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Bullying and Your Child



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Your child has always enjoyed learning, but lately seems eager to avoid school. Stomachaches and mysterious illnesses pop up in the evening and seem to get worse as the school bus creeps closer to your street the next morning. It's possible the problem has nothing to do with how last night's dinner was digested. Your child could be worried sick over a schoolyard bully.

Lea este artículo en Español 

Bullies can take the fun out of school — where bullying happens most — and turn something simple like a ride on the bus, stop at a locker, or walk to the bathroom into a scary event that's anticipated with worry all day.

Children who are bullied often experience low self-esteem and depression, whereas those doing the bullying may go on to engage in more destructive, antisocial behaviors as teens and adults. Bullies, who often have been bullied themselves, may pick on others to feel powerful, popular, important, or in control. Often, they antagonize the same children repeatedly.

Sadly, bullying is widespread. According to a 2004 KidsHealth KidsPoll, 86% of more than 1,200 9- to 13-year-old boys and girls polled said they've seen someone else being bullied, 48% said they've been bullied, and 42% admitted to bullying other kids at least once in a while.

If your child is a victim of bullying, you can help reduce intimidation and fear by listening and offering to help. If your child is the bully, you'll need to emphasize that this kind of behavior is unacceptable, as well as discuss why he or she might be doing it and how to stop it.

The Different Ways Kids Bully

Bullying behavior isn't always easy to define. Where do you draw the line between good-natured ribbing and bullying? Although teasing resembles bullying because it can prompt feelings of

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anger or embarrassment, teasing can be less hostile and done with humor, rather than harm. Teasing often promotes an exchange between people rather than a one-sided dose of intimidation.

Although the black eye is a concrete sign that your child may be a victim of bullying, there are many different ways kids bully that aren't always as easy to spot:

- **Cyber bullying** — a relatively new phenomenon — began surfacing as modern communication technologies advanced. Through email, instant messaging, Internet chat rooms, and electronic gadgets like camera cell phones, cyber bullies forward and spread hurtful images and/or messages. Bullies use this technology to harass victims at all hours, in wide circles, at warp speed.
- **Emotional bullying** can be more subtle and can involve isolating or excluding a child from activities (i.e., shunning the victim in the lunchroom or on school outings) or spreading rumors. This kind of bullying is especially common among girls.
- **Physical bullying** can accompany verbal bullying and involves things like kicking, hitting, biting, pinching, hair pulling, or threats of physical harm.
- **Racist bullying** preys on children through racial slurs, offensive gestures, or making jokes about a child's cultural traditions.
- **Sexual bullying** involves unwanted physical contact or sexually abusive or inappropriate comments.
- **Verbal bullying** usually involves name-calling, incessant mocking, and laughing at a child's expense.

Also, despite the common notion that bullying is a problem mostly among boys, both boys and girls bully. But boys and girls can vary in the ways they bully. Girls tend to inflict pain on a psychological level. For example, they might ostracize victims by freezing them out of the lunchroom seating arrangements, ignoring them on the playground, or shunning them when slumber party invitations are handed out.

Boys aren't as subtle and they can get physical. For example, boy bullies are more apt to insult their victims on the playground than ignore them. Instead of isolating a nonathletic victim during a gym class dodgeball game, they might take relentless aim and target the child throw after throw.

Why Kids Bully

There are many reasons why kids may become bullies. Bullies frequently target people who are different. Then, they seek to

exploit those differences. They choose victims who they think are unlikely to retaliate. That means children who are overweight, wear glasses, or have obvious physical differences like big ears or severe acne are common subjects for ridicule. But the differences don't have to be just physical. Children who learn at a different pace or are anxious or insecure can also be targets for bullies.

Bullies may also turn to this abusive behavior as a way of dealing with a difficult situation at home, such as a divorce. Bullies might not realize how hurtful their actions can be, but some know the pain firsthand because they've been bullied or have been victims of abuse themselves. Some bullies think their behavior is normal because they come from families in which everyone regularly gets angry, shouts, and/or calls names. They copy what they know. And just like the children they're tormenting, bullies often have low self-esteem.

Whatever the cause, bullies usually pick on others as a way of dealing with their own problems. Sometimes, they pick on kids because they need a victim — someone who seems emotionally or physically weaker — to try to gain acceptance and feel more important, popular, or in control. Although some bullies are bigger or stronger than their victims, bullies can come in all shapes and sizes.

Signs That a Child Is Being Bullied

Of course, bumps and bruises are telltale signs your child has been physically bullied, but you can watch for other less obvious hints, too:

- inventing mysterious illnesses to avoid school (for example, stomachaches, headaches, etc.)
- missing belongings or money
- sleeping problems
- bedwetting
- irritability
- poor concentration
- unexpected changes in routine
- problems with schoolwork

Being bullied can also have long-term consequences, affecting the way children form relationships as adolescents and adults and even possibly leading to more serious problems like substance abuse and depression. In addition, bully victims are more likely to experience withdrawn behavior such as anxiety and depression.

How to Help if Your Child Is Being Bullied

Being a good listener is one of the best ways to comfort your child. Just talking about the problem and knowing you care can be helpful. Your child is likely to feel vulnerable while discussing bullying and how it makes him or her feel, so it's important to show your love and support.

If you find out that your child is being bullied, don't add to the burden by becoming angry. Although it's understandable to be

upset, be careful not to let your child see that. Your sadness could be misinterpreted as disappointment. Be sure to validate your child's feelings — don't minimize them.

You should also reassure your child that he or she isn't to blame. Explain that bullies are often confused or unhappy people who don't feel good about themselves.

Also consider asking your child thoughtful questions, such as:

- What's it like walking to the bus stop or home from school?
- What's it like on the bus ride to and from school?
- What happens on the playground during recess or before or after school?
- What happens in the hallways at school or during lunchtime?
- Have any bullies in the neighborhood or at school threatened anyone you know?
- Do some kids you know get emails, instant messages, or text messages that are upsetting, threatening, or insulting?

This approach might make it easier for your child to talk about bullies because it isn't as personal and emphasizes that other kids experience bullying, too.

Artwork and drawings or puppets may prompt younger victims to talk about bullies. Older children, however, may be helped by direct questions, like asking them to talk about their "friends" and "enemies."

But telling your child what to actually *do* about bullying can be another story. The national KidsHealth KidsPoll showed that 46% of the children surveyed who said they've been bullied respond by fighting back, a solution that can just make things worse. Boys in the poll were more likely to say they would fight back than girls (53% of boys vs. 38% of girls), whereas girls were more likely to say they would talk to an adult than boys (32% of girls vs. 19% of boys).

The key to helping your child deal with bullying is to help him or her regain a sense of dignity and recover damaged self-esteem. To help ward off bullies, give your child these tips:

- **Hold the anger.** It's natural to want to get really upset with a bully, but that's exactly the response the bully is aiming for. Not only will getting angry or violent not solve the problem, it will only make it worse. Bullies want to know they have control over your child's emotions. Each time they get a reaction from your child, it adds fuel to the bully's fire — getting angry just makes the bully feel more

powerful.

- **Never get physical or bully back.** Emphasize that your child should never use physical force (like kicking, hitting, or pushing) to deal with a bully. Not only does that show anger, but your child can never be sure what the bully will do in response. Tell your child that it's best to hang out with others, stay safe, and get help from an adult.
- **Act brave, walk away, and ignore the bully.** Tell your child to look the bully in the eye and say something like, "I want you to stop right now." Counsel your child to then walk away and ignore any further taunts. Encourage your child to "walk tall" and hold his or her head up high (using this type of body language sends a message that your child isn't vulnerable). Bullies thrive on the reaction they get, and by walking away, or ignoring hurtful emails or instant messages, your child will be telling the bully that he or she just doesn't care. Sooner or later, the bully will probably get bored with trying to bother your child.
- **Use humor.** In a situations where your child has to deal with a bully and can't walk away with poise, tell him or her to use humor or offer a compliment to throw the bully off guard. However, tell your child **not** to use humor to make fun of the bully.
- **Tell an adult.** If your child is being bullied, emphasize that it's very important to tell an adult. Teachers, principals, parents, and lunchroom personnel at school can all help to stop it. Studies show that schools where principals crack down on this type of behavior have less bullying.
- **Talk about it.** It may help your child to talk to a guidance counselor, teacher, or friend — anyone who can give the support your child needs. Talking can be a good outlet for the fears and frustrations that can build when your child is being bullied.
- **Use the buddy system.** Enlisting the help of friends or a group may help both your child and others stand up to bullies. The bully wants to be recognized and feel powerful, after all, so a lot of bullying takes part in the presence of peers. If the bully is picking on another child, tell your child to point out to the bully that his or her behavior is unacceptable and is no way to treat another person. This can work especially well in group situations (i.e., when a member of your child's circle of friends starts to pick on or shun another member). Tell your child to make a plan to buddy up with a friend or two on the way to school, on the bus, in the hallways, or at recess or lunch — wherever your child might meet the bully. Tell your child to offer to do the same for a friend who's having trouble with a bully. When

one person speaks out against a bully, it gives others license to add their support and take a stand, too.

- **Develop more friendships by joining social organizations, clubs, or sports programs.** Encourage regular play or social visits with other children at your home. Being in a group with other kids may help to build your child's self-esteem and give your child a larger group of positive peers to spend time with and turn to.

Of course, you may have to intervene in persistent cases of bullying. That can involve going to school with your child and talking to your child's teacher, school counselor, or principal. In certain extreme cases it may be necessary to contact legal authorities. Safety should be everyone's concern. If you've tried the previous methods and still feel the need to speak to the bullying child's parents, it's best to do so within the context of the school, where a school official, such as a counselor, can mediate.

If Your Child Is the Bully

Learning your child is the bully can be shocking. But it's important to remain calm and avoid becoming defensive, as that can make a bad situation worse. You may have a greater impact if you express disappointment — not anger — to your child.

Because bullying often stems from unhappiness or insecurity, try to find out if something is bothering your child. Children who bully aren't likely to confess to their behavior, but you'll need to try to get your child to talk by asking some specific, hard-hitting questions, such as:

- How do you feel about yourself?
- How do you think things are going at school and at home?
- Are you being bullied?
- Do you get along with other kids at school?
- How do you treat other children?
- What do you think about being considered a bully?
- Why do you think you're bullying?
- What might help you to stop bullying?

To get to the bottom of why your child is hurting others, you may also want to schedule an appointment to talk to your child's school counselor or another mental health professional (your child's doctor should be able to refer you to someone).

If you suspect that your child is a bully, it's important to address the problem to try to mend your child's mean ways. After all, bullying is violence, and it often leads to more antisocial and

violent behavior as the bully grows up. In fact, as many as one out of four elementary school bullies have a criminal record by the time they're 30. Some teen bullies also end up being rejected by their peers and lose friendships as they grow older. Bullies may also fail in school and may not have the career or relationship success that other people enjoy.

Helping Your Child Stop Bullying

Although certainly not all bullying stems from family problems, it's a good idea to examine the behavior and personal interactions your child witnesses at home. If your child lives with taunting or name-calling from a sibling or from you or another parent, it could be prompting aggressive or hurtful behavior outside the home. What may seem like innocent teasing at home may actually model bullying behaviors. Children who are on the receiving end of it learn that bullying can translate into control over children they perceive as weak.

Constant teasing — whether it's at home or at school — can also affect a child's self-esteem. Children with low self-esteem can grow to feel emotionally insecure. They can also end up blaming others for their own shortcomings. Making others feel bad (bullying) can give them a sense of power.

Of course, there will be moments that warrant constructive criticism: for example, "I counted on you to put out the trash and because you forgot, we'll all have to put up with that stench in the garage for a week." But take care not to let your words slip into criticizing the person rather than the behavior: "You're so lazy. I bet you just pretend to forget your chores so you don't have to get your hands dirty." Focus on how the behavior is unacceptable, rather than the person.

Home should be a safe haven, where children aren't subjected to uncomfortable, harsh criticism from family and loved ones.

In addition to maintaining a positive home atmosphere, there are a number of ways you can encourage your child to give up bullying:

- **Emphasize that bullying is a serious problem.** Make sure your child understands you will **not** tolerate bullying and that bullying others will have consequences at home. For example, if your child is cyber bullying, take away the technologies he or she is using to torment others (i.e., computer, cell phone to text message or send pictures). Or instruct your child to use the Internet to research bullying and note strategies to reduce the behavior. Other examples of disciplinary action include restricting your child's curfew if the bullying and/or teasing occur outside of the home; taking away privileges, but allowing the opportunity to earn them back; and requiring your child to do volunteer work to help those less fortunate.
- **Teach your child to treat people who are different**

with respect and kindness. Teach your child to embrace, not ridicule, differences (i.e., race, religion, appearance, special needs, gender, economic status). Explain that everyone has rights and feelings.

- **Find out if your child's friends are also bullying.** If so, seek a group intervention through your child's principal, school counselor, and/or teachers.
- **Set limits.** Stop any show of aggression *immediately* and help your child find nonviolent ways to react.
- **Observe your child interacting with others and praise appropriate behavior.** Positive reinforcement is more powerful than negative discipline.
- **Talk with school staff and ask how they can help your child change his or her bad behavior.** Be sure to keep in close contact with the staff.
- **Set realistic goals and don't expect an immediate change.** As your child learns to modify behaviors, offer assurances that you still love him or her — it's the behavior you don't like.

Getting Help for Both Bullies and Kids Being Bullied

A big part of helping your child is not being afraid to ask others for assistance and advice. Whether your child is being bullied or is the one doing the bullying, you may need to get outside help. In addition to talking to your child's teachers, you may also want to take advantage of school counseling services and consult your child's doctor, who may be able to refer you to a mental health professional.

You may also want to talk to the school principal about bullying policies. For example, ask how bullies are disciplined and whether areas where bullies harass people, like stairwells or courtyards, are observed by staff. Voice your concerns to teachers, fellow parents, school bus drivers, school counselors, the school board, and the parent-teacher association. If your child's school doesn't already have one, start an antiviolence program. If the environment at your child's school supports bullying, working to change it may help.

Reviewed by: Jennifer Shroff Pendley, PhD

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