



For Parents and Families: What to do if a Child is Being Bullied

WHAT IS BULLYING?

Bullying among children is aggressive behavior that is intentional and that involves an imbalance of power or strength. A child who is being bullied has a hard time defending himself or herself. Bullying can take many forms, such as: hitting and/or punching (physical bullying); teasing or name-calling (verbal bullying); intimidation through gestures or social exclusion (nonverbal bullying or emotional bullying); and sending insulting messages by phone or computer e-mail (cyber bullying). Usually, bullying is repeated over time. Many children, particularly boys and older children and youth, do not tell their parents or adults at school about being bullied. It is important that adults are vigilant to possible signs of bullying.

WARNING SIGNS

Possible warning signs that a child is being bullied:

- Comes home with torn, damaged, or missing pieces of clothing, books, or other belongings
- Has unexplained cuts, bruises, and scratches
- Has few, if any friends, with whom he or she spends time
- Seems afraid of going to school, walking to and from school, riding the school bus, or taking part in organized activities with peers (such as clubs)
- Takes a long, “illogical” route when walking to or from school
- Has lost interest in school work or suddenly begins to do poorly in school
- Appears sad, moody, teary, or depressed when he or she comes home
- Complains frequently of headaches, stomach aches, or other physical ailments
- Has trouble sleeping or has frequent bad dreams
- Experiences a loss of appetite
- Appears anxious and/or suffers from low self-esteem

EFFECTS OF BULLYING

Bullying can have serious consequences. Children and youth who are bullied are more likely than other children to:

- Be depressed, lonely, anxious
- Have low self-esteem



- Be absent from school
- Feel sick
- Think about suicide

REPORTING BULLYING TO PARENTS

Children frequently do not tell their parents that they are being bullied because they are embarrassed, ashamed, frightened of the children who are bullying them, or afraid of being seen as a “tattler.” If your child tells you about being bullied, it has taken a lot of courage to do so. Your child needs your help to stop the bullying.

WHAT TO DO IF YOU SUSPECT YOUR CHILD IS BEING BULLIED?

If your child shows any of the above signs, this does not necessarily mean that he or she is being bullied, but it is a possibility worth exploring. What should you do? Talk with your child and talk with staff at school to learn more.

Talk with your child. Tell your child that you are concerned about him or her and that you’d like to help. Here are some questions that can get the discussion going:

- “I’m worried about you. Are there any kids at school who may be picking on you or bullying you?”
- “Are there any kids at school who tease you in a mean way?”
- “Are there any kids at school who leave you out of things on purpose?”
- “Do you have any special friends at school this year? Who are they? Who do you hang out with?”
- “Who do you sit with at lunch/on the bus?”
- “Are there any kids at school who you really don’t like? Why don’t you like them? Do they ever pick on you?”

Talk with staff at your child’s school. Call or set up an appointment to talk with your child’s teacher. He or she will probably be in the best position to understand the relationships between your child and peers at school. Share your concerns about your child and ask the teacher such questions as:

- “How does my child get along with other students in his/her class?”
- “With whom does he/she spend free time?”
- “Have you noticed or have you ever suspected that my child is bullied by other students?”

Give examples of some ways that children can be bullied to be sure that the teacher is not



focusing only on one kind of bullying (such as physical bullying). Ask the teacher to talk with other adults who interact with your child at school (such as the music teacher, physical education teacher or bus driver) to see if they have observed students bullying your child. If you are not comfortable talking with your child's teacher, or if you are not satisfied with the conversation, make an appointment to meet with your child's guidance counselor, and/or principal to discuss your concerns. If you obtain information from your child or from staff at your child's school that leads you to believe he or she is being bullied, take quick action. Bullying can have serious effects on children. If, after talking with your child and staff at his or her school, you don't suspect that your child is being bullied, stay vigilant to other possible problems that your child may be having. A number of the warning signs above (e.g., depression, social isolation, loss of interest in school) may be signs of other serious problems. Share your concerns with a counselor at your child's school.

WHAT TO DO IF YOU ARE CERTAIN YOUR CHILD IS BEING BULLIED

1. Focus on your child. Be supportive and gather information about the bullying.
 - Never tell your child to ignore the bullying. What the child may "hear" is that you are going to ignore it. If the child were able to simply ignore it, he or she likely would not have told you about it. Often, trying to ignore bullying allows it to become more serious.
 - Don't blame the child who is being bullied. Don't assume that your child did something to provoke the bullying ("What did you do to aggravate the other child?")
 - Listen carefully to what your child tells you about the bullying. Ask him/her to describe who was involved and how each bullying episode played out.
 - Learn as much as you can about the bullying tactics being used, and when and where the bullying happened. Can your child name other children or adults who may have witnessed the bullying?
 - Sympathize with your child. Tell him/her that bullying is wrong and that you are glad he/she had the courage to tell you about it. Ask what he/she thinks can be done to help. Assure him/her that you will think about what needs to be done and you will let him/her know what you are going to do.
 - If you disagree with how your child handled the bullying situation, don't criticize him/her.
 - Do not encourage physical retaliation ("Just hit them back") as a solution. Hitting



- another student is not likely to end the problem, and it could get your child suspended or expelled.
- Check your emotions. A parent's protective instincts stir strong emotions. Although it is difficult, a parent is wise to step back and consider the next steps carefully.
2. Contact your child's teacher and/or principal. Parents are often reluctant to report bullying to school officials, but bullying probably won't stop without the help of adults at your child's school. Keep your emotions in check. Give factual information about your child's experience of being bullied—who, what, when, where, and how. Emphasize that you want to work with the staff at school to find a solution to stop the bullying, for the sake of your child as well as others.
- Do not contact the parents of the student(s) who bullied your child. This is usually a parent's first response, but sometimes it makes matters worse. School officials should contact the parents of the child or children who did the bullying.
 - Expect the bullying to stop. Talk regularly with your child and with school staff to see if the bullying has stopped. If the bullying persists, contact school authorities again.
3. Help your child to become more resilient to bullying from others.
- Help to develop your child's talents and positive attributes. Doing so may help your child be more confident among his/her peers.
 - Encourage your child to make contact with friendly students in class. Your child's teacher may be able to suggest students with whom your child can make friends, spend time, or collaborate on work.
 - Help your child meet new friends outside of the school environment. A new environment can provide a "fresh start" for a child who has been bullied over and over by classmates.
 - Teach your child safety strategies. Teach him/her how to seek help from an adult when she/he feels threatened. Talk about whom she/he should go to for help and rehearse what to say. Assure your child that reporting bullying is not the same as tattling.
 - Ask yourself: Is my child being bullied because of a learning difficulty or a lack of social skills? If your child is hyperactive, impulsive or overly talkative, the child who bullies may be reacting out of annoyance. This doesn't make the



bullying right, but it may help to explain why your child is being bullied. If your child easily irritates people, seek help from a counselor so that your child can better learn the informal social rules of his/her peer group.

- Home is where the heart is. Make sure your child has a safe and loving home environment where he/she can take shelter, physically and emotionally. Keep the communication lines open!

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