

# Bullying: What American Indian and Alaska Native Parents Need to Know

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Bullying continues to be a significant problem for youth, parents, school counselors, and many others. This paper provides general information about bullying, and specific information about bullying of Native youth and those with disabilities. It also offers action steps for parents to take. We hope Parent Centers will share this resource in trainings with Native parents and in information booths at Native community events.

## What is Bullying?

The U. S. Department of Education defines bullying as “unwanted, aggressive behavior among school-aged children that involves a real or perceived power imbalance. The behavior is repeated, or has the potential to be repeated, over time.”<sup>1</sup> The term **power imbalance** means that one young person has or seems to have more physical strength, popularity, or access to embarrassing information than the person being bullied.

Examples of bullying behaviors include intentionally making threats, teasing, name-calling, pushing, kicking, biting, hitting, stealing or damaging another’s property, spreading rumors or others’ secrets, and excluding someone from a group. Nationally, between **25-33% of students** report being bullied in one or more of these ways at school.<sup>2</sup>

Bullying is different from normal childhood conflict or everyday rough-housing. It’s about control. We cannot shrug it off as “kids will be kids.” Those who bully:

- select a target who is smaller, younger, or less able to cope socially (**power imbalance**);
- pick on the target day after day (**repetition**); and
- enjoy seeing their target afraid and upset (**intention**).

## Who are Common Bullying Targets?

In general, youth who are targeted and bullied are seen as being different from their peers in some way. They may be bullied based on their weight, gender, sexual orientation, religious beliefs, race, and/or disability. Targets may be loners, new students, or new immigrants.<sup>3</sup>

## What are the Impacts of Bullying?

Children who are bullied can become increasingly withdrawn, sad, frustrated, and aggressive. Most begin to avoid peers, social events, and school. Truancy and poor school performance can result. They may show signs of stress, complain of headaches or stomachaches, and have trouble sleeping. Depression and feelings of hopelessness are serious warning signs for parents.<sup>4</sup>

## **Why are Native Youth Bullied?**

American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) children are often targeted because of their race. Nationally, at least 1 in 5 minority students report being bullied specifically for their race.<sup>5</sup> If you are a parent or relative of an AI/AN child, you may have experienced how common it is for Native young people to be bullied.

**Those who bully seek out targets who have less power, whether it is a physical weakness or less social status.**

Native youths are likely targeted because negative stereotypes and misconceptions about American Indians and Alaska Natives still exist. Such stereotypes encourage racist beliefs and behaviors. These stereotypes are difficult to eliminate, because they have become part of the accepted history of this country. After the taking of Indian lands and subsequent wars, the new United States government depicted the original Native inhabitants as inferior.<sup>6</sup> Federal policies further marginalized Native peoples.

Currently, Native communities and organizations continue to struggle against the use of Indians as sports team mascots and negative commercial logos. Turning Natives into caricatures belittles American Indians/Alaska Natives as a people and reinforces stereotypes. As one Navajo blogged: “These degrading images and (our) outright erasure slowly accumulated in the minds of Native youth to the point of believing we are less than.”<sup>7</sup>

Stereotypes can also play a role in the bullying of Native youth when they excel in school. They may experience verbal harassment and social isolation when they don’t conform to the stereotype that AI/AN youth will perform poorly in school.

In some homes, young Native people grow up witnessing the isolating effects of poverty, substance abuse, domestic violence, and feeling “less than.” Without social supports, they may want to make themselves feel better and release their anger and frustration, so may resort to bullying others, including other AI/AN youth.

## **Why are Native Youths with Disabilities Bullied?**

Recent studies indicate that students with disabilities are one of the groups most targeted for bullying. They are 2-3 times more likely to be bullied than their nondisabled peers.<sup>8</sup> Consider the vulnerability of young people who are Native *and* have a disability.

Remember that those who bully seek out targets who have less power, whether it’s a physical weakness or less social status. We know that children with disabilities often start out with a lower social standing among their peers, and they struggle with school work and self-esteem issues. These factors alone can make them frequent targets of bullying.

In addition, youth with developmental disabilities may have limited social skills. Those with motor difficulties have issues with reading, writing, and participating in physical activities. Children with visible, physical disabilities may move slower and with an impaired gait. Those

with communication disabilities may use assistive technologies, which can be misunderstood, considered weird, or even desired by peers. These additional factors can lead to verbal bullying, such as using the hurtful and stereotyped word “retard” and even physical bullying.<sup>9</sup>

## **What Can a Parent Do about Bullying?**

***Listen to your child/teenager.*** If they tell you they’ve been bullied, listen and remain as calm as you can. Let them know you are there for them.

***Be careful not to shame or blame.*** Most youth will be embarrassed and ashamed already and feel the bullying incident was their own fault. They will also worry that they’ve disappointed you or will make you angry. Instead, honor them for the courage it took to come forward.

***Raise the issue of bullying.*** If you notice warning signs, such as avoiding school or increased sadness, but your child hasn’t mentioned bullying, bring it up in a caring conversation. Let children know they are not alone.

***Be a role model.*** Bullying among family members, especially brothers and sisters, called *sibling bullying*, is also common. Prevent all bullying in your own home.

***Address school-level bullying.*** If the bullying is taking place at school or on the school bus, notify your child’s teacher(s) and the school administrator. Ask for a copy of the school’s Student Code of Conduct and the bullying prevention plan. Use those documents to pressure the school for better enforcement.

***Write anti-bullying strategies into your child’s IEP.*** Students with disabilities who receive services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) will have an Individualized Education Program (IEP). The IDEA requires that a free appropriate public education be made available to every student receiving special education services. Bullying at school can prevent students with disabilities from receiving that education. Parents can call an IEP meeting at any time. Write into the IEP new strategies to prevent bullying of your child, such as allowing your child to leave classes early to avoid hallway bullying.

***Become aware of your state’s anti-bullying legislation.*** All 50 states now have laws against bullying of young people, especially in or near schools. State laws will apply on state-recognized reservations.

***Learn about tribal anti-bullying legislation and resources.*** If you live on a federal reservation, the state legislation won’t apply. Instead, check with your Tribal Council about local tribal laws that may apply to bullying. If none exists, urge the Council to pass such laws for the protection of the tribe’s youth. Even without a tribal law, some reservation communities have initiated anti-bullying programs. Learn about them and other local, bullying-related resources, and begin a local campaign.

***Know your federal rights.*** If a Native American youth is bullied because of his or her race, or if a youth with disabilities is bullied because of his or her disability, those behaviors may be considered discrimination and harassment, which are against federal civil rights laws. You can

seek federal assistance from the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) within the U. S. Department of Education at [ocr@ed.gov](mailto:ocr@ed.gov). Visit OCR online for information about how and where you can file a complaint: <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/complaintintro.html>

**Form a coalition of other concerned parents.** Work with other parents, your extended family, elders, school staff, mental health workers, and other allies to prevent bullying in your urban, rural, or reservation community. A community-wide effort shows that local adults care.

## References

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<sup>1</sup> stopbullying.gov. (n.d.). *What is bullying?* Retrieved March 17, 2020 from: <https://www.stopbullying.gov/bullying/what-is-bullying>

<sup>2</sup> stopbullying.gov. (n.d.). *Frequency of bullying.* Retrieved March 17, 2020 from from: <https://www.stopbullying.gov/bullying/what-is-bullying#frequency>

<sup>3</sup> National Education Association. (2014). *Bully free: It starts with me.* Washington, DC: Author. Available online at: <http://www.nea.org/home/neabullyfree.html>

<sup>4</sup> National Education Association. (2014). *Identify bullying.* Washington, DC: Author. Available online at: <http://www.nea.org/home/53359.htm>

<sup>5</sup> Campbell, E.M., & Smalling, S.E. (2013, September). American Indians and bullying in schools. *Journal of Indigenous Social Development*, 2(1), 1-2.

<sup>6</sup> Butterfield, R. (2016). *What parent centers need to know: Historical perspectives for working with Native American parents.* Albuquerque, NM: Native American Parent Technical Assistance Center (NAPTAC). Online at: <https://www.parentcenterhub.org/naptac-tier1-culture/>

<sup>7</sup> Slater, S., & Wright, J. (2016, October 25). *Stopbullying blog: The impact of community in Navajo life.* Available online at: <https://www.stopbullying.gov/blog/2016/10/25/impact-community-navajo-life>

<sup>8</sup> AbilityPath.org. (2015). *Walk a mile in their shoes: Bullying and the child with special needs.* Available online at: <http://abilitypath.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/walk-a-mile-in-their-shoes.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.



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