

## **The dark side of bullying**

Bullying is far more than a school troublemaker stealing lunch money. It can take many forms, ranging from physical abuse to verbal putdowns to social isolation. In the past, there was a tendency to excuse bullying as a normal part of growing up. We have learned, however, that bullying undermines self-esteem and can lead to depression and in extreme cases, suicide. Understanding bullying—what it is and is not—is the first step in helping your child overcome this potentially disastrous problem.

Bullying includes a variety of negative acts that can be carried out once or repeated over time. It involves a real or perceived imbalance of power, with the more powerful teen or group attacking those who are less powerful.

## **Overcoming common misconceptions**

The problem of bullying is compounded by age-old arguments that tend to understate the seriousness of bullying. Among the half- and mistruths are:

- Bullying is physical—Although bullies often use physical force to intimidate their victims, teens can bully others verbally (insults and harsh teasing about appearance, sexual comments, threats, or rumors) or relational (excluding a person from his or her peer group usually through verbal threats of spreading rumors).
- Boys are the bullies—Boy bullies only slightly outnumber girl bullies, and that number is narrowing each year. Boys are more inclined to physically and verbally abuse others. Girls typically focus on relationships, ruining another's reputation or standing with friends.
- It's just good-natured teasing—Bullies and even bystanders fail to see the harm caused by bullying, but victims suffer isolation, self-esteem problems, and declining academic performance.
- “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but...”—The old saying simply doesn't hold true, especially not in high school. Older students become more sophisticated in both what they say and how they deliver their message. Teens struggling with body image, complexion problems, relationships, sports, and other weighty issues are especially vulnerable to the sharply delivered comments of their peers.
- Bullying is just a phase—One study showed that kids identified as bullies often develop deep-rooted anti-social behaviors. Nearly 60 percent of them were convicted of at least one crime by age 24, while 40 percent had three or more convictions by age 24.
- Bullying is limited to school—The advent of technology has created 24-hour-a-day opportunities to hurt others. Instant messages, texts, and tweets (those 140-character messages sent via Twitter) enable bullies to harass victims anywhere, anytime. Bullying can also take place at home (by friends, siblings or even parents) or in the neighborhood.
- Bullying is a one-on-one issue—Members of social cliques, sports teams, or gangs may work in concert to single out and bully individuals.
- Victims will “get over it”—While true that many victims learn to deal with bullies, many do not. A Massachusetts study revealed that students who are bullied just once at school

are two and a half times more likely to consider or attempt suicide than their peers. In other instances, victims learn from their oppressors and becoming bullies themselves.

### **Recognizing the problem**

The first step in helping the victim is to recognize a problem. Bullying victims seldom come forward and offer information. Instead, parents and friends need to watch for telltale signs of trouble such as:

- Sudden mood swings, frequent crying; depression. Bullied teens have five times the rate of depression as non-bullied students.
- Withdrawing from friends, clubs, sports, or other activities.
- Frequent illness, skipping school, or avoiding certain classes.
- “Lost” or “broken” possessions.
- Complaints of being picked on or persecuted.
- Threats of personal harm or suicide.

### **Parents can help**

A recent national survey indicated that nearly 75 percent of all parents are concerned about high school bullying. Bullying is a serious problem that deserves a quick and decisive response.

- Watch for trouble signs.
- Ask your child questions without judgment.
- Share your concerns with the appropriate teachers, coaches, or administrators.
- Check in with parents of other teens you know to see if their kids are experiencing similar problems.
- Don’t quit until you resolve the problem—there is too much at stake.
- Explore and support your school’s anti-bullying programs.

An area school psychologist offers this advice, “If your child is being bullied, react immediately. If your child feels action is being taken, he or she will sense a glimmer of hope. Without that promise of improvement, a teen is left with a feeling of hopelessness.”

### **Bullying and suicide (sidebar)**

Few things strike greater fear into the heart of parents than the thought of their children committing suicide. Yet, feelings of vulnerability paired with the powerlessness to respond (whether real or imagined) can leave a teen feeling desperate enough to consider the unthinkable. In one survey, as many as one in four victims of bullying have considered suicide and one in eight have actually attempted it.

### **Facts about Bullying**

- Most bullying cases go unnoticed and unreported by parents and schools because the victims rarely tell anyone until the bullying reaches a point of extreme physical or emotional pain.

- When bullying reaches the breaking point for victims, the results can be disastrous as we have seen in junior highs and high schools across the country.
- Whether bullies find their way into a victim’s life on the phone or in person, their abusive actions need to stop. If you hear about bullying at your teen’s school, call, e-mail or go see the principal or a school counselor.

## **Additional Resources**

### *Web resources*

- Bullying Is Not a Fact of Life (<http://family.samhsa.gov/redirect.asp?ID=6342>)
- Take Time To Talk About Bullying (<http://download.ncadi.samhsa.gov/ken/pdf/SVP-0051/SVP-0051.pdf>)
- Take Action Against Bullying (<http://download.ncadi.samhsa.gov/ken/pdf/SVP-0056/SVP-0056.pdf>)
- Stop Bullying Now! (<http://stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov/adults/default.aspx>)
- The Bully Roundup ([http://www.bam.gov/sub\\_yourlife/yourlife\\_bullyroundup.html](http://www.bam.gov/sub_yourlife/yourlife_bullyroundup.html))
- Bullying and Your Child, Dealing With Bullies (<http://kidshealth.org/parent/emotions/behavior/bullies.html>)
- What Kids Say About Bullying ([http://kidshealth.org/kid/feeling/school/poll\\_bullying.html](http://kidshealth.org/kid/feeling/school/poll_bullying.html)).
- Bullying (<http://www.ncpc.org/topics/bullying/>)
- Girls and Bullying (<http://www.ncpc.org/programs/circle-of-respect/bullying/girls-and-bullying/>)
- Cyberbullying (<http://www.ncpc.org/newsroom/current-campaigns/cyberbullying>),
- Friendships—Helping Your Child Through Early Adolescence (<http://www.ed.gov/parents/academic/help/adolescence/part9.html>).

### **Books**

- “Queen Bees and Wannabes: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends, and Other Realities of Adolescence” by Rosalind Wiseman
- “Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls” by Rachel Simmons
- “The Curse of the Good Girl” by Rachel Simmons
- “Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys” by Daniel Kindlon

- “And Words Can Hurt Forever” by James Garabino
- “A Parent’s Guide to Understanding and Responding to Bullying” by Arthur Horne