



Working in the Community to Prevent and Reduce Bullying

Bullying is a complex phenomenon that can be difficult to understand. Learn the signs of unhealthy behaviors in friendships.

Unhealthy friendships

It is important to recognize signs of unhealthy relationships before they escalate. This includes:

- Control: one person makes all the decisions and tells the other what to do.
- Digital monitoring or “clocking”: one person uses social media sites like Instagram and Snapchat to keep tabs on the other person. They constantly message or text the other person and demand quick responses.
- Disrespect: one person makes fun of the other or talks about them behind their back.
- Harassment: one person uses unwanted, unwelcome, and uninvited behavior to make the other feel unsafe.

How to recognize power imbalance and social status between peers:

- Examine power and social status imbalance. Social status reflects a broader categorization of peer acceptance than simple friendships. An example of unhealthy use of power is knowing a person’s vulnerabilities and using those against them.
- Look at how the group of children in a dominate culture group respect and value the nondominated culture’s norms.

How to distinguish bullying from friendships:

- If someone is experiencing treatment from a friend that hurts them and they have asked that friend to stop, but it continues, then that is not healthy friendship. The behavior could be bullying.

How to respond to unhealthy friendships:

- Model positive behavior. Build expectation of kindness, respect, and empathy and cultivate an environment where everyone feels connected.
- Encourage open, honest, and thoughtful reflection. Talk openly with youth about healthy friendships. Ask about their values and expectations for healthy relationships. Don’t dismiss their ideas, encourage discussion—this will help them come to their own understanding.
- Discuss safety and signs of unhealthy behavior. Encourage youth to talk to a trusted adult or connect them with resources in your community if you suspect that someone may be in an unhealthy or abusive relationship of any kind.

Resources

[Respectfully Campaign – mass.gov](https://www.mass.gov/respectfully)

[Recognizing the signs of an unhealthy relationship – mass.gov](https://www.mass.gov/recognizing-the-signs-of-an-unhealthy-relationship)

[Healthy relationship tools and resources for youth | mass.gov](https://www.mass.gov/healthy-relationship-tools-and-resources-for-youth)

[Can a friend be bullying me – National Bullying Prevention Center](https://www.nationalbullyingpreventioncenter.org/can-a-friend-be-bullying-me)