

## **When good fun becomes bullying**

Youngsters often like to kid around with each other, but what happens when kidding evolves into teasing, taunting, or bullying? Feelings usually get hurt – and sometimes the consequences can be far worse. What may seem like a simple joke can undermine an adolescent’s self-esteem and lead to self-destructive behaviors. Statistics show that bullying is most common in grades six through eight, so it is especially critical to recognize the signs of bullying and to stop it before it becomes even more serious.

## **What is bullying?**

Simply stated, bullying is treating others abusively. It can be as simple as name calling or as dramatic as stuffing someone in a locker. It takes many forms, but the objective is always the same—the bully tries to gain control over his or her victim.

Researchers break bullying down into four categories:

- **Physical**—Bullies may hit, kick, or shove others.
- **Verbal**—This is the most common form of bullying for boys and girls. Bullies use words to harm others through name-calling, insulting, or harsh teasing—most often about appearance, sexual comments or rumors (rarely racial or religious). The introduction of instant messaging, texting, and tweeting enable students to verbally abuse others over cyberspace.
- **Relational**—Bullies often focus on excluding one person from their peer group and usually do so through verbal threats and spreading rumors. This is most common among girls.
- **Reactive**—Bullies are individuals who are often both bully and victim. Typically victims first, they respond to victimization with bullying behavior later.

Interestingly, researchers found that bullies typically claim that their actions are just “joking.” Most bystanders believe that most teasing they witness is done with no mal intent. The victims, however, see the teasing as bullying. Regardless of a person’s perspective, the facts are clear—any time a person uses words, behavior, or physical force to demean another person, it is bullying...and it is wrong!

## **Who bullies?**

Bullying is not limited to the playground tough guy, nor is bullying limited to boys. Boys engage in bullying more frequently than girls but, both boys and girls bully. Boys are more likely to physically or verbally intimidate while girls generally turn to relational bullying.

## **Who is affected by bullying?**

Bullying tends to peak in late childhood/early adolescence, making it a major concern for middle and junior high schools. A 2001 study reports that nearly 30 percent of all middle school students were more than occasionally involved as a bully or the victim of bullying behavior. Most of these incidents occurred at lunch or recess, but also occurred outside of school and during class.

The victim is the person most obviously affected by bullying. Without emotional support of family and friends or in cases where bullying is ongoing or severe, victims are at greater risk of academic problems, absenteeism, loneliness, loss of friends, and harming themselves.

Ironically, bullying also affects the bullies. They are more at risk for such problems as delinquency, alcohol and drug abuse, and dropping out of school. In addition, both bullies and victims have been found to be more depressed than students who are not involved in bullying.

### **What are the signs of a bullied adolescent?**

A victim of bullying will seldom volunteer information. Instead look for signs such as:

- Mood swings including frequent crying; acting depressed.
- Withdrawing socially.
- Complaining frequently of illnesses; not wanting to go to school or avoiding certain classes.
- Bringing home damaged possessions or reporting things "lost."
- Comments of being picked on or persecuted.
- Talking about running away.
- Attempting to take protection to school, such as a stick, rock, or knife.

### **What can a parent do if you suspect your child is being bullied?**

If you suspect your child is a victim, sit down and have a long patient talk. Ask lots of questions and be prepared to listen for any signal of problems. If your child reports feeling bullied, don't laugh, shrug it off, or explain that it's "just the age." Be prepared to speak to teachers, coaches, and other adults in charge because they may not have noticed the behavior. A parent may ask for a meeting to discuss what is happening. Parents also can develop relationships with parents of other children in the same neighborhood or school. When several parents know about the bullying, or have children who are affected, they may be in a better position to deal with school staff members.

### **Facts about Bullying**

- Most bullying cases go unnoticed and unreported by parents and schools because 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 school, stop by the front office and report it to 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