

# Handling Bullies

As many as half of all children are bullied at some time during their school years, and at least 10 percent are bullied on a regular basis, experts estimate. If your child is being picked on, threatened, harassed or physically assaulted in any way by another child, it is important to respond properly to the situation. Teaching your children how to protect themselves and boost their self-esteem can help them to keep from becoming victims.

## What You Can Do

To help protect your child against bullying, consider these suggestions:

- **Build your child's self-esteem at an early age.** Children who are praised for their efforts, encouraged to develop talents and taught to keep trying tend to have greater self-confidence. Make your child feel good about himself or herself by avoiding criticism and negative comments. The more self-respect your child has, the better he or she will be at ignoring a bully's taunts.
- **Encourage your child to express dissent.** One good anti-bully exercise is to teach your child how to speak up respectfully if he or she disagrees with you. Stress that it is okay to express anger in healthy and appropriate manner. Practice negotiating and debating techniques as alternatives to fighting or being victimized. Teach your child to use direct "I" expressions when someone is making him or her uncomfortable, such as: "I don't like when you treat me that way."
- **Teach your child to stand up for himself or herself.** Emphasize the importance of maintaining eye contact, standing up straight and proud, not showing fear and not backing down to a bully when cornered. A child may be less likely to bully if they sense that the other child is not afraid.
- **Teach your child how to ignore taunts.** Tell your child that insults and threats are just words; they cannot really hurt. Encourage your child to talk to himself or herself privately with positive reassurances, such as: "I know what he's saying isn't true. I'm not going to give in to his words. I'm stronger than that." Often, the best advice is to tell your child simply to walk away and say nothing.
- **Emphasize avoidance if necessary.** You do not want your children to run away from their problems or live their life in fear, but you can encourage them simply to stay away from the bully, especially if the possibility of physical harm exists.
- **Discourage fighting back.** Getting physical with the bully is giving in to exactly what the bully wants: a chance to exert physical dominance over your child. Your child may end up seriously hurt, and the bully's success will only encourage him or her to continue the victimization. Tell your child to not taunt or provoke the bully in any way. Consider signing up your child for an age-appropriate martial-arts class or a sport. A bully may decide to leave your child alone if the bully knows your child is athletic or trained to defend himself or herself.
- **Keep an eye out for warning signs.** Your child may be frightened to tell you that they are being threatened or picked on. Watch for slipping grades, physical marks on his/her body, missing lunch money, or any out-of-the-ordinary behaviors. If you suspect that your child is being bullied, encourage them to tell you. If you think your child is covering up or holding back, try talking to their friends or their friends' parents. Have they seen or heard about your child being picked on?
- **Respond appropriately.** Do not ignore the problem or overreact. Weigh your options and talk to your child about options before you go ahead and do something on your child's behalf.
- **Get help.** If you feel that your child is in danger or that a bully's tactics have gone too far, get involved. If the bullying happens at school, talk to your child's teachers and principal about the problem, and try to arrange for a school-supervised meeting between you, your child, the bully and their parents. If your child has been injured or seriously harassed, file a police report and explore your legal options.
- **Discourage bullying.** Your child may begin to model some of the bullying behavior to which they have been exposed by picking on other children. Indicate that you will not tolerate bullying.

There are no easy answers, and you may have to keep trying before you find the right approach that works for you and your child against bullying.



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