



Help Your Child Deal With Bullies and Bullying

One of a series of Parent Guides from

**THE
PARENT
INSTITUTE®**

Parent Guide

Help Your Child Deal With **Bullies and Bullying**

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Introduction

Bullying is not a new problem, but it is a very serious one. No child deserves to be the victim of a bully, or should have to tolerate it. According to the research, most children are victims of bullying at some point during their school years and as many as 10 percent are the victims of severe acts of bullying on a regular basis.

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) says there is a misconception that bullying is an unavoidable part of childhood and adolescence, and for that reason many parents and schools ignore or minimize the problem. But, it says, bullying may have serious consequences, including physical and mental health problems, depression and low self-esteem. Bullied students consider suicide more often than students who are not bullied, and they may also bring weapons to school. Bullying also affects bystanders, creating a climate of fear and anxiety at the school, making students feel unsafe and leading to an unhealthy learning environment.

NASP says bullies also suffer themselves. They often face a troubled future of academic underachievement and failure, and they are more likely to become abusive spouses or parents and engage in criminal activities as adults.

Bullying is a significant problem affecting many children and deserves the attention of parents, school and community leaders to control it. *Experts agree that prevention and parent cooperation with school and other local agencies are the best strategies to address the problem, but that parents have a leading role to play if they suspect or learn of bullying behavior.* This Parent Guide reviews the facts about bullying, signs to watch for, and provides specific action steps parents can take to help stop bullying.



Veteran educators warn that most children will say they don't want their parents to get involved, but they emphasize that it is an absolute must that parents do get involved.

**Each child is unique, so this publication alternates using masculine and feminine pronouns.*

What is bullying?

Bullying is the act of repeatedly inflicting physical and/or psychological harm to another person or persons. Some experts define bullying as an imbalance of power that exists over an extended period of time between two individuals, two groups, or a group and an individual in which the more powerful intimidates or belittles others.

Bullying can take many different forms—direct behaviors such as verbal taunts, name calling, teasing and put-downs, threats and intimidation, menacing gestures, physical violence or extortion and theft, for example. More indirect bullying behaviors can include intentional exclusion from a group, spreading rumors and creating situations where victims feel like social outcasts. And now, in today's social media world of texts, tweets and other instant posting sites, cyberbullying has become an increasingly common occurrence.

Bullies can now use electronic technology to anonymously post malicious messages that spread rumors and make fun of others. Most young people today have their own cell phones and text messaging is a popular method of communicating. Unfortunately, this has also become the method of choice for many bullies.



Teasing can be bullying, too

One of the most common forms of bullying is teasing and nearly every child experiences it. Sometimes the teaser has no intention of bullying but simply means to be playful or even affectionate. The problem is that the distinction between teasing and bullying is very subtle. The victim can interpret what is intended as fun and harmless by the teaser as mean and hurtful.

Teasing is a “slippery slope,” even for parents who can unwittingly become bullies to their own children and send the message that it's okay for their children to tease their friends.



Who are the bullies?

When most people think about bullies, they think of the stereotypical “big kid inclass”—but not all bullies are boys and not all bullies are physically big. Many girls engage in bullying, too. Bullies are usually physically, psychologically or socially more powerful than those they bully.

While boys generally engage in the more direct and physical forms of bullying, girls who bully are more likely to use more indirect and subtle methods. Regardless of the form it takes, however, there is one constant. Bullying is ongoing. It is a pattern of behavior that occurs repeatedly over time.

Why do some children become bullies?

Although the common wisdom is that youngsters who bully suffer from low self-esteem, research indicates just the opposite: Bullies tend to have average or above average self-esteem. The one thing many bullies do seem to have in common is their home environment.



Most children who bully learn the behavior at home. Researchers have found that children who engage in bullying behavior have received the most forceful and physical discipline from their parents. These children often receive little attention and affection from their parents and frequently lack supervision. As a rule, they have fewer positive adult role models.

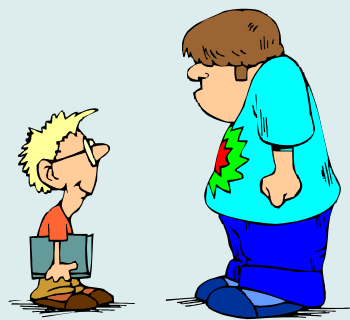
Temperament also appears to be a factor. Children who bully seem to have a need to feel powerful and in control. They seem to enjoy tormenting other children and often justify their actions by claiming that they were provoked.

Which kids are more likely to be bullied?

Generally, it is the children who are smaller, shyer or less aggressive than their peers who are singled out by bullies. Youngsters with special needs—especially those who have Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or who are classified as learning disabled—are also more likely to be victimized.

Bullies may target children who cry easily under stress, who seem easy to manipulate and are quick to obey what other children tell them to do. But almost anything, regardless of how minor, can attract the attention of a bully. The victim may be taller, shorter, fatter or thinner. He might wear glasses or dress differently than most of the kids in school. Or, he might be the new kid on the block.

The one common denominator among habitual victims of bullying, however, is low self-esteem. These are the kids who don't retaliate—or at least try to make the situation better—because they think they somehow deserve to be picked on. These are the kids who may need extra help learning to feel good about themselves.



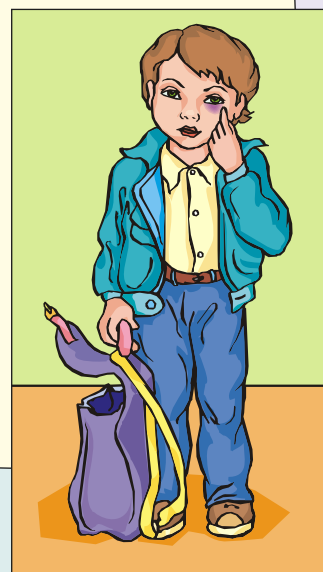
Learn to recognize the signs

Many children who are bullied don't tell anyone about it—even when they are asked directly by their parents. Or, if they do tell, they don't do so immediately. And—according to the research—the older the child, the less likely he is to report it at all.

Because of that, it's important for parents to know the signs that their child might be the victim of a bully. Here are some questions to ask yourself:

- **Has your child had an abnormal number of cuts, scrapes or bruises or too many instances of torn clothing?** It may be an indication that he is being abused.
- **Has he begun taking an unusual or circuitous route to school?** He may be trying to avoid the area where his tormentor generally hangs out.
- **Have his grades dropped?** It's hard to concentrate on schoolwork when you're busy worrying about what's going to happen to you next.
- **Does your child frequently explain away missing items—**money, toys, clothing, etc.—by claiming to have lost them? Some bullies engage in extortion and/or theft.
- **Does he make a beeline for the bathroom** when he comes in the door from school? Bathrooms are high on the list of places bullies are likely to attack, and your child may consider “holding it” his best option.

- **Has he become overly angry or aggressive,** or unusually withdrawn? Children who are bullied often react by taking it out on others—including parents or siblings—or by isolating themselves.
- **Has your child begun to have stomachaches,** headaches, panic attacks or difficulty sleeping? These can all be signs of bully-related stress.
- **Is he reluctant to go to school?** Does he suddenly not want to take part in school activities that he used to enjoy? These are some of the strongest signals that he may be the victim of a bully, because most bullying takes place at school.
- **Does your child seem to have low self-esteem** or self-confidence? Does he have difficulty asserting himself?

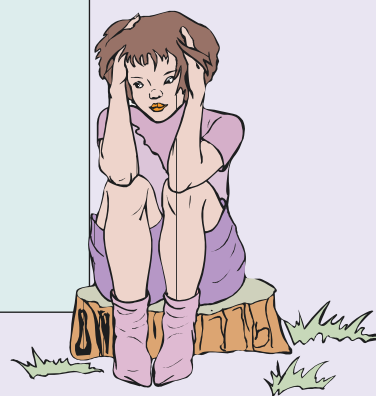


While it's important not to ignore these signs, it's also important not to overreact or jump to conclusions. Confirm your suspicions before you determine what course of action to take. Talk with your child. Tell him what you suspect and explain why it's important for him to tell you the truth. Get as much information as you can and avoid assigning blame until you have all the facts.

Why kids don't talk

Parents are often the last to know that their child is being bullied. Most children just don't talk about it, for a number of reasons:

- **They are ashamed.** Bullies tend to make their victims feel unworthy of respect, unpopular and isolated. Boys, especially, are unlikely to tell a parent because our culture tells them that they are supposed to be able to "take it" or "be strong." Girls often don't talk about it because the kind of bullying they are subjected to is often so subtle that they may not fully understand what is happening to them.
- **They are afraid of retaliation.** Most bullies threaten their victims with even worse treatment if they tell an adult what happened.
- **They don't think anyone can or will help them.** The longer the bullying continues, the more isolated and helpless they feel.



If your child is reluctant to talk about what is happening, ask indirect questions. For example, ask her how she is spending her lunch hour or what it's like riding the bus home from school. Keep the conversation general. For example, "Are there any kids at school who are mean?" "Are there any kids who get picked on?" Once she's begun talking about the subject in general terms it may be easier to get her to talk about herself.

"Many children in our nation's schools are robbed of their opportunity to learn because they are bullied and victimized daily. Bullying exacts a terrible toll on children, and the scars can last a lifetime."
—National Education Association

Girls—the ‘invisible’ bullies

“Relational aggression” is the term used by Rachel Simmons, author of the best-selling book, *Odd Girl Out, The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls*, to describe the sneaky form of bullying that girls tend to perpetrate.



For years, Simmons says, the researchers who were studying bullies looked only for direct signs of aggression such as punching, threatening and hitting. It wasn't until 1992, when a group of Norwegian researchers turned their attention to girls, that the reality became clear: Girls, who are culturally programmed to avoid overt aggression, typically engage in much more subtle (although every bit as damaging) forms of bullying. Girls often use their relationship with their victim as a weapon. And they have been doing it for as long as boys have been using physical aggression.

The relationally aggressive bully ignores her victim to punish her or to get her own way. She practices social exclusion—deciding who will be allowed to join her and her clique, and who will be treated as a pariah. She spreads rumors and sabotages relationships.

Her bullying generally is invisible to the adults around her. She's often one of the prettiest, smartest and most popular girls in class. She's unfailingly polite around adults. She may well be the girl many teachers point to as “the perfect student.”



What can you do to help if your daughter is the victim of a relational bully?

According to Simmons' research, the parents who are most effective in helping their daughter deal with this kind of ordeal are those who actively listen. They make sure that home and family provide an emotional refuge. They hold her when she cries. They may accommodate special requests—things like dropping her off at school just before the opening bell rings and being there to pick her up exactly when the last bell rings.

That, of course assumes your daughter has confided in you—and many girls don't. Because relational bullying is so insidious, the victim frequently doesn't realize that what is happening to her is wrong. She may internalize the problem and decide it's her fault.

Talk with your daughter about relational aggression. Let her know—in a nonjudgmental way—that you understand this kind of behavior often takes place at school. Ask her what happens in class. What kinds of things do girls do when they want to be mean? If you approach the subject in a general way it may be easier for your daughter to talk about any problems she may be having.

If you learn that she is having problems, be thoughtful in your reaction. Let her know how sorry you are. Don't minimize her pain. Don't call the school in a fit of anger and demand action. It is important for you to talk with her teacher, but do it calmly with the purpose of finding solutions rather than assigning blame.

And, if she's having problems, one of the best things you can do is help find a new activity for her—something that will allow her to focus on what she can do or likes to do—a class at the community center or a volunteer opportunity with a religious youth group, for example. It doesn't matter what it is as long it gets her together with some new people who aren't connected with her problems at school.



What steps can you take if your child is being bullied?

While it's not appropriate to advise your child to fight back if he is being bullied, it's also not a good idea to tell him to ignore the situation. Bullying can cause a child to become depressed or withdrawn and it can—at a minimum—result in loss of self-esteem.

There are no simple solutions and there are no one-size-fits-all solutions. Solving the problem will take time, so it is important to be patient. However, there are some general things you can do to help your child if he is being bullied:

- **Stay calm.** Don't allow anger at what has happened to your child to cloud your judgment.
- **Encourage your child to talk** about what is happening and how it makes him feel. Let him know that you believe him and that you are there for him. The discussion should be handled with patience, sensitivity and a clear message that the child does not have to just "grin and bear it" and that no one should have to tolerate being bullied. If your child is still reluctant to discuss the issue, talk about the behaviors you have observed in him that make you suspect bullying may be occurring. It may take more than one conversation before your child will talk about the problem.
- **Assure your child** that he is not to blame for being targeted and that it's important to report any bullying incidents to you or to an adult at school.
- **Don't minimize what has happened.** Even something that appears trivial to you can seem very important to a child.

- **Don't wait for the school** to take the initiative. Veteran educators warn that most children will say they don't want their parents to get involved, but they emphasize that it is an absolute must that parents do get involved. Talk with your child's teacher about what is happening and about what can be done at school to prevent further incidences of bullying. Share everything you have learned about the problem with as many specifics as possible—times, places, what happened, who was present, etc.

Ask if the school principal knows about the situation. Contact the school principal (and then, if necessary, other school system central office officials) quickly if you are not satisfied that your contact with the teacher is producing results. Insist that your concerns about bullying be taken seriously.

Educators suggest that parents ask for a daily or weekly report from the school or teachers involved about the status of the problem after the school has put into place whatever program or process it has developed to deal with such problems. And stay in touch. School officials emphasize that it is not enough to have one meeting with the school and expect everything to be solved.

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- **Consider asking for the bully to be removed from the class** or activity where bullying is occurring. If the school cannot, or is unwilling to remove the bully, consider asking that your child be assigned to alternative school or class placements or activities. The important thing, experts say, is that parents take a proactive role in this important issue. It is parents' job to be the main advocate for their child.



- **Empower your child.** Make sure she feels that she is part of the solution. Ask her how she thinks she could handle the situation. Has she tried to solve the problem on her own? What happened?
- **Advise her to stay in a group** whenever she can. Many bullies won't confront a person if she is with a group of friends.
- **Talk with your child** about how she can avoid the bully. If she is generally confronted on the way home from school, for example, help her devise an alternative route. If possible, arrange for an older child to walk home with her.
- **Help your child learn to avoid behavior** attractive to bullies, such as being overly obedient to other children, and crying easily when under stress.
- **Role-play.** Pretend you are the bully and allow your child to practice standing up for herself, being assertive, looking the bully in the eye and firmly saying, "Stop treating me that way." But never suggest physical confrontation or violence.
- **If you feel you must contact the parents** of the bully, do it only with a school official, religious leader or other adult authority present, and don't be surprised if they become angry or defensive.
- **If the abuse is physical and ongoing,** contact law enforcement authorities right away.



What should you do if you discover that your child is a bully?

Bullying isn't child's play. It can be a behavior pattern that leads to serious trouble, arrest and imprisonment later in life. If you discover that your child is engaging in bullying behavior, it is essential that you take action to turn the situation around. Here are some things you can do:

- **Talk to your child** about his or her behavior. Emphasize that it is wrong to harass and torment people for any reason, that such behavior not acceptable and that you will not tolerate it. Make it clear that a loss of significant privileges will be the result of continued bullying behavior.

- **Do not allow your child to minimize** the behavior. Bullying is not "just kidding around" or "fun." Make sure your child understands that bullying is hurtful, intimidating and potentially illegal—and that you expect it to stop immediately.

- **Provide more supervision** for your child. Make sure you know where he is going, what he is doing and who his friends are.

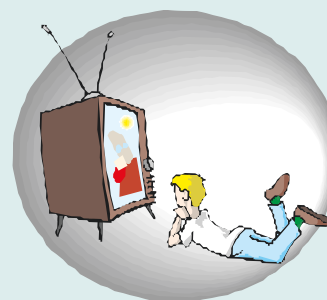
- **Establish expectations** for your child's behavior. Set logical and reasonable consequences for his failure to meet those expectations and apply the consequences quickly and consistently.

- **Avoid physical punishment.** Be a model for your child of how to handle problems without getting physical. Consistently using time-outs, loss of privileges and reasonable consequences are the best approaches.

- **Praise your child** for the things he does right—and for making the effort to improve.

- **Turn off the violence in your home.**

Research has shown that exposure to violent television shows—including cartoons—and playing violent video games can desensitize a child to violence. That means your child may become less likely to recognize the pain and suffering he is causing in someone else and more likely to act in aggressive or violent ways. Provide nonviolent alternatives. There are plenty of good movies and TV shows and lots of nonviolent fantasy games.



- **Be a positive role model.** As his parent, you are your child's first and most important teacher. If he sees you engaging in violent or aggressive behavior he will be much more likely to do the same.

- **If bullying continues,** ask your child's doctor or a school official for help in seeking a professional psychological assessment to try to identify what is motivating this behavior.

Teach your child what to do if she sees someone being bullied

Children who are bullied aren't the only ones who are affected. Children who witness repeated instances of bullying can be affected, too. Standing by and doing nothing hurts onlookers' self-confidence and self-respect.

Why do some children simply stand by and watch? Although they may want to help the victim, they may fear getting hurt or becoming a target of the bully themselves. They may not want to attract what they perceive as negative attention—being labeled as a “snitch” or a “rat,” for example. They may be afraid that, if they do take action, they will make matters worse. Or, they simply may not know what to do.

Talk with your child about what she can do if she sees someone being bullied. For example, tell her:

- **Don't be a bystander.** Most bullies enjoy having an audience, so don't provide one. If she isn't able to intervene, tell your child she should walk away.
- **Speak up for the child being bullied.** Saying, “Stop that!” or “Stop hitting him!” can be effective.
- **Don't laugh or giggle**—even if she is nervous and doesn't know what else to do. That kind of reaction will only encourage the bully to continue.
- **If your child thinks the victim is in danger** of getting hurt, tell her to find a teacher or another adult quickly and tell that person what is happening.
- **Make sure your child knows that it is wrong** to keep quiet about bullying. She must tell a teacher or another adult—and that it's not being a “snitch” or a “tattle tale.”
- **Suggest that she seek out** the victim later to offer her support and friendship. This is one of the most important things she can do, because the victims of bullying often are shy and quiet children who don't have lots of friends.



Dispel the myths about bullying

There are a number of misperceptions about bullying. Make sure your child recognizes them for what they are. Here are a few of the most common ones:

- **Myth:** *Learning to ignore bullying toughens you up.* Nothing could be further from the truth. Victims of bullying can suffer serious physical or mental trauma.
- **Myth:** *Bullying is a rite of passage. We all go through it.* Bullying is not a rite of passage—it is wrong, inappropriate, and often dangerous, behavior.
- **Myth:** *Children who allow themselves to be bullied are weaklings or wimps.* Children do not allow themselves to be bullied. They are victims, and as such they have no reason to feel ashamed or embarrassed.

Conclusion

Experts now recognize bullying as a critical problem, one that has led to a number of school tragedies and countless psychological, not to mention physical scars, that children carry with them throughout their lives. Being bullied is not “just a normal part of growing up,” not simply “boys being boys,” or “girls being girls” either. Children who are bullies are more likely to become abusive spouses or parents and to engage in criminal activities as adults.

While there are no simple, instant solutions or one-size-fits-all solutions, bullying can be stopped. It is serious business and requires a thoughtful, energetic and cooperative response from parents, schools and community leaders as well as law enforcement agencies. ***But it is the responsibility of parents to take the initiative to get everyone working together to stop bullying.***

A quick review of action steps parents can take to stop bullying

No matter how your child is being bullied:

- **Stay calm.**
- **Understand that solving bullying** takes time but you can start working on it immediately.
- **Encourage your child to talk** about what is happening, even if he's reluctant to do so.
- **Make it clear that no one** should have to put up with bullying.
- **Assure your child** that he is not to blame for being targeted and that it's important to report any bullying incidents to you or to an adult at school.
- **Don't trivialize** the problem.
- **Talk with your child's teachers** calmly with as many specific facts, times and places as you can.
- **Contact the school principal** (and then, if necessary, other school system central office officials) quickly if you are not satisfied that your contact with the teacher is producing results. Insist that your concerns about bullying be taken seriously.
- **Take the initiative** to stay in touch with the school. Ask for updates from the school weekly or more often.
- **Consider placing your child** in an alternate class, school or activity.
- **Accept the responsibility** to be your child's primary advocate.
- **Get your child involved** in finding a solution.
- **Monitor your child's** social media activity.
- **Let your child know** he can talk to you if he gets messages from a cyberbully via the internet or cell phone. Tell your child never to respond to such messages but to save them in case they can be traced to the sender.
- **Advise your child** to stay in a group.
- **Talk about how to avoid** the bully.
- **Help your child learn** to avoid behavior attractive to bullies.
- **Role-play standing up to the bully**, but never suggest violence.
- **Contact the bully's parents** only with a school or other authority figure.
- **Contact law enforcement** authorities if the abuse is physical and ongoing.

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