workers, family members, and acquaintances can demonstrate how important it is for young people to adopt the same habits. They will be better able to navigate interpersonal challenges, avoid bullying behavior, and know how to support their peers through difficult situations.

These three opportunities allow us to create environments where cyberbullying is thwarted and where young people can thrive, without fear or threat of bullying and harassment, in person or online.