

Dan Olweus, the world renowned Swedish psychology professor and one of the world's leading experts on bullies and their victims, defines bullying as an accumulation of negative actions, occurring repeatedly and over time, directed toward one student by another student or students. Those negative actions, which can include threats, physical attacks, words, gestures, or social exclusion, occur in a context always characterized by an imbalance in strength between the bully and the victim.

According to Olweus, who has been studying those characteristics for 30 years, much of what we have always believed about bullying is wrong. Consequently many of our techniques for dealing with bullies and their victims have simply made the problem worse. Research indicates that bullies are not cowardly misfits with low self-esteem. Their victims are rarely chosen because of the colour of their hair or skin or the shape of their glasses. Most importantly, perhaps, Olweus contends bullying is not a problem that will go away without adult intervention.

Following are ten myths about bullying that Olweus has identified through his research:

1. **MYTH: Bullies suffer from insecurity and low self-esteem. They pick on others to make themselves feel more important.**

RESEARCH: Most bullies have average or above-average self-esteem. They "suffer" from aggressive temperaments, a lack of empathy, and poor parenting.

2. **MYTH: Bullies are looking for attention. Ignore them and the bullying will stop.**

RESEARCH: Bullies are looking for control, and they rarely stop if their behaviour is ignored. The level of bullying usually increases if the bullying is not addressed by adults.

3. **MYTH: Boys will be boys.**

RESEARCH: Bullying is seldom outgrown; it's simply redirected. About 60 percent of boys identified as bullies in middle school commit at least one crime by the time they are 24.

4. **MYTH: Kids can be cruel about differences.**

RESEARCH: Physical differences play only a very small role in bullying situations. Most victims are chosen because they are sensitive, anxious, and unable to retaliate.

5. **MYTH: Victims of bullies need to learn to stand up for themselves and deal with the situation.**

RESEARCH: Victims of bullies are usually younger or physically weaker than their attackers. They also lack the social skills to develop supportive friendships. They cannot deal with the situation themselves.

6. **MYTH: Large schools or classes are conducive to bullying.**

RESEARCH: No correlation has been established between class or school size and bullying. In fact, there is some evidence that bullying may be less prevalent in larger schools where potential victims have increased opportunities for finding supportive friends.

## 7. MYTH: Most bullying occurs off school grounds.

RESEARCH: Although some bullying occurs outside of school or on the way to and from school, most occurs on school grounds: in classrooms, in hallways, and on playgrounds.

## 8. MYTH: Bullying affects only a small number of students.

RESEARCH: At any given time, about 25 percent of U.S. students are the victims of bullies and about 20 percent are engaged in bullying behaviour. The National Association of School Psychologists estimates that 160,000 children stay home from school every day because they are afraid of being bullied.

Dr. Mona O'Moore's Irish research estimates that some 31% of Primary Students and 16% of Secondary Students have been bullied at some time. In simple terms, if 900,000c. students make up the Irish school going population, approximately 23% or 207,000 children are at risk of suffering the ill effects of bullying.

## 9. MYTH: Teachers know if bullying is a problem in their classes.

RESEARCH: Bullying behaviour usually takes place out of sight of teachers. Most victims are reluctant to report the bullying for fear of embarrassment or retaliation, and most bullies deny or justify their behaviour.

## 10. MYTH: Victims of bullying need to follow the adage "Sticks and stones will break your bones, but names can never hurt you."

RESEARCH: Victims of bullying often suffer lifelong problems with low self-esteem. They are prone to depression, suicide, and other mental health problems throughout their lives.

## TEACHERS ARE A DECIDING FACTOR

Bullies, Olweus notes, are produced in the home, shaped by a combination of factors, including lack of parental warmth and attention, poor supervision, parental modelling of aggressive behaviour, and an active and impulsive temperament on the part of the child. The victims of bullies, however, are most often created at school. "Teachers' attitudes, behaviours, and routines," Olweus said, "play a large role in the prevalence of bullying behaviour." Bullying is a problem that schools can help control.