

BULLIES AND VICTIMS: INFORMATION FOR PARENTS

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It is unlikely that any school is completely free from all bullying behavior. The prevalence of bullying is staggering. Estimates of the prevalence of bullying have ranged from a reported 10% of children who were said to have been the victims of severe acts of bullying to 75% of children who reported being bullied at least once during the academic year. Researchers have concluded from these statistics that at least 25% of all children will be affected by bullying at some point during their school years, and many of these children miss significant numbers of school days each year owing to fear of being bullied.

Bullying: Basic Facts

Bullying, as defined by Olweus (1993; see "Resources"), occurs when a student is repeatedly harmed, psychologically and/or physically, by another student or a group of students. Bullies are typically physically, psychologically, or socially stronger than the children they bully. It is important to realize that bullying may present itself in different forms, including, but not limited to, physical assaults or aggressions, verbal and/or physical threats, intentional exclusion from a group, spreading rumors, menacing gestures or faces, or repeated name calling.

Both boys and girls engage in bullying behavior, but some differences are evident. Boys, for example, typically engage in direct, overt bullying behaviors, including physical assaults or verbal taunts and threats. Girls often use more indirect, discreet means to bully others, such as intentionally leaving someone out of activities or spreading rumors.

One common misconception is that bullying is an unavoidable part of childhood and adolescence. For this reason, bullying behaviors may be ignored or not noticed. Teachers and parents may not recognize certain behaviors as "bullying." However, there may be serious consequences to dismissing such detrimental behaviors as commonplace. Chronic victims of bullying report physical and mental health problems, may develop depression or low self-esteem, may bring weapons to school, and may contemplate suicide more often than their non-bullied peers. Bullying can create a climate of fear and anxiety, not only for the direct victims, but for the bystanders as well. This negative climate may limit students' opportunity for a safe, healthy learning environment.

The future for bullies is also quite grim. Along with a higher likelihood of underachievement in academic settings, bullies are more likely to become abusive spouses or parents and to engage in criminal activities as adults.

It is clear that bullying is a significant problem that affects many children and deserves the attention of both educators and parents. The best strategy to address the problem of bullying is prevention. Creating a comprehensive plan for coping with this issue is of the utmost importance to school personnel. School personnel can do their part by imposing strict policies against bullying and implementing school-wide prevention programs. However, if parents suspect or learn of bullying behavior, then there are several things they can do to intervene.

Be Alert to Warning Signs of Bullying

Watch for warning signs that your child might be engaging in bullying behavior. Here are some questions to ask yourself:

- Has my child ever been accused of being a bully at school or elsewhere?
- Has my child gotten into trouble for fighting (physically or verbally) with other children at school?
- Does my child become easily frustrated when he does not get his way? Is my child defiant or oppositional?
- Who are my child's friends? How does my child interact with others? Have I witnessed my child with other children? Is she dominant or aggressive?

- What does my child do with spare time? What are my child's hobbies?
- Does my child speak about other children as "stupid" or use other negative terms to describe others? Does my child talk about certain children "deserving" bad things to happen to them or showing little concern for others in bad situations?

What You Can Do if You Suspect Your Child Is Bullying Others

If you discover that your child is bullying others, it may be difficult to accept or understand. Here are some suggestions:

- Become familiar with the anti-bullying policy at your child's school. Discuss school rules and behavior expectations with your child. Ensure that your child understands what behaviors are acceptable and what behaviors are unacceptable.
- Find out exactly what it is that your child has been doing. What has your child been *accused* of doing? What does your child *admit* to doing?
- Talk to your child, calmly, about why such behaviors are being engaged in. It is important that you not approach your child in an accusatory or confrontational tone. Your child may be experiencing social or emotional difficulties that are difficult to handle. Some children may feel pressure to participate in bullying behavior in order to fit in with peers or to avoid being bullied themselves.
- Explain to your child why bullying behavior is unacceptable. Attempts should be made to explain how bullying affects others (victims, bystanders, school climate).
- Discuss alternatives to aggressive behavior with your child. Role playing may help some children to understand how it feels to be bullied. Teach your child some alternatives to aggressive behavior such as asking for help, respecting others, and showing tolerance for those who are different. Praise your child for using alternative, appropriate behavior. Acknowledgement of desirable behaviors will serve as a reward for your child and encourage the use of such behaviors in the future.
- Establish rules regarding aggressive behavior. Explain to your child that there will be consequences for these types of behaviors, such as losing privileges (consequences should be non-physical in nature). Implement non-physical consequences consistently when rules are violated.
- Ensure appropriate adult supervision at all times. Be aware of your child's involvement in activities inside and outside of school. Make certain that adequate adult supervision is present in every situation.

- Report any incidents of bullying behaviors to school officials, even if your child is the one engaging in those behaviors. This teaches children that they are accountable for their own behavior. Engage school officials' help in monitoring and addressing these behaviors. This will show your child that you will not tolerate such behavior, and that you want to help your child avoid it.
- Seek outside help. Dealing with bullying behavior is difficult. Your school's psychologist, counselor, or social worker may be able to offer additional suggestions or work with your child to change behavior.

Be Alert to Warning Signs of Victimization

Watch for warning signs that your child might be the victim of bullying. Here are some questions to ask yourself:

- Does my child fear going to school? Is my child anxious about school? Has my child been out sick a lot? Does my child often complain about not feeling well as a way of avoiding school?
- Have I noticed bruises on my child? When I ask my child about the bruises, what is the response?
- Does my child have friends? Who are the friends? Have I seen the way that they interact? Is my child submissive or withdrawn with other children?
- Does my child seem unhappy or insecure? Does my child talk about "nobody liking her" or "not having any friends?" Does my child talk about wanting to hurt someone or get back at someone?
- Does my child seem to have low self-esteem or self-confidence? Does my child have difficulty being assertive?

What You Can Do if You Suspect Your Child Is Being Bullied

Talking about being bullied may be a difficult thing to do with your child. Here are some suggestions:

- Do not confront the suspected bully or bullies on your own. Your first instinct may be to protect your child and address the suspected bully directly. This may only serve to escalate the situation, and ultimately make things worse.
- Talk to a school administrator about the situation. Remember that the school is responsible for providing your child with a safe learning environment.
- Ask your child what takes place in school, what happens when there is free time, how they are feeling. Talk with your child about different aspects of school and how they feel about it.
- Role play with your child and discuss ways they can respond to a bully. Some possibilities might include walking away, telling an adult, or asking for help from peers.

- Teach your child that telling on those who bully should not be considered tattling, and that everyone is a victim when the bully is allowed to treat others badly. Let your child know that by reporting bullying help will come and that support will come from you and from the school staff.
- Encourage your child to talk with friends about bullying. Bullies rarely target kids in groups, so maintaining a peer group that is unified may be helpful in avoiding being the target of bullying behavior.
- Ensure appropriate adult supervision at all times. Be aware of your child's involvement in activities inside and outside of school. Make certain that adequate adult supervision is present in every situation.
- Report any incidents of bullying behaviors, even if your child is not the target of such behavior, to school officials. Engage school officials' help in monitoring and addressing these behaviors. This will show your child that you and others are committed to stopping all such behaviors.
- Seek outside help. Addressing bullying behavior and its consequences is a difficult task. Your school's psychologist, counselor, or social worker may be able to offer additional suggestions or work with your child in dealing with bullies.

What You Can Do to Help Eliminate Bullying

Whether or not you suspect bullying behavior is occurring at your child's school, you may want to consider getting involved in establishing an anti-bullying prevention plan at the school if the school does not already have such a policy. Additionally, you may want to consider talking with school officials about the school's current policy for responding to bullying behavior.

Many states have policies in place that may explain your child's rights with regard to bullying behaviors and what should be done when those behaviors occur in schools. Visit www.bullypolice.org or call your state department of education for more information about your state's policy against bullying. It is important to teach your child that bullying of any sort is not acceptable behavior even if you do not believe that your child is in danger of being victimized or committing such acts. Encourage your child to report all incidents of bullying to you or school officials.

Getting involved in your child's life both inside and outside of school is important, both for your own sake and for your child's. You will see how your child interacts with other children and will be able to take steps if you see any potentially troublesome behaviors that are taking place. Talking with your child about how to engage in non-violent interactions and how to respond to those who bully will prepare your child for such situations in school and elsewhere.

Resources

- Coloroso, B. (2003). *The bully, the bullied and the bystander: Breaking the cycle of violence*. New York: Harper Resource. ISBN: 0060014296.
- Olweus, D. (1993). *Bullying at school: What we know and what we can do (understanding children's worlds)*. Malden, MA: Blackwell. ISBN: 0631192417.
- Rigby, K. (2001). Health consequences of bullying and its prevention in schools. In J. Juvonen & S. Graham (Eds.), *Peer harassment in school: The plight of the vulnerable and victimized* (pp. 310–331). New York: Guilford. ISBN: 1572306270.
- Swearer, S. M., & Doll, B. (2001). Bullying in schools: An ecological framework. In R. A. Geffner, M. Loring, & C. Young (Eds.), *Bullying behavior: Current issues, research and interventions* (pp. 7–23). Binghamton, NY: Haworth Press. ISBN: 078901436X.

Websites

- Bullying Online—www.bullying.co.uk
UK website with especially useful information on what parents can do. Although some of the information is geared toward British schools, the general approach recommended is equally useful for American users.
- Bullypolice—www.bullypolice.org
A list of states that have anti-bullying law, plus links to other websites.
- Committee for Children—www.cfchildren.org/bully.html
Provides information on bullying and bullying prevention.
- KidsHealth—www.kidshealth.org
From the Nemours Foundation, has much information on bullying, including "Bullying and Your Child."
- National Mental Health and Education Center—
www.naspcenter.org/factsheets/bullying_fs.html
From the National Association of School Psychologists, offers several links with suggestions for parents and teachers concerning bullying.

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