Types of bullying

Bullying occurs in a variety of subtly different forms. Some are specific to the workplace, while others are found in both work and school environments. The following definitions will help you identify the main types of the potential for developing hypersensitivity to this issue.



Universal types of bullying

Social bullying: Bullies often work to exclude their target from social groups, painting the individual as an undesirable or someone who should be mocked. Social bullying is typically discriminatory in nature, focusing on traits about the target that are different from those of the bully (e.g. appearance, race, or sexual orientation).

- **Cyber bullying:** Cyber bullying is conducted via technology – emails, forums or text messages – and is particularly insidious, as it allows the bully to retain their anonymity. Your cyber bully might be a colleague, a fellow student, or a stranger who has chosen you at random.
- **Secondary bullying:** People repeatedly exposed to the bad behaviour of a confident and prominent bully may not always act in accordance with their ethical values, i.e. speak out, defend or support the target. This may be an attempt, conscious or unconscious, to avoid being abused by the bully. Unfortunately, these 'secondary' bullies may not realize that by failing to act, they are becoming part of the problem.
- **Vicarious bullying:** Vicarious forms of bullying are orchestrated by those who will instigate a conflict between another individual and the desired target, deriving enjoyment from witnessing the victim's humiliation and distress. Some employees will instigate vicarious bullying between their employer and a fellow employee, and student bullies may attempt to create similar discord between teachers and students.

Common types of workplace bullying

- **Client bullying:** Examples include teachers being assaulted by their pupils, bankers intimidated by their customers or hospital workers threatened by their patients. Client bullying is often abusive and frightening, but will be defended by bullies as though it is merely justified criticism. For example, they may claim they are simply trying to receive the special treatment they are owed.
- **Institutional bullying:** Institutional bullying results when bullying becomes the accepted norm in the workplace. This can occur when one bully is always replaced by a new one (after the first bully moves on to a new position). Over time, bullying becomes the norm, as employees become used to the fact that someone in a position of power is abusive and applies constant pressure.
- **Attention-seeking:** Some bullies want to be perceived as the best and most effective people in the workplace, and they are willing to use any tactics to undermine people who may perform better at their job. For example, an attention-seeking bully might try to blackmail you into allowing them to take credit for certain aspects of your work, or they may insist that you are to blame when they make mistakes.
- **Regulation bullying:** Through enforcing unnecessary or inappropriate workplace rules, an employer or employee in a position of power can make their target feel demeaned and powerless.

Hypersensitivity

While being educated about the main types of bullying can help you identify when someone is being unfairly and unethically treated, the prevalence of discussions about bullying can itself lead to additional problems. Specifically, parents can become hypersensitive to the threat of bullying, interpreting any strife experienced by their children as a form of abuse. People in the workplace can experience similar hypersensitivity issues too. Therefore, keep the following in mind:

- Not all instances of cruelty constitute bullying. If you have experienced an isolated incident that resembles a particular type of bullying, or if your child reports being teased at school one afternoon, try to reserve judgment until you acquire more evidence.

- To identify genuine bullying, look for a pattern of demeaning behaviour by someone who deliberately and repeatedly puts their target in a position of weakness.

If you are unsure whether you are being hypersensitive, try discussing it with an objective third party. Parents may benefit from comparing notes with other parents, contrasting the experiences and challenges of different children.