

**FEATURES**

# The study of bullying: why it matters

*UB's Alberti Center serves as a national resource in the study and prevention of bullying*



Photo by [JACOB WOJTOWICZ](#) | The Spectrum

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persisted well into adulthood.

The center underwent a period of transition and growth when Dr. Stephanie Frederick joined in 2019 with her, her research into cyberbullying.

Frederick began her dissertation in the early 2010s.

“At that time, cyberbullying was getting a lot of attention in the media, and in particular, there was a lot of focus on suicide, and relating it to cyberbullying.”

Nickerson, on the other hand, fell into the study of bullying accidentally. She was a professor at the University of Utah when graduate student Leigh Worrall (née Cooper), now a staff member of UB’s Graduate School of Education, approached her with a potential study looking at the experiences of parents of middle school students, and how their previous experiences with bullying they dealt with bullying relating to their own children.

One surprising finding was that [parents who experienced physical bullying were less concerned about their children](#) compared to parents who experienced other forms of bullying.

Subsequently, Nickerson began to study bullying, and was asked to help the center upon its creation in 2019.

One research area that Nickerson is passionate about is bystander intervention because “one of the things that we know about [middle school students] are present almost all the time when bullying is happening in some way”.

Nickerson has been involved in a pilot program called Norms and Bystander Intervention Training (NBIT) which focuses on understanding the reasons why someone may not intervene, and teaching adolescents how to recognize and respond to cyberbullying and sexual harassment with the goal of giving them tools to intervene.

One variable that has consistently been shown to not cause people to intervene is the fear of retaliation. Research shows that individuals may perceive that the individual being harassed has done something to deserve it.

On the other hand, one personality trait that has shown to consistently cause someone to intervene is empathy. Research shows that individuals possess, “affective empathy, being able to understand and feel bad that somebody else may be hurt by their actions.”

Some of her earlier work has also found that increased open communication and a closer relationship with the individual being bullied whether one will intervene.

Another factor is perceived popularity. According to Nickerson: “Those that already have people like them are more likely to have efficacy, they believe that they can make a difference.” One memory that has stuck with Nickerson is a freshman high school student shared with her that he stood up to his sports team when he recognized

According to Frederick, as traditional forms of bullying have declined, new forms have emerged: “If you look at these national datasets, we are generally finding an overall decline in traditional forms of bullying. If you look at what’s called bias-based bullying that targets for example someone’s sexual orientation, gender identity, or race, that’s still be still quite problematic. If you look at these large datasets with cyberbullying, we are seeing a rise in the last few years or so.”

Currently, the center is working with Dan Fox, guidance counselor of Clarence Middle School to implement a program to promote online safety and prevent cyberbullying.

This is a passion project for Frederick: “How can we have empathy both in the real world as well as online, and hoping to scale that up a little bit and ideally, help schools and families become more comfortable talking about that part of online safety.”

Katie Brown, a first-year Ph.D. student who is interested in social and emotional learning says that when she analyzed, the program at Clarence Middle School appears to have made a positive effect.

Prior to arriving at the center, postdoctoral associate Hannah Rapp published her dissertation on bullying of individuals with developmental disabilities. “Who gets bullied the most is students who have disabilities, especially those who, well, who might have less friends to defend them or who don’t pick up on social cues like everybody else.”

[Rapp’s dissertation found that](#) parents of disabled students often “come out of these situations with hurt from the school system.”

With a final sample of 146 parents, Rapp read 146 stories of the endless ways that kids with disabilities are bullied. One that she remembers was a story by “a mom who wrote ‘her daughter would wait for the bus at school and they would tell her to lick trees and the telephone pole, and they told her to kneel with her hands behind her head, and she was just joking because she had a [intellectual disability] and didn’t realize she was being bullied.’”

The Alberti Center will continue to serve as a valuable resource for the studying and prevention of bullying.

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