



#WESPEAKUP

Stop Bullying: Speak Up

# IMPROVING COMMUNICATION TO COMBAT BULLYING

## Research in Brief

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Commissioned by Cartoon Network



## OVERVIEW

Nationally, 91% of students and educators and 87% of parents agree that bullying is a problem. This is according to a 2016 Cartoon Network survey of students, parents, and educators, which asked about perceptions of and experiences with bullying and cyberbullying. Fortunately, students, parents, and educators also agree that bullying and cyberbullying can be improved through better communication and collaboration among the three of them.

- Students indicate that they want to talk with their parents about bullying and believe that talking with their parents would help them deal with bullying.
- Likewise, students want to talk with their teachers about bullying and indicate that bullying situations improve when their teachers intervene.
- Parents believe that greater teacher involvement and more communication among parents and teachers would improve bullying at school.
- Educators welcome more parent involvement, and educators from schools with well-implemented bullying prevention programs indicate that communication with parents reduces bullying.

Despite general agreement that communication and coordination is effective at preventing and responding to bullying, students, parents, and educators indicate that there is room for improvement.

- Parents whose children have not been victims or perpetrators of bullying are less likely to believe that bullying or cyberbullying are problems and are less likely to believe that adults need to intervene when bullying occurs.
- Not all educators recognize bullying or how effective they can be in resolving bullying situations.
- School-based bullying prevention programs improve communication and collaboration between parents and teachers, but educators indicate that not all schools have bullying prevention programs and not all bullying prevention programs are well-implemented.
- These findings suggest that educational outreach targeting parents of bystanders and teachers, and assistance to schools around implementing bullying-prevention programs, would help reduce bullying and cyberbullying.



## WHY BULLYING?

In 2009, Cartoon Network conducted a survey of its audience and discovered that 8- to 14-year-old males in the United States ranked bullying and cyberbullying with unemployment, crime, and drug abuse as the “most important things going on in the world.” However, unlike those other issues, the survey indicated that bullying and cyberbullying were issues that the respondents felt they could “help to solve.”<sup>1</sup> In response to this, Cartoon Network conducted more research, convened experts, and eventually launched Stop Bullying: Speak Up!. Stop Bullying: Speak Up! is a “multi-platform campaign, dedicated to raising awareness, building partnerships, and empowering young people to speak up against bullying safely and effectively.”<sup>2</sup> Since its inception, Cartoon Network’s Stop Bullying: Speak Up! campaign has received numerous accolades, been promoted by celebrities and elected officials, including President Barack Obama, and reached millions of children.<sup>3</sup>

In 2016, Cartoon Network contracted with Nielsen to conduct a follow-up survey of its audience. The Stop Bullying: Speak Up! Survey contained questions addressing respondents’ general social concerns as well as respondents’ perceptions of and experiences with bullying and cyberbullying. Nielsen distributed the survey to nationally representative panels of students, parents, and educators.<sup>4</sup>

A total of 300, 8- to 11-year-old children, 300 parents of 8- to 11-year-old children, and 300 professional educators of 3rd to 6th grade students were surveyed. All respondents attend, send their children to, or work at public schools. Data from all three surveys were analyzed by the authors.

## WHAT IS BULLYING?

Bullying is most frequently defined as, “(1) intentional negative behavior that (2) typically occurs with some repetitiveness and is (3) directed against a person who has difficulty defending himself or herself.”<sup>5</sup> Cyberbullying shares all of these characteristics of bullying, but, as its name implies, cyberbullying is “inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices.”<sup>6</sup> The definitions of bullying and cyberbullying continue to evolve, and difficulties defining bullying and cyberbullying and communicating these definitions to children, parents and educators continue to cause problems with bullying research.<sup>7</sup> The 2016 Stop Bullying: Speak Up! Survey did not offer a definition, rather, respondents were left to determine for themselves what constitutes bullying or cyberbullying.

## WHO IS BEING BULLIED?

Two studies track bullying and cyberbullying nationally: the School Crime Supplement to the National Crime Victimization Survey (SCS) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS).

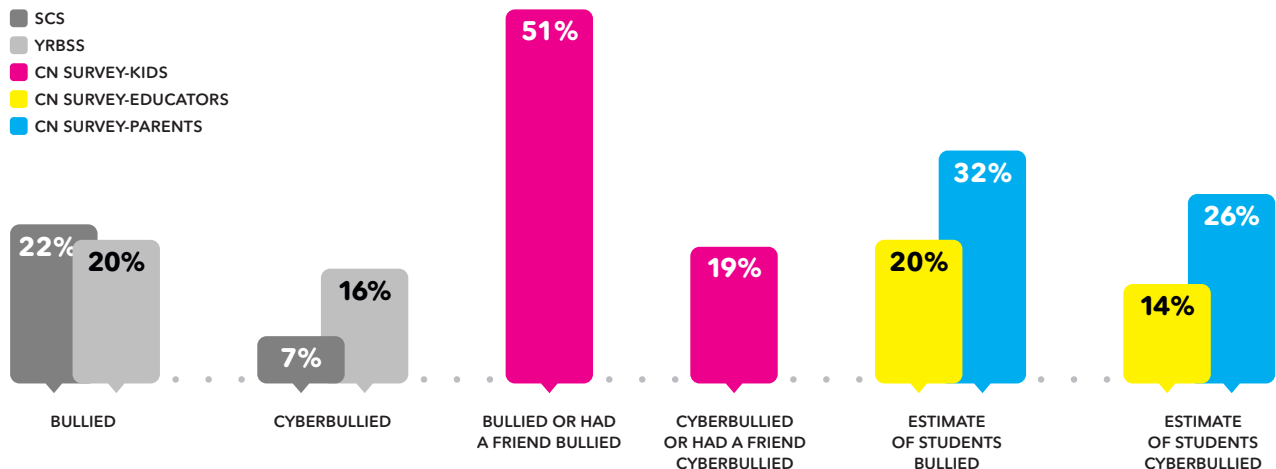
In 2013, the most recent year for which results are available, the SCS found that 22% of students, ages 12-18, in the United States reported being bullied at school during the school year. This percentage is lower than had been reported in 2011 (28%), 2009 (28%), or 2007 (32%). The SCS also found that 7% of students, ages 12-18, reported being cyberbullied anywhere during the school year.<sup>8</sup>

In 2015, the YRBSS found that 20% of 9th through 12th grade students in the United States were bullied on school property during the 12 months before the survey. This percentage has remained relatively constant since the YRBSS started tracking bullying in 2009. The YRBSS also found that 16% of 9th through 12th grade students in the United States were cyberbullied during the 12 months before the survey.<sup>9</sup>

Differences in how the two studies word their survey questions about bullying and cyberbullying are likely responsible for the discrepancies in rates reported by the SCS and the YRBSS.

The 2016 Stop Bullying: Speak Up! Survey found that 51% of students, ages 8-11, had been bullied or had a friend who had been bullied at school by another student, and 19% of students, ages 8-11, had been cyberbullied or had a friend who had been cyberbullied (see Figure 1).

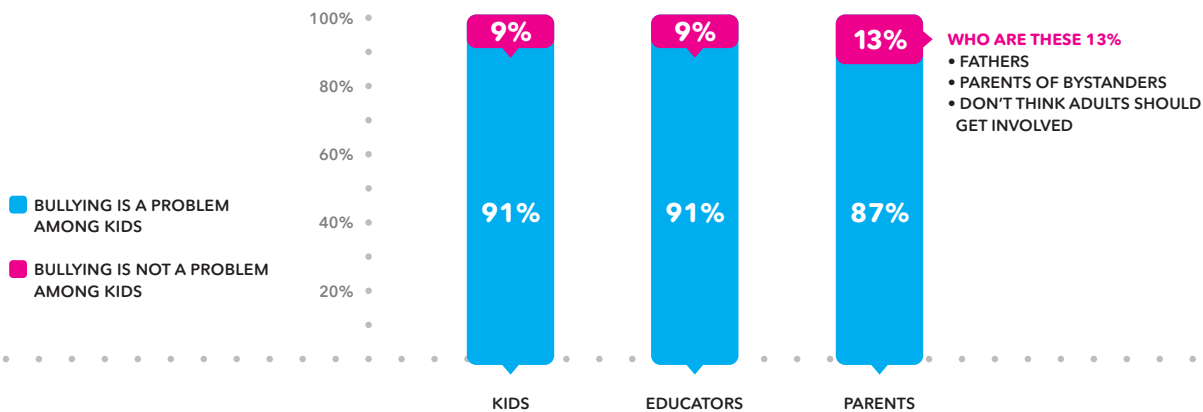
**FIGURE 1: RATES OF BULLYING & CYBERBULLYING**



Despite differences in perceptions of the prevalence of bullying and cyberbullying, 91% of students, 87% of parents, and 91% of educators surveyed in the 2016 Stop Bullying: Speak Up! Survey believe that bullying is “somewhat a problem” or a “very big problem.”

Those 13% of parent respondents who do not think that bullying is a problem are similar to parents who think it is “somewhat a problem” or “very big problem” in many ways (e.g., age, average income, and number of children in their households). However, parents who do not think bullying is a problem tend to be male and tend to be parents of “bystanders,” or children who have not experienced bullying. In addition, parents who do not think that bullying is a problem are less likely to believe that a teacher, a school counselor, a principal or a vice principal, or the parents of the bully needs to get involved when there is bullying at school (see Figure 2).

**FIGURE 2: PERCEPTIONS OF THE BULLYING PROBLEM**



## WHAT WORKS TO COMBAT BULLYING?

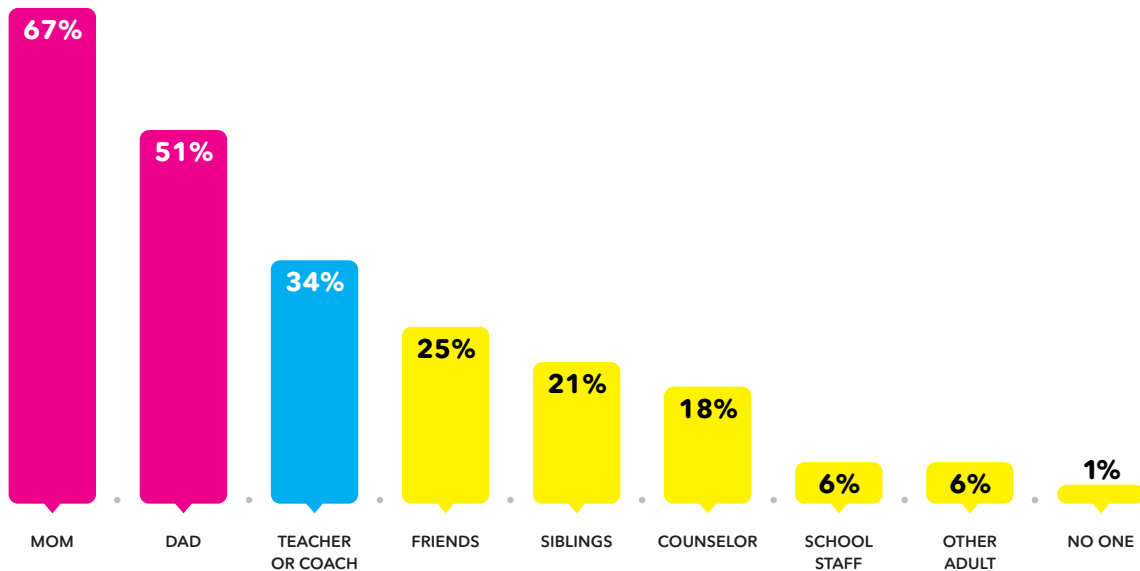
A large body of research shows that communication and collaboration among students, teachers, and parents effectively helps combat or prevent bullying and cyberbullying. For example, one recent comprehensive review of the bullying literature found that all successful anti-bullying programs necessarily engage all three of these stakeholder groups.<sup>10</sup> A separate study demonstrated that support from teachers and parents can protect students from the harmful consequences of bullying.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, students who communicate with and feel empowered by their teachers are less likely to be victims or perpetrators of bullying.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, when victims of bullying feel supported by their parents, they are less likely to harm themselves.<sup>13</sup> Finally, parental participation in school-based anti-bullying programs has been shown to increase the effectiveness of those programs.<sup>14</sup> In some cases, parental involvement has been shown to be among the only statistically significant factors in reducing school-based bullying.<sup>15</sup>

The importance of communication and coordination among students, parents, and teachers is also evident from our analyses of the 2016 Stop Bullying: Speak Up! Survey. For example, 71% of the student respondents who report that an educator saw them being bullied and intervened indicate that the bullying improved after the teacher intervention. This is consistent with national best practices, which instruct victims and bystanders to involve a teacher or trusted adult when they witness or experience bullying.<sup>16</sup>

In addition, when asked to choose which activities or resources they thought would help them when “dealing with bullying,” student respondents selected talking with a parent more than any other option.

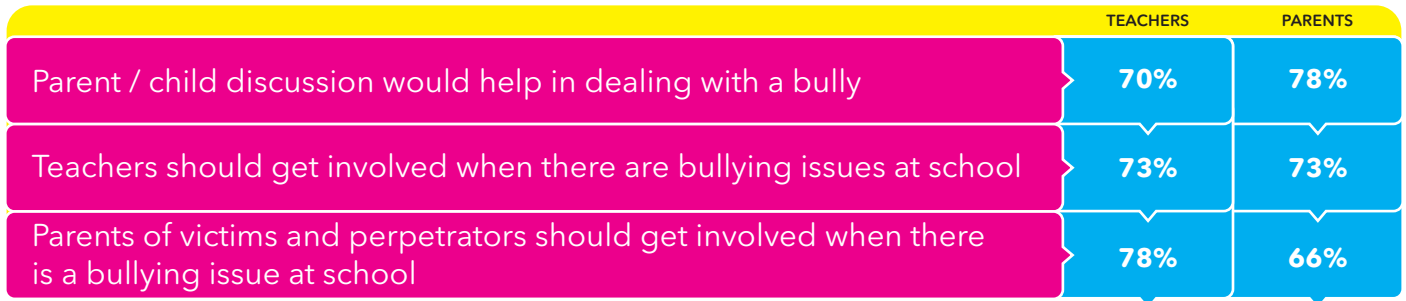
Finally, these student respondents indicate that they feel more comfortable talking to their parents and teachers about bullying than they feel talking to friends, siblings, school counselors, school staff, or other adults about bullying. When asked to choose up to three people they feel most comfortable talking to about bullying, 79% of student respondents picked either their mother, their father, or both, and 34% picked a teacher or coach (see Figure 3).

**FIGURE 3: WHO STUDENTS WANT TO TALK TO ABOUT BULLYING**



The parents and educators surveyed generally seem aware of the important roles they both play in resolving bullying, as 70% of educators and 78% of parents indicate that a parent and child discussion would help a student when dealing with a bully. Furthermore, 73% of parents and 73% of educators surveyed indicate that teachers need to get involved if there is a bullying issue at school. Likewise, 66% of parents and 78% of educators surveyed indicate that parents of victims and perpetrators need to get involved if there is a bullying issue at school (see Figure 4).

**FIGURE 4: WHAT WORKS IN COMBATING BULLYING**



When teachers or parents do get involved, educator respondents indicate that the involvement typically improves the bullying situation and rarely, if ever, exacerbates it. A majority of educators indicate that the situation following a bullying incident gets better when teacher or faculty:

- Talk with the students involved
- Send a note home to parents
- Call parents
- Participate in a parent-teacher conference



## WHAT OPPORTUNITIES EXIST TO IMPROVE HOW BULLYING IS COMBATTED?

There is agreement in the research and among the student, parent, and educator respondents to the 2016 Stop Bullying: Speak Up! Survey that better communication and coordination among students, parents, and teachers is important to preventing or resolving bullying. Yet our analyses shows this communication is not optimized, since we find differences in terms of how students, parents and teachers view the prevalence of the problem and how schools respond to it. First, parents' and educators' estimates of the rates of bullying and cyberbullying vary greatly from one another and from students' responses. In addition, 78% of the educators claim that a teacher or school employee talks with the students involved when a bullying incident occurs, but only 40% of parents whose children had witnessed or experienced bullying at school indicate that a teacher or school employee talked with the students involved. Similarly, 70% of the educators claim that a teacher or school employee calls parents when a bullying incident occurs, but only 23% of parents whose children had witnessed or experienced bullying at school indicate they were aware that a parent was called.

### EDUCATE PARENTS OF BYSTANDERS

As mentioned, parents of bystanders are less likely to believe that bullying is a problem or that parents or faculty need to intervene when bullying incidents occur. In addition, student respondents who are bystanders are less likely to believe that kids who speak up when they see someone else being bullied are "doing the right thing." These findings are potentially problematic given that students report that bullying improves when teachers get involved and that best practices call for engaging bystanders to ally with victims and report bullying to teachers or trusted adults.<sup>17</sup> Educating parents of bystanders about bullying and cyberbullying and the importance of having students involve adults when they witness or experience bullying could inspire them to motivate their bystander children to speak up. The survey also suggests that bullying education campaigns that target male parents may be especially impactful.





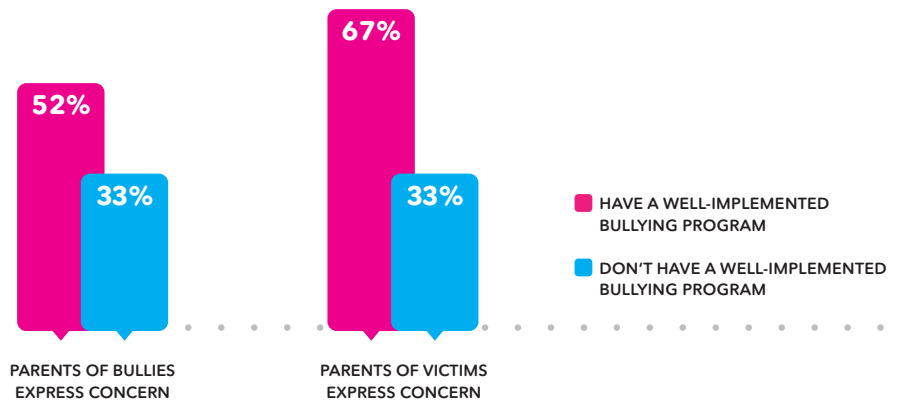
## **EDUCATE TEACHERS**

Survey responses suggest that more teachers could be more engaged in bullying prevention; as we discuss above, prior studies clearly demonstrate the importance of such engagement. Our analyses show that older educators seem less aware of bullying and cyberbullying than are younger educators. More importantly, some 11% of student respondents indicate that when they or their friend were bullied, a teacher saw the bullying and did nothing. Likewise, 9% of bystanders indicate that a teacher saw the bullying and did nothing. Finally, 14% of student respondents feel that they have been bullied by a teacher. Based on these discrepancies in bullying and cyberbullying awareness among educators, and the apparent failure of some teachers to either act when they witness bullying or realize that they themselves are behaving in a way that is perceived of as bullying, it is clear that more can be done to educate teachers about bullying and cyberbullying and how important their role in addressing these issues is.

## **ASSIST SCHOOLS IN IMPLEMENTING ANTI-BULLYING PROGRAMS**

Finally, survey responses highlight importance of a properly implemented, school-based bullying prevention program. Having a bullying prevention program that is well-implemented predicts collaboration between parents and teachers. Perhaps more importantly, schools with well-implemented school-based bullying prevention also demonstrate effective parent-teacher communications. For example, 52% of educators from schools with well-implemented bullying prevention programs indicate that parents of bullies were concerned about the problem after communicating with the school. In contrast, only 33% of educators from schools without bullying prevention programs or where bullying prevention programs are not well-implemented indicate that parents of bullies were concerned about the problem after communicating with the school. Similarly, 67% of educators from schools with well-implemented bullying prevention programs indicate that parents of victims were concerned about the problem after communicating with the school. In contrast, only 33% of educators from schools without bullying prevention programs or where bullying prevention programs are not well-implemented indicate that parents of victims were concerned about the problem after communicating with the school. These findings speak to the importance, not only of having a formal school-based bullying prevention program, but of ensuring that the program is implemented with fidelity (see Figure 5).

**FIGURE 5: IMPORTANCE OF A WELL-IMPLEMENTED BULLYING PREVENTION PROGRAM**



## ABOUT US

**R. Bradley Snyder** holds an Ed.M. in Human Development Psychology, with a specialization in Adolescent Risk and Prevention, from Harvard University and an M.P.A. in Public Policy from New York University and is the Executive Director of the Dion Initiative for Child Well-Being and Bullying Prevention. Brad comes to this position after more than two decades managing projects targeting children and adolescents for clients ranging from Cartoon Network to the U.S. Justice Department (for whom his project won the Innovations in American Government Award from Harvard University). At the age of 19, Brad helped found HomeBase Youth Services, a shelter for homeless and runaway youth. In 1994, he ran one of the inaugural AmeriCorps programs. In 2005, Brad helped launch MentorE Online Youth Services, an organization that uses technology to link at-risk youth with caring mentors. Experts describe Brad’s book, *The 5 Simple Truths of Raising Kids*, as an “urgent ‘must-read.’” Titles from his *What Every Child Needs To Know* children’s book series (...About Elvis Presley, ...About Cancer, ...About Punk Rock, ...About The Economy, ...About Pizza and ...About Coffee), which he coauthors with Dr. Marc Engelsjerd to explain adults to children, have received numerous accolades, including being a “staff pick” at the Museum of Modern Art bookstore in New York City.



**Aaron Kupchik** received his Ph.D. in Sociology from New York University and is a Professor and the Director of Graduate Studies in the Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice at the University of Delaware. His research focuses on the punishment of youth in schools, courts, and correctional facilities. He is author of *The Real School Safety Problem: The Long-term Consequences of Harsh School Punishment* (U California Press, 2016), *Homeroom Security: School discipline in an age of fear* (NYU Press, 2010) and *Judging Juveniles: Prosecuting adolescents in adult and juvenile courts* (NYU Press, 2006). He is a past recipient of the American Society of Criminology Michael J. Hindelang Book Award and the American Society of Criminology Ruth Shonle Cavan Young Scholar Award. His work has been funded by the National Science Foundation and the National Institute of Justice. He serves on several editorial boards and has held leadership positions within the American Society of Criminology and American Sociological Association's Crime, Law and Deviance Section.

**Melissa S. Kovacs** has a Ph.D. in public policy and is the principal and founder of FirstEval, LLC, a data analytics and evaluation consulting firm. Her clients include nonprofit organizations in the arts and social service sectors, governments, foundations, and attorneys. She recently was the Research Director for Maricopa County's Justice System Planning and Information department, where she oversaw numerous research and evaluation projects of the criminal justice and juvenile justice systems. Previously she held an evaluation position with Cisco Systems in Corporate Affairs examining the effectiveness of a global IT education program on youth unemployment. She has held faculty positions at Arizona State University in the Schools of Public Affairs and Sustainability, Allegheny College, and a Fulbright professorship at the Universität Duisburg-Essen in Germany. She holds board positions on the Lodestar Day Resource Center, Phoenix; the Arizona Violent Death Reporting System Advisory Board; and volunteers for the Phoenix chapter of the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation.

**Cartoon Network's Stop Bullying: Speak Up** is an award-winning, multi-platform pro-social campaign, created with experts in the field to raise awareness, build partnerships and empower young people to speak up against bullying safely and effectively. Campaign resources include video, print and online content— including an award-winning documentary introduced by President Barack Obama—available at [StopBullyingSpeakUp.com](http://StopBullyingSpeakUp.com), available at no charge to schools, community groups and parents to motivate bullying prevention activities or discussions.

**MORE DETAILED FINDINGS WILL BE PUBLISHED.**



- <sup>1</sup> CN xWhy Boys Panel April Kids Survey (pp. 2-3, Rep.). (2009). Atlanta, GA: Cartoon Network.
- <sup>2</sup> Stop Bullying: Speak Up! 2015 Fact Sheet (pp. 1-2). (2015). Atlanta, GA: Cartoon Network.
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- <sup>16</sup> What You Can Do. (n.d.). Retrieved September 13, 2016, from <http://www.stopbullying.gov/kids/what-you-can-do/index.html>
- <sup>17</sup> What You Can Do. (n.d.). Retrieved September 13, 2016, from <http://www.stopbullying.gov/kids/what-you-can-do/index.html>