

This card provides tools for practical questions like:

- What is bullying and cyberbullying?
- What to do when things go wrong?
- How to create a bullying-resistant school culture?

WHAT IS BULLYING AND CYBERBULLYING?

Bullying is repeated, intentional behaviour that causes harm, imbalance of power, and distress. Cyberbullying refers to bullying that occurs through digital platforms.

WHY SHOULD (CYBER)BULLYING CONCERN THE LEADERSHIP?

Bullying is not new, but digital technologies have magnified its reach and impact. A cruel comment that once stayed in the playground can now be shared with hundreds of people in seconds. Photos or videos can be altered and spread widely, resulting in public humiliation that can be long-lasting. For schools, bullying — especially cyberbullying — is one of the most pressing challenges to student safety and wellbeing.

Recent research highlights a critical but often overlooked reality: although peer-to-peer bullying is the most visible form, students are sometimes bullied by teachers or family members. These forms of abuse are often hidden, under-reported, and deeply damaging. School leaders must acknowledge them, create safe reporting systems, and act decisively.

It is, however, essential to have guidelines for all stakeholders that define responsibilities in the event of an accident, as not all cyberbullying incidents fall under the school's jurisdiction, unless they occur on school premises or have offline consequences or precedents within the school.

BULLYING BY TEACHERS: THE “HIDDEN” PROBLEM

It is uncomfortable but necessary to acknowledge that some students are bullied by those entrusted with their care. Teacher bullying online (but also offline) may include humiliating or ridiculing a student publicly, unfairly targeting a student with harsh discipline, making discriminatory or demeaning remarks, or using sarcasm or authority to intimidate rather than to guide.

Why It Is Often Missed

Students may fear retaliation or believe no one will listen. Colleagues may normalise harsh behaviour as “tough teaching.” Parents may hesitate to challenge authority figures.

Leadership Responsibilities

Schools must establish a zero-tolerance policy, as bullying is unacceptable regardless of who perpetrates it. They should provide confidential reporting systems for students and parents, ensure independent investigations of allegations involving staff, and promote a culture where respectful, supportive teacher–student relationships are the norm.

BULLYING BY FAMILY MEMBERS

While schools cannot control home environments, they must recognise when students are experiencing bullying from parents, siblings, or other carers. Family bullying may include constant criticism or belittling of the child, digital surveillance or shaming via social media, or sibling harassment that is tolerated or even encouraged by parents.

Signs Teachers and Leaders May Notice

A student may appear consistently anxious or withdrawn after weekends, have physical symptoms such as headaches or abdominal pains, show sudden reluctance

to use digital devices, or provide evidence that family members are sharing embarrassing content online.

Leadership Role

School leaders should have staff trained to recognise warning signs, provide safe and confidential ways for students to disclose concerns, and work with safeguarding services to support the child and, where necessary, intervene.

PEER BULLYING

While less frequent than public narratives sometimes suggest, and happens less often than teacher bullying, peer bullying remains damaging. It can undermine self-esteem, academic progress, and a sense of belonging. Leaders should treat even small incidents seriously to prevent escalation.

SUPPORTING TEACHERS IN HANDLING BULLYING

In most cases, cyberbullying does not happen in school, but the effects may be felt in school. If this happens, teachers and school heads may need to collaborate with parents and the students to tackle it.

Teachers are often the first to hear about bullying but may feel ill-equipped to act, especially if it involves digital evidence. Leaders can empower teachers by:

- Providing clear procedures: Teachers should know exactly how to report and escalate incidents.
- Training on digital evidence: Teachers must understand how to preserve screenshots, messages, or posts appropriately.
- Encouraging empathy-based approaches: Teachers should address both victims and perpetrators with a focus on repair, not just punishment.
- Backing them up: Teachers must feel leadership will support them if they take action, even in sensitive cases involving parents or staff.

SUPPORTING STUDENTS EXPERIENCING BULLYING

School leaders must ensure that students who experience bullying — whether from peers, teachers, or

family members — receive immediate and long-term support. It is also important to remember that bullying is a learned behaviour, so most of the perpetrators are also victims or have been exposed to bullying as onlookers. Thus, the bullies also need to be treated carefully, and leadership action should aim at finding the causes of bullying. Leaders can support students by:

- Safe reporting: Multiple reporting options (digital forms, trusted staff, peer mentors).
- Swift action: Prompt investigation and communication to demonstrate seriousness.
- Counselling and support: Access to pastoral care, mentoring, or external services.
- Restorative practices: Where possible, safe opportunities for resolution and rebuilding trust.

HOW TO CREATE A BULLYING-RESISTANT SCHOOL CULTURE?

Prevention is more effective than crisis management. Leaders should create a school climate where bullying of any form is unacceptable.

Key Steps

- Policy clarity: Ensure bullying policies explicitly include teachers and family contexts.
- Regular training: Refresh all staff annually on recognising and addressing bullying.
- Student voice: Involve students in shaping anti-bullying strategies.
- Parental partnerships: Offer parents collaborative workshops with teachers on digital responsibility and family dynamics.

Visibility of values: Promote respect, empathy, and inclusion in school communications and events

Recommended Resources

DRONE project – school leader handbook

[\[mydroneproject.eu\]](https://mydroneproject.eu)

PARTICIPATE project – new research on cyberbullying

[\[msca-participate.eu\]](https://msca-participate.eu)

SAILS Project Tools – checklists for recognising bullying behaviours.

[\[eshalink.eu/seafarers\]](https://eshalink.eu/seafarers)

[\[eshalink.eu/captain\]](https://eshalink.eu/captain)

