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# Children and Bullying: A Guide for Parents

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Although bullying is *not* a normal part of childhood, it's a serious and common problem that can drastically affect the ability of children—bullies and their victims alike—to progress academically, emotionally and socially. This publication explains what bullying is, discusses the interaction of bullies and their victims, and suggests how to respond to and curtail bullying.

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**B**ULLYING is a common occurrence during childhood. It is most frequently seen in school, but it also occurs in the home, at clubs, and during sports activities. As many as half of all children are bullied at some time during their school years, and 10% are bullied on a regular basis. Boys are more commonly involved in bullying than girls—both as bully and victim. Some children learn well how to control and manipulate others and begin to enjoy doing so. These actions may set a pattern for how children will behave as adults. Children who are bullied suffer emotionally or physically and usually do so in silence for fear that the bullies will get back at them.

## What is bullying?

Bullying is any kind of ongoing physical or verbal mistreatment where there is unequal power between two or more people—such as bigger children picking on smaller ones or bullying a child who is thought to be different. It occurs when a child purposely and repeatedly holds power over another with the intent of hurting another.

A wide range of physical or verbal behaviors can be described as bullying: insulting, teasing, verbally and physically abusing, threatening, humiliating, harassing, gossiping, spreading rumors, rejecting, and excluding. Boys tend to use physical intimidation and threats regardless of

the gender of their victims. Girls often target other girls and are likely to use such indirect strategies as spreading rumors. While victims tend to be upset about the incident, bullies are matter-of-fact, stating that “the kid was asking for it” or “it didn’t really hurt.”

## Who are the children who bully others?

Children who bully typically have a need to feel powerful and in control. They get enjoyment from hurting others and making them suffer. They have little compassion for those they bully, and often defend their actions by saying that their victims “made” them act as they did.

Bullies often come from homes where physical punishment is used, children are taught to fight back physically, and parental involvement and warmth are missing. They may come from homes where there are family financial and other problems. These children may be depressed or angry or upset about events at school or home. Bullying may also be modeled by other children; children often repeat the behaviors they witness.

Children who bully appear to have little anxiety and a strong self-esteem. They work through fear and manipulation, intimidating others by threatening to harm them, calling them names if the victim tells anybody what is occurring.

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## Which children are likely to be bullied?

Bullies tend to pick on those who are quiet and sensitive or stand out in some way (they're taller or shorter, they wear braces, they're overweight or have a disability). Bullied children often have a hard time defending themselves because they're not confident in their physical abilities and strength. Children who are irritating and annoying and who seek negative attention from their peers also tend to get picked on.

Children who are bullied usually have few friends to help defend them in a bullying situation. (The friends they do have may be afraid to step in for fear of being targeted as well.) They tend to be close to their parents, who may be overprotective. A child who is bullied is often ashamed or afraid to tell an adult about the bullying. Many bullied children think that adults will not help them and that telling on the bully will only bring more harm.

## Bullying in preschool

Bullying behavior can be seen as early as preschool. Preschool-age children may bully others to get attention, show off, or get what they want (toys, clothing, playground equipment). They might be jealous of the children they are bullying. They may also be getting bullied themselves. When preschoolers begin to call people names or use unkind words, intervene immediately and consistently to teach acceptable behavior.

## Bullying in elementary school

Younger children are bullied more often than older children. University of Michigan researchers found that 8-year-old children who had been identified as bullies in their schools were often bullies for the rest of their lives.

Children usually bully because they are being bullied or want to show off. They may also bully because they're angry or upset or bored.

In kindergarten, children learn the power of exclusion. It may be common to hear things like, "She's not my friend and can't come to my birthday party." Adults might respond, "You don't have to be her friend right now, but it is not

okay to hurt her feelings by telling her she can't come to your party."

In early elementary grades, cliques may contribute to cruel behavior, and children may be cruel to one another. Children need to hear such things as, "It's not okay for you to treat others that way."

## Bullying in adolescence

Many teens tease their peers to go along with the crowd but feel uncomfortable doing so. Those who report bullying others often state that they are themselves bullied. In the U.S., approximately 1.6 million children in grades 6 through 10 are bullied at least once a week. When made fun of, rejected or bullied, some teens turn to violence.

In early adolescence, especially in the sixth grade, when students are trying to fit in with others, there's an increase in teasing and bullying. Once peer groups have formed, many bullying behaviors go away. Bullying is most frequent and most severe in middle school, and declines in high school. Youth who bully are typically popular up to the ages of 14 or 15; however, when such bullies reach their late teens, their popularity typically declines.

## What are the consequences of bullying?

Being bullied can have such serious short-term effects as depression, withdrawal from friends and family and declining school performance—including not wanting to go to school at all. Long-term effects may interfere with children's social, academic, and emotional development. In extreme cases, victims may be so upset that they are suicidal. The sooner the bullying is stopped, the better the long-term outcome for those who are bullied.

Children who bully tend to become aggressive adults who stand a much higher chance than non-bullies of racking up multiple criminal convictions.

Bullying may cause anxiety in bystanders. Children who observe violent behavior and see that the bully is not punished will be more likely to use aggression in the future.

## What can parents do to help bully-proof their children?

- **Encourage friendships.** Children who don't have friends tend to be vulnerable to bullies. Start early in helping your child build social skills and make friendships.
- **Teach your children to express themselves clearly yet tactfully.** Help your child use "I statements" (e.g., "I am upset because I feel that you are picking on me"). Such "I statements" explain how people feel. When children know how to express themselves without offending others, they tend to be popular with their peers, and that will keep bullies away.
- **Teach self-respect.** A confident child is not likely to become a victim of a bully.
- **Stress the importance of body language.** Teach your child to be assertive by relaxing his body (deep breathing helps), keeping his hands steady, and using frequent eye contact. These tricks will help children seem self-assured even when they are not.
- **Start teaching the art of negotiation early.** The preschool years are the best time to begin teaching children to settle their own disputes and solve problems. For example, when your child is fighting over a toy with another child, let them discuss how they can share the toy; let them talk about what can be done to solve the problem.

## What are some helpful strategies for talking with a child who has been bullied?

- **Help your child be self-confident.** Help your child practice what to say to the bullies so he or she will be prepared the next time. Teach her to tell bullies that their actions won't be tolerated. However, some bullies feed on responses, so your child should assert himself just once. If it doesn't work, tell your child to do something else so that the bullying doesn't escalate.

- **Don't encourage your child to fight the bully.**
- **Tell your child it is not her fault** and that she did the right thing by telling you.
- **Ask your child what she thinks should be done.** What has she tried? What worked and what didn't? Make it clear that she should never be ashamed to ask for help. Encourage your child to report the bullying to her teachers, guidance counselors, or other responsible adults.
- **Teach your child to avoid situations when necessary.** Tell him to avoid the bullies by taking different routes to and from school. Since it may only delay the bullying attempts, this approach should not be looked at as a long-term solution. Instead, it should be looked at in terms of safety—a way to avoid immediate harm.

If your child becomes withdrawn, depressed, or reluctant to go to school, or if you see a decline in performance, consultation with or intervention by a school counselor or guidance office, for example, may be needed. A child and adolescent psychiatrist or other mental health professional can help you, your child, other family members and school officials develop a plan to deal with the bullying. Seeking professional assistance early can lessen the risk of lasting emotional scars for your child.

### **When should an adult intervene?**

If you observe a child being bullied, watch to see whether the child is able to handle the situation herself. Then talk to the victim and commend her for handling the situation well. You may also want to talk to the bully to express to him that his behavior was inappropriate.

However, if the victim is not able to handle the situation alone, intervene. Depending on the situation, you may want to discuss the bully's action with his parents or a school official or both.

### **What can we do to help our child if he bullies others?**

Although we don't like to think that our child could be a bully, we must face reality if it happens. Here are some suggestions for parents and caregivers responsible for a child who is bullying others.

- **Make sure your child isn't witnessing violence between members of your family.** Modeling aggressive behavior at home can lead to violence by the child against others at school and later on in life.
- **Talk to your child, his teachers and school administrators.** Children who bully try to deny or minimize their wrongdoings. Cooperate with the school to help change your child's aggressive behavior. Talk frequently with teachers and administrators to find out how he's doing in changing his behavior.
- **Make it clear that bullying will not be tolerated.** Tell your child you will not allow such actions, and state the consequences. If the problem occurs at school, tell him that you respect the school's right to punish him if it persists.

- **Have your child walk in the victim's shoes.** Discuss how it feels to be bullied. How would he feel if it happened to him?
- **Increase your supervision of your child's activities and whereabouts.** Find out who he's associating with. Spend time with him and set reasonable rules for and limits on activities.
- **Praise the efforts your child makes toward becoming nonviolent and responsible.**

If your child is bullying others, it is important to seek help for him as soon as possible. Without intervention, bullying can lead to serious academic, social, emotional, and legal problems for the bully as well as for the victim. Talk to your child's principal and teachers, school counselor, and pediatrician or family physician. If the bullying continues, have your child evaluated by a children's psychiatrist or other mental health professional. Such an evaluation can help you and your child understand what's behind the bullying and develop a plan to stop it.

### **Conclusion**

Bullying is a serious problem that can drastically affect the ability of children to progress academically, emotionally, and socially. Children who bully or are bullied often need intensive support and intervention. An intervention program that involves all—students, parents and school staff—ensures that all children can learn to cooperate in a safe and fear-free environment. When everyone works together to discourage bullying and responds to incidents, the surroundings become more positive, and everyone feels safer.

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*See next page for online resources.*

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## ONLINE RESOURCES

A fact sheet from About Our Kids:

**[www.aboutourkids.org/articles/bullies.html](http://www.aboutourkids.org/articles/bullies.html)**

A fact sheet from the University of Nebraska – Lincoln:

**[www.ianr.unl.edu/pubs/family/nf309.htm](http://www.ianr.unl.edu/pubs/family/nf309.htm)**

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