

There has been a great deal in the news lately about an incident in Florida where an irate parent boarded a school bus and threatened students because he believed his handicapped child was being bullied. This incident is a seminal one in that it focused needed national attention on a long-standing problem that is difficult to solve.

The playground bully has been around as long as children have been going to school. But as society has changed, and some would argue has become ill-mannered, bullying has become worse, in some cases involving serious threats and physical assaults. Regardless of severity, it causes emotional harm to victims and cannot be tolerated. It occurs so frequently because those who bully know that the chance of any serious consequence is small. That needs to change.

Is bullying really that big a problem?

Unfortunately, bullying is ubiquitous, particularly among children. There are different estimates of how often children are bullied or engage in bullying:

- According to the American Medical Association, 3.7 million youths engage in bullying, and more than 3.2 million are victims of “moderate” or “serious” bullying each year (Cohn & Canter, 2003).
- Some studies have shown that between 15 and 25 percent of U.S. students are frequently bullied; 15 to 20 percent report that they bully others frequently (Nansel et al., 2001; Melton et al., 1998; Geffner, Loring, & Young, 2001).
- Over the course of a year, nearly one-fourth of students across grades reported that they had been harassed or bullied on school property because of their race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, or disability (Austin, Huh-Kim, Skage, & Furlong, 2002).
- Almost 30 percent of youth in the United States (or over 5.7 million) are estimated to be involved in bullying as either a bully, a target of bullying, or both. In a national survey of students in grades 6 to 10, 13 percent reported bullying others, 11 percent reported being the target of bullies, and another 6 percent said that they bullied others and were bullied themselves (Nansel et al., 2001).

When and where does bullying usually occur?

- It occurs at early ages and in all grades, with an onset between three and four years of age (Byrne, 1994a, 1994b).
- In the United States, it increases for boys and girls during late elementary years, peaks during the middle school years, and decreases in high school (Hoover, Oliver, & Hazler, 1992; Banks, 1997; Garrett, 2003).
- Seventy-four percent of eight- to eleven-year-old students said teasing and bullying occur at their schools (Kaiser Family Foundation & Nickelodeon, 2001).
- It occurs two to three times more often at school than on the trip to and from school (Olweus, 1995) but . . .
- It occurs virtually everywhere: in homes, nursery schools, preschools, elementary schools, middle schools, high schools, neighborhoods, churches, city parks, on the trip to and from

school, on the streets, and in the workplace, for example. It occurs in large cities and small towns, large schools and small schools—and even one-room schools in other countries (Olweus, 1995).

- It is most likely to occur when there is no adult supervision, inadequate adult supervision, poor supervision, a lack of structure, and few or no anti-bullying rules; it is also more likely to occur when teachers and students accept bullying or are indifferent to it (Beane, 2008).
- It occurs mainly in hidden areas and areas lacking adult supervision: halls, stairwells, the playground, areas where students take brief breaks, between buildings, restrooms, locker rooms, the cafeteria, on buses, and parking lots; it occurs when students are walking to and from school, but also in classrooms (Beane 2008).
- Every seven minutes, a child on an elementary playground is bullied (Pepler, Craig, & Roberts, 1998).

Is bullying on school buses common?

It's hard to say for sure, but it's definitely a significant problem.

The school bus is, in many respects, a rolling classroom and many of the challenges that exist there also exist on the bus, perhaps to an even greater extent. There are typically far more children on a school bus than in a classroom and the bus driver has to manage them all while operating a 10 ton vehicle - and facing the opposite direction! It's an incredibly tough job, made even more so by bullying among students.

We know parents have mixed impressions of school buses. A 2006 survey conducted by the American School Bus Council (ASBC) revealed that for the most part, parents think the bus is a safe way to transport their children to and from school and rarely hear of school bus accidents. However, the same survey revealed parents are concerned about the bus driver's background and qualifications, which are rarely known outside of the transportation department, and parents are also concerned about student misbehavior on the bus, especially more serious situations like bullying.

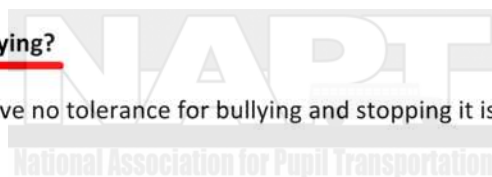
Parents in this survey also said their children had similar complaints about unruly behavior on the bus. In fact, one participant in a focus group stated, *"The older kids are so rowdy on the bus, they don't listen generally. And if a bus driver is always talking to them about being quiet, that's distracting him from driving."*

One thing is for sure: every driver knows that students who step aboard the bus have to cope with all kinds of issues, from problems at home and school to disputes with friends. We live in complicated times and all manner of social, demographic and economic factors affect children and their behavior.

What is NAPT's stance on bullying?

The short answer is that we have no tolerance for bullying and stopping it is one of our national public policy priorities.

The challenge for us is that while bullying occurs on school buses (and many other places) the root causes and solutions involve larger societal issues that are very complex. As an accountable and



conscientious industry we want to be part of the solution but clearly do not have all the answers or ability to deal with them all effectively.

The recent incident in Florida has triggered an interesting public response: Some feel that the father is a hero for taking matters into his own hands. Others, including those of us in the school bus industry charged with the safe and secure transportation of children, believe that vigilantism is never acceptable. That said, we all have experienced the frustrations of working for solutions within “the system” that can often be slow, bureaucratic and unresponsive. So, while we certainly do not condone the behavior of this father - behavior that is illegal in many jurisdictions - the up side is that this unfortunate incident is triggering a much needed national discussion about bullying prevention and solutions. We intend to be very involved in that discussion.

Bullying complaints must always be taken seriously and “the system” needs to provide a swift and thorough response when allegations are raised. No exceptions. Parents should never feel compelled to take matters into their own hands. They need the confidence that their child—whether on a school bus, at a bus stop, on a playground, or in the school rest room—will not be subjected to taunting, abuse or assaults from other children. Those who bully need to know that their behavior will not be tolerated.

How should school bus drivers deal with bullying?

School bus drivers are very limited in what they can do when a behavioral incident occurs on their bus because dealing with it could involve compromising the safe operation of the bus and/or getting children to and from school on schedule. They are professionals whose primary responsibility is to operate the bus safely. They are carefully screened when hired, and undergo continuous training on driving proficiency/safety and in recent years also receive training in security awareness. But they are not social workers, deputized law enforcement officers or even responsible for disciplining students.

From a practical standpoint, bullying often occurs in a “below the radar” way that the driver may not be able to observe. Stopping the bus and walking back through the aisle to check out every suspected conflict between students is just not possible.

Many buses have cameras installed to monitor students on and around the bus. These cameras make it easier to identify those responsible for bullying or other aberrant behavior. Most buses also have two-way communications so drivers can report immediately any serious situation aboard a bus. But it is up to school administrators to investigate and take action when bullying occurs.

Okay, but what should I do if my child is bullied on a school bus?

Bullying incidents understandably trigger strong emotional responses from parents but, PLEASE, think before you act. Get all the facts and focus on constructive action. You will be most successful if you are persistent in respectfully demanding a response.

NAPT recommends the following steps for parents who want to get action promptly but responsibly:

1. **Report the Incident Immediately to the Principal of Your Child’s School.** Call the school and insist on speaking to the principal. Follow up as many times as necessary until you actually speak with the principal. Request that your child’s classroom teacher be notified about the incident, and ask an approximate date for when you should hear back. Provide the following information:

- Your name and contact numbers
- Your child's name
- Date and location of the incident
- Detailed account of what happened—the facts as you know them
- Names of parties involved
- Names of witnesses who can collaborate
- Police contact and report number (if a police report was made)

2. Report the Incident to the School Bus Service Provider. Call the school district's transportation department and ask to speak to the director or a supervisor. Tell them your child reported to you an incident of bullying on one of their buses and ask that the driver be interviewed to get the facts. Request that the findings be reported to the school principal, along with any videotape record from the bus (if there is one). If you would like to talk directly to the school bus driver, ask that the driver or his/her supervisor call you.

3. Involve Law Enforcement (if necessary). If the incident on the bus involved a threat of harm, or actual physical assault, contact local police immediately and fill out a complaint report, even before contacting the school principal. This will create a public record and the police will investigate the incident.

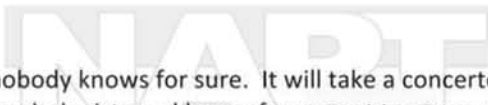
4. Schedule a Meeting with the Principal of Your Child's School. If you don't get action within a reasonable period (bullying is serious and response should be swift), ask for a personal meeting with the school principal to register your concern face to face and underscore your resolve. Ask for the following:

- Copy of the student handbook
- Copy of the school district's bullying policies (if any)
- Copy of the school district's discipline code (if one exists)
- An assessment of how the investigation is proceeding (timeline, etc.) and expected resolution.

5. Involve the School Superintendent (if necessary). If the principal's response is unsatisfactory and/or not prompt, request a meeting with the superintendent of schools for your school district. Bring along as many documented facts as possible, and request intervention.

Can bullying be eliminated?

The answer, unfortunately, is nobody knows for sure. It will take a concerted effort by parents, school officials, school bus industry, psychologists and law enforcement to come up with rational ways to both prevent it and provide meaningful sanctions for those who bully. One thing is certain: Vigilantism will not be a part of the solution. It's inappropriate, contrary to common sense rules of a civil society and dangerous, especially when children are involved. As an industry we are committed to being fully engaged in the discussion.



So what can I do as a parent to prevent bullying?

Get involved! It is crucial that parents, educators, administrators, health care professionals, and researchers work together to reduce bullying. Rather than wait until an incident occurs, concerned parents should ensure that their child's school system has a zero tolerance policy regarding bullying. Does your child's school have an anti-bullying policy? If not, involve your school bus service provider in a community discussion—we can offer useful perspectives and should be part of the solution. And don't forget law enforcement. Zero tolerance means what it says—that all incidents are reported and acted upon promptly and thoroughly.

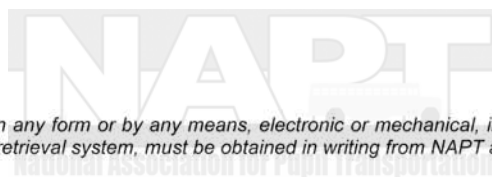
In addition, dealing with student behavior problems is part of driver training and awareness, but the degree and content of that training varies from community to community. Many school bus drivers, like teachers, have had formal training to deal with bullying. But the training is not across-the-board or standardized. Bullying prevention training is most likely to have occurred in communities where behavioral problems are more common. As an organization – and an industry - we certainly support such training, but it becomes a matter of local budget priorities. While keeping in mind that education budgets in all states are always a major balancing act, and particularly now during very challenging economic circumstances, encourage your school district to integrate bullying prevention into their school bus driver training curriculum.

Finally, it is important to have a consistent open dialogue with your children about bullying and its consequences. Be actively involved in your children's lives and intervene in a supportive and empathetic way if you believe your child or another child is being bullied.

Please feel free to contact us - toll free – at 800-989-NAPT (6278) if you think we can help you or if you think you can help us. We are committed to eliminating and preventing bullying and we are willing to work with anyone and everyone who seeks this same end.

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