

Bullying and Mental Health: A Guide for DC Parents and Educators

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing concerns about the [mental well-being of children and adolescents](#). Bullying behaviors are [strongly associated with mental health issues](#), both for those who are bullied and those who bully others. This tipsheet first provides an overview of the association between bullying and mental health, and then offers resources for parents and educators in Washington, DC to support students who may need additional mental health supports.

Mental Health and Being Bullied

Children and adolescents who are depressed or anxious are at higher risk of experiencing bullying; in turn, those who are bullied are more likely, [over time](#), to become [depressed or anxious, or to experience suicidal ideation](#). Bullying can therefore become a [vicious cycle](#) for youth who are targeted because of their mental health needs and who may then experience greater mental health concerns following their experience with bullying. It is important to remember, however, that mental health concerns such as depression, anxiety, and suicide are rarely driven by a single experience or event. Bullying may be a contributing factor to an individual's mental health needs, but it is rarely the sole cause. While it is critical to intervene in and resolve an individual's experience with being bullied, this will often [not fully address](#) that child's mental health needs.



To more comprehensively address the mental health needs of young people who experience bullying, parents and educators should:

- Create open lines of communication so that children and adolescents are comfortable reporting their experiences with bullying. Resources such as the [KnowBullying app](#) from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration can inform these conversations.
- Watch for increasing mental health symptoms, such as withdrawal and self-harming behaviors, especially among children and adolescents with pre-existing mental health needs, as these may be signs of emerging issues, including bullying.
- Monitor social media and texting for potential bullying. Parents should be [transparent about their monitoring](#), as doing so without a child's knowledge can lead children to further withdraw.
- Remember that behaviors that may not fit the definition of bullying may still affect a child's mental well-being. The [Youth Bullying Prevention Act of 2012](#) (YBPA) defines bullying as aggressive behavior that is severe, persistent, or pervasive and that leads to harm or fear of harm to physical or mental health, academic achievement, or an individual's ability to participate in or benefit from school or other activities. This definition necessarily creates a high bar for when schools must take action to address bullying behavior. However, even when behaviors do not rise to an objective level of severity to meet this definition, [they may still be traumatizing for youth who experience them](#), and those youth may still require supports.
- Connect with local mental health resources. Every school in DC has at least one mental health provider who may be able to connect children to additional resources and supports that would benefit them. Educators should familiarize themselves with their school's referral process and build relationships with the providers in their buildings. This could include inviting the school's mental health provider to visit classrooms to build relationships with students and parents before the provider's services are needed. Doing this can reduce the stigma associated with needing to see the mental health professional.

Mental Health and Bullying Others

Children and adolescents who perpetrate bullying are also more likely to have [mental health needs](#). Often, engaging in bullying behaviors may reflect underlying, unaddressed trauma and other [internalizing symptoms](#). Moreover, schools' and parents' responses to bullying behaviors—and particularly the use of exclusionary discipline such as suspensions or expulsions from school—[could lead to further trauma](#). Providing children and adolescents who bully others with mental health supports is a critical step in reducing the likelihood they will continue those behaviors.

To more comprehensively address the mental health needs of young people who bully others, parents and educators should:

- Understand that bullying behaviors may be a sign of unaddressed mental health needs and address behaviors using a [trauma-informed lens](#).
- Consider providing mental health supports as an alternative to punitive and exclusionary discipline practices. [There is little evidence](#) that exclusionary discipline prevents the recurrence of bullying behavior, primarily because such discipline cannot address bullying's root causes.
- Explore whether the child or adolescent may also be being bullied by others. Those who both bully and are bullied are at the [highest risk for mental health issues](#).

Resources for Mental Health Supports in the District of Columbia

The District of Columbia offers several resources to help address mental health needs for children and adolescents. The DC Department of Behavioral Health (DBH) implements school behavioral health programs across public and public charter schools through partnerships with community-based organizations. Parents and educators can find a listing of behavioral health providers, by school, on the [DBH website](#). Mental health providers in schools are uniquely well-positioned to be able to help, especially when bullying is connected to the school setting in some way.

DBH also maintains a list of [community-based service providers](#). Below, we highlight organizations that support the mental health of children and youth in Washington, DC:

- **Break the Cycle** inspires and supports young people ages 12 to 24 to build healthy relationships and create a culture without abuse. Break the Cycle is a culturally affirming organization that centers young people, caring adults, and communities in its prevention and intervention efforts. Please contact <https://www.breakthecycle.org/> or call 202-849-6289.
- **Collaborative Solutions For Community** (formerly Columbia Heights – Shaw collaborative) is a DC-based organization committed to helping families and neighborhoods realize a brighter future through engagement and support. For more information, go to <https://www.wearecsc.org/> or call 202-518-6737.
- **East of the River** empowers families, youth, seniors, and communities to become more self-sufficient through integrated and collaborative community-based services that utilize evidence-based practices that are family-focused and person-centered. Please call 202-397-7300 or find more information here: <https://www.erfsc.org/>.
- **Edgewood Brookland Family Support Collaborative** is one of five neighborhood-based collaboratives in the District of Columbia, which, when combined, make up the citywide Healthy Families, Thriving Communities Collaborative network. For more information, see <https://ebfsc.org/>.
- **Far South East Collaborative** has worked to tackle some of the community's toughest issues, while building the capacity of residents and organizations to do the same. For more information, see <http://www.fsfsc.org/> or call 202-889-1425.
- **Georgia Ave Collaborative** programs are designed to provide supportive services and linkages to youth, families, and residents to prevent the occurrence of child abuse and neglect. Call (202) 722-1815 or visit <https://gafsc-dc.org/>.

- **Latin American Youth Center (LAYC)**'s mission is to empower a diverse population of youth to achieve a successful transition to adulthood, through multi-cultural, comprehensive, and innovative programs that address youths' social, academic, and career needs. For more information, visit <https://www.layc-dc.org/> or call 202-319-2225.
- **Mary's Center** uses a holistic model that combines medical, dental, and behavioral health services for the entire family, along with social services and family literacy services—all under one roof. For more information, go to <https://www.maryscenter.org/> or call 202-483-8196.
- **One Common Unity** breaks cycles of violence and builds compassionate, healthy communities through the transformative power of music, arts, and peace education. For more information, visit <https://onecommonunity.org/> or call 202-765-3757.
- **Safe Shores** is dedicated to working with and advocating for children and adolescents affected by trauma and violence and provides training and supports. For more information, go to <https://www.safeshores.org/> or call 202-671-7233.
- **SMYAL**. Through youth leadership, SMYAL creates opportunities for LGBTQ youth to build self-confidence, develop critical life skills, and engage their peers and community through service and advocacy. For more information, visit <https://smyal.org/> or call 202-546-5940.
- **Wendt Center** is a premier resource for restoring hope and healthy functioning to adults, teens, and children who are coping with grief, loss, and trauma in the Greater Washington region. For more information, visit <https://www.wendtcenter.org/> or call 202-624-0010.