

Positive Parenting of Teens

tips and tools

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Bullying Makes Life Miserable for Many Kids

Ronald L. Pitzer, Family Sociologist, University of Minnesota Extension Service;
Asst. Professor of Social Work, College of Human Ecology; and Positive Parenting Project Leader

There's nothing new about bullies. Most people can remember some experience with a bully while growing up. Unfortunately, bullies still cause psychological and physical damage to other kids. Consider these figures from studies over the past ten years:

- American schools harbor approximately 2.1 million bullies and 2.7 million of their victims.
- 77% of students in a Midwestern study say they have been bullied.
- In an interview study of 7- to 12-year-olds in rural Minnesota, 69% said there were bullies in their town and over 50% said they had been picked on by these bullies. Bullying included swearing, teasing, throwing things, knocking them down, name-calling, and beating.
- The National School Safety Council estimates that 525,000 "attacks, shakedowns, and robberies" occur in an average month in public secondary schools.
- It is estimated that 160,000 children miss school every day due to fear of attack or intimidation by other students.

These studies show bullying is most frequent in grades 2 through 6, most serious in grades 7 through 9, and tapers off after that. Most research indicates that 10 to 15% of children are regular victims of bullies and that 7 to 9% of school-age children are bullies. Boys are somewhat more likely than girls to be the victims of bullying and are considerably more likely to be bullies. But, interestingly, 30 to 40% of the bullying of girls and 15 to 20% of the bullying of boys is done by girls.

Bullies and Their Victims

It has been shown that bullies are angry kids who usually are bullied at home by parents, step parents or older, bigger siblings. Bullies generally come from families where parents use physical means of discipline. They may be kids reacting poorly to divorce, death, or other family crises. However, bullying is **not** normal childhood behavior and should not be dismissed as "*kids will be kids*." This research has shown that children who show chronic patterns of aggression by age eight are more likely to be involved in criminal behavior and family violence later in life. They are also more likely to physically punish or abuse their own kids. Intervention is needed to stop this behavior and, in many cases, professional help is needed.

Typically, assertive, self-confident children do not become victims of bullying. Surprisingly, children who are fat, wear glasses, or are scholarly are no more likely to be bullied than others. Children usually are singled out because of psychological traits such as extreme passivity, sensitivity to criticism, or low self-esteem.

After reviewing the research, psychologist David Perry concludes that the probability, intensity, and duration of aggression increases if the victim is perceived by the aggressor as deliberately provocative; resembles others who the aggressor has seen victimized; has a history of yielding to the aggressor's demands; or fails to show signs that normally inhibit aggressive responses.

Children who are routinely victimized by bullies spend their childhood plagued by anxiety, insecurity, and low self-esteem. Chronic victims of bullying probably need professional help as much as the bullies do.

The Bystander

Some experts suggest that changing attitudes and involvement of kids who witness but are not victims of bullying may have the greatest impact on bullies.

Since bullies love an audience, a bystander's encouragement or toleration of the bully will make the bully stronger. Training through role-playing can help children recognize a potentially harmful situation and assertively do something positive. By saying simply, "*That's not fun*," a bystander can stop a bully's activities. Children need to know that taking a stand for what is right can be very effective.

How to Deal with Bullies

Experts indicate that teachers and parents seem unaware of bullying and victimization. They, therefore, do little to stop bullies or to help children cope with being bullied.

What You Can Do if Your Child is the Victim of a Bully

- Pay attention to your child's reports of school or neighborhood violence.
- Watch for signs that a child is being victimized—such as torn clothing, unexplained bruises, moodiness, withdrawn behavior, a drop in grades, lack of friends, loss of appetite, coming home to use the bathroom, or low self-esteem.
- Be suspicious if your child needs extra school supplies or extra lunch

money. A bully may be blackmailing your child for things your child claims he or she loses.

- Take an active role in the school to keep up on potential problems.
- Report all incidents to school authorities and insist that they ensure your child's safety.
- Record bullying incidents.
- Work on building your child's self-esteem and encourage assertive, not aggressive, responses.
- Teach your children how to respond to aggression. With bullies, they should be assertive and leave the scene without violence. **Do not** tell children to strike back. This tells children that the only way to fight violence is by using more violence. It makes them feel that they need to solve the problem alone and that parents and teachers don't care enough to help.
- Eliminate violent toys, games, TV shows, and movies as much as possible. Discuss and demonstrate cooperative, nonaggressive ways to solve problems.
- Avoid physical punishment because it sends the message that using physical force is acceptable. Children disciplined by physical punishment may use physical force to get their way with others.

What to Do if Your Child is a Bully

- Teach your child to recognize and express emotions nonviolently.
- Teach conflict-management and conflict-resolution skills.
- Emphasize talking out the issue rather than hitting.
- Promote empathy by pointing out the consequences for others of the child's verbal and physical actions.
- Don't put down a bully. Bullies are intolerant of any insult to their self-concept.
- Model toward the child the kind of behavior you want him/her to exhibit.

Experts recommend that parents and teachers take a hard-line approach to childhood aggression. Adults must make it clear that aggressive behavior in school, the neighborhood, or at home is not acceptable and will not be tolerated. Children should be encouraged to report aggression and threats. Parents and school staff must deal with these incidents seriously.

When aggression is tolerated, everyone loses—the bullies, the victims, and the bystanders. They are all learning that violence is acceptable, and that is not the lesson we want to teach our children.

Bullying can be eliminated if adults and children become partners in this crusade against cruelty.

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