

Put an End to Bullying

Whether on the playground or the Internet, bullying is a serious problem. Not only can it undermine self-esteem, it can affect how a child feels about school and learning. Watching for telltale signs of a bullied child can help identify and help overcome the problem before it grows.

What is bullying?

Bullies were once thought of as the big kid pushing littler kids around on the playground or stealing lunch money. Today, educators and counselors know that bullying can be far more subtle and take a variety of forms, but they are all equally destructive.

Bullying is any action repeated over time in which an individual or group intentionally uses physical size, social standing, intelligence, or other perceived advantage to hurt, embarrass or humiliate another person. Experts point out that regardless of the method, bullies have the same goal: to elevate themselves at the expense of their victims.

When asked, most people associate bullying with some form of physical abuse. Bullying, however, can take many forms including:

- Physical—this is the “traditional” form of bullying where a bully hits, kicks, or bites the victim or damages personal property.
- Verbal—the old saying “sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me” is far from true. Research shows that using words to hurt or humiliate is as powerful as any physical act.
- Relational—more common among girls, this involves spreading rumors or saying mean things to exclude a person from a peer group.
- Prejudicial—the bully uses racial slurs or jokes about cultural, religious or other differences.
- Sexual harassment—while not as common among elementary school children, a bully will use suggestive words or inappropriate touches to make a victim feel uncomfortable.

For many generations, bullying was typically limited to school hours; victims were usually safe once school ended and they were back home. Sadly, cell phone texts, Facebook postings, Twitter tweets, and other acts of cyber-bullying enable bullies to reach their victims any time of the day or night.

Regardless of the form it takes, bullying always has the same goal—to establish or maintain the bully’s power at the expense of the victim. A bully uses his or her actions to say, “I am bigger, stronger, smarter, more popular, or more important than you are.” In other words, the bullies want to be seen as better than peers.

Devastating results

Bullying has far reaching effects. In short-term, victims can be physically hurt, saddened, frightened, or insulted. Over time, these behaviors can leave victims with a sense of inferiority or deep-rooted fear. They often carry emotional scars into their later school years or beyond.

Author and activist Eric Rofes sums it up this way, "When I was a young boy, the bully called me names, stole my bicycle, forced me off the playground. He made fun of me in front of other children, forced me to turn over my lunch money each day, threatened to give me a black eye if I told adult authority figures. At different times I was subject to a wide range of degradation and —de-pantsing (sic), spit in my face, forced to eat the playground dirt....To this day, their handprints, like a slap on the face, remain stark and defined on my soul."

Few children volunteer that they have been bullied for fear of even greater hurt. Children are anxious to fit in and are reluctant to say or do anything that might result in getting "beat up," or further isolation from their peers, so victims often suffer silently. As a result, parents need to watch for even subtle changes in behavior that might suggest something is wrong. Victims may:

- act moody, sullen, or withdraw from family interaction
- become depressed
- lose interest in school work, or grades drop
- lose appetite or have difficulty getting to sleep
- wait to use the bathroom at home
- arrive home with torn clothes, unexplained bruises
- ask for extra money for school lunch or supplies, extra allowance
- refuse to go to school (15 percent of all school absenteeism is directly related to fears of being bullied at school)
- want to carry a protection item, such as a knife
- begin bullying others (Research suggests that a growing number of victims become bullies.)

In more severe cases, victims become so overwhelmed by fear and helplessness that they may even consider harming themselves.

Even for children who are neither bullies nor victims, bullying has an impact. Roughly 30-50 percent of children are witnesses. Their involvement may range from support for the act to direct intervention on behalf of the victim. The majority, however, remain passive, allowing the event to take place. Researchers have discovered that witnesses of bullying may experience symptoms of psychological distress, such as feelings of depression, anxiety, hostility and inferiority and have a greater likelihood of using drugs.

(Play prominently as page 1 sidebar) Elementary schools tackle bullying head-on

Although bullying peaks in middle school and early high school, it has its roots in the elementary years. For this reason, early education is key to preventing the problem. All New York State schools are required to have clear bullying and anti-discrimination policies. School must also incorporate lessons on character education from kindergarten through grade 12.

During the elementary years, children are taught how to resolve conflicts peacefully, to accept others' differences and to work well as part of a team. Children who learn

tolerance and can get along with others are less likely to become bullies as teens and adults.

Character education also helps children develop good coping skills they can draw on if they are victims of bullying. In elementary classrooms, children may listen to and discuss books on this topic or role-play ways to resolve problems such as what to do if someone won't make room for a child to sit at the lunch table. Children are also encouraged to talk with their teachers or work one-on-one or in small groups with school social workers and counselors to learn good coping skills.

Helping children resist bullying

Although lessons in school are important, what children see and hear at home is even more powerful in influencing behavior.

Following are some ways families can help teach their children how to be safe and resist bullying:

- Talk with your children each day about anything and everything. Take the time to ask open ended questions—those that require more than a "yes," "no," or "nothing" answer. Ask about friends, school, and their likes and dislikes, and then patiently listen as they answer. These daily conversations will give you insight into their lives outside your home and may provide clues if something is troubling them. They will also be more likely to bring their concerns to you first if you are a patient and sympathetic listener.
- Practice what you preach. Responding calmly to stressful situations and being tolerant of others' differences sends a positive message to your children about how to act.
- Teach your children how to stay safe and stand up for themselves and others. For example: Look a bully in the eye, stand tall, use a firm voice, walk away from a conflict and find a trustworthy adult to talk to. Help them practice these skills; these behaviors don't always come naturally for children.
- Teach the difference between "tattling" and "reporting." The U.S. Department of Health offers this definition, "Tattling is when you are trying to get someone in trouble. Reporting is when you are trying to get someone out of trouble." It takes courage to stand up for someone who is in trouble. Encourage your children to be brave and to help protect themselves or someone else.
- Encourage constructive group activities. Bullies tend to pick on loners. Children with meaningful friendships and who are involved in adult-supervised clubs and activities are partially insulated from bullying.

If you think your child is being bullied...

Call the school to report any incidents of bullying. Talk with your child's teacher(s), principal, school counselor or social worker about what you know and discuss ways you can work together to solve the problem.

Optional Back Page

More Tips for Parents

- Encourage your child to talk with you about any bullying or harassment he may be experiencing at school. He may not volunteer this information; you may have to make a point to directly ask about his experiences in school.
- Encourage your child to participate in school clubs or athletics to widen her exposure to new friends and support systems, as well as to help build her self-esteem.
- Praise and encourage your children. Search for talents and praise them for it. A self-confident child is less likely to be bullied.
- Teach your child to be assertive rather than aggressive or violent when confronted by a bully. Instruct him to walk away and get help from an adult in more dangerous situations. Practice responses with your child through role-playing. Teach your child to attempt to stay within sight of adults as often as possible.
- If your child tells you she is being bullied, make a detailed record of each incident. Find out what happened, when it happened, and where the incident occurred. Note who was involved and if there were witnesses. Ask what response your child made and whether the incident was a one-time event or something that happens regularly.
- Build a relationship with your child's teachers and administrators. If your child is bullied, make an appointment with the school staff member who handles parental complaints. Give him or her a copy of your written report of the bullying incident and ask how he or she plans to address the problem or offer to help develop a plan. If you feel school staff are being dismissive, make note of the reaction to your complaint. Include names, staff position and dates.
- If you feel that your reports are not being acted upon, you may need to move up the chain of command in the school's administration. You may start with a teacher, if the bullying took place in a class, then work your way up to the principal, superintendent of schools, the school board, and finally, if these attempts prove unsuccessful, send a copy of the report of all events to date to the police for their files.
- Never blame your child if he has been a victim of bullying.
- Seek help from a mental health professional. Children who have been bullied often benefit from talking about what happened to them with a mental health professional. Signs that your child may need help include depression, withdrawal from friends or activities, and mood swings.

Tips for Students

- An easy way to remember how to avoid bullying is through the letters that form the word S-T-A-M-P.
- In general,
 - Stay away from bullies.
 - Tell someone.
 - Avoid bad situations.

- Make friends.
- Project confidence.
- Stay away from anyone or any group of kids who don't like you or are mean to others. Try taking a different route to and from school. If you are being bullied on the bus, make sure your driver is aware of the problems, and attempt to sit near the front of the bus within view of the driver.
- Tell someone you trust if you are being bullied, perhaps a trusted teacher, counselor, principal, or your parents. Tell them what happened, what you did, and who bullied you. Also note where it happened and if anyone else saw. If you tell someone who doesn't take you seriously enough, tell someone else.
- Avoid unsupervised areas of school or other places where you don't feel safe. Try to stay within the view of a teacher as much as possible and avoid being alone in remote parts of the building and locker rooms.
- Make friends at school and stick together. Join clubs or participate in the band or a sports team.
- Project confidence. Don't challenge a bully, but respond firmly or say nothing and walk away to the nearest adult.

*(from "The 411 Bullying" from the Hamilton Fish Institute
<http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojjdp/grants/226235.pdf>)*