

# Workshop 4: The role of bystanders

## Initiators, targets and bystanders

This handout outlines the roles that students can take in relation to bullying behaviour. It highlights the particularly the important role of bystanders in preventing bullying.

Bullying behaviour involves three parties:

- **Initiators** – those doing the bullying
- **Targets** – those being bullied
- **Bystanders** – those who witness the bullying).

### Initiators

Students who bully others often do so to gain status and recognition from their peers. Their bullying behaviour is reinforced when they intimidate their targets and when the peer group colludes by not challenging the initiator or reporting the bullying to staff.

### Targets

Students of all ages can be at relatively greater risk of being bullied (i.e. being targets) for a whole host of reasons, including: being unassertive or withdrawn (e.g. isolated students with low self-esteem) differing from the majority culture of a school in terms of ethnicity, cultural or religious background, sexual orientation, gender identity, or socio-economic status having a disability, special education needs or mental health issues academic achievement (perceived as high or low achiever) having recently transitioned into a school (through natural progression through schools, changing to a new school because of behavioural issues at a previous school or moving to the area from another city or country).

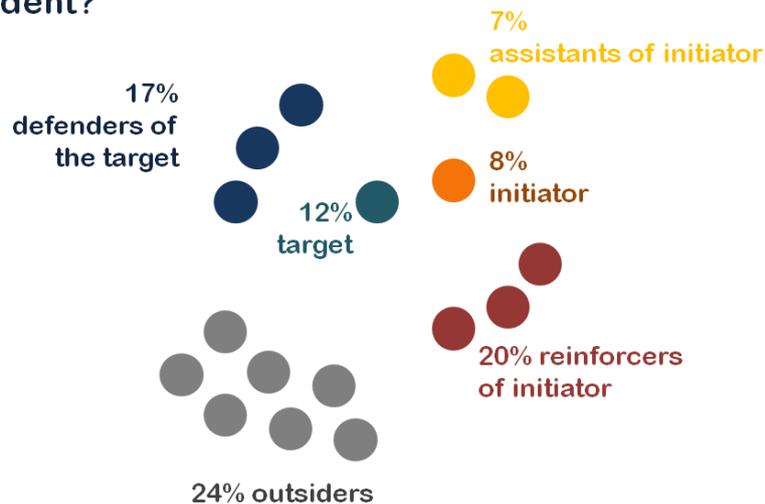
### Bystanders

Bystanders (i.e. witnesses to bullying behaviour) can have a powerful effect on either encouraging or inhibiting bullying behaviour. There are three main types of bystander: followers (assistants) – do not initiate, but take an active role in the bullying behaviour supporters (reinforcers) – support the bullying behaviour (overtly or covertly, e.g. by turning a blind eye) but do not take an active role in the bullying behaviour defenders – dislike the bullying and try to help the target by intervening, getting teacher support (using safe telling) or providing direct support to the target.

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The diagram below is a proportional representation of the roles typically played by students involved in bullying incidents.

### Who's typically involved in a bullying incident?



(Salmivalli et al, 1996)

All students have the potential to occupy at least one of these roles (i.e. target, initiator or bystander) at some point in their school life. All students will transition to a new school at least once, placing them at higher risk of being bullied. It is possible that students could be in two categories at one time. For example, a student could be both a target and an initiator.

This is why it is important to involve all students in bullying prevention strategies and to ensure they are aware of their rights and responsibilities. Everyone has a role to play in preventing bullying behaviour. Bystanders need to know that responding appropriately (by discouraging, intervening in or reporting bullying) can be a very effective way to limit the impacts of, and even prevent, bullying behaviour.

Students can move in and out of the roles of initiator, target and bystander at different times. Therefore, it is important not to label particular students as 'bullies'. Because all students may be initiators, targets or bystanders at some time, they all need to take part in strategies to learn about bullying and how to respond to it.

### Discussion questions

- How do you think this model applies to your school?
- What skills do you currently teach that would support students with understanding their role as bystanders?

### Further reading:

*Bullying and the peer group: a review*, Christina Salmivalli: Aggression and Violent Behaviour 15 (2010) 112-120 – Wilfrid Laurier University

[https://legacy.wlu.ca/forms/3304/Bullying\\_and\\_the\\_Peer\\_Group.pdf](https://legacy.wlu.ca/forms/3304/Bullying_and_the_Peer_Group.pdf)

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