Warning Signs that 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. Typically, it is repeated over time. Bullying can take many forms, such as hitting and/or punching (physical bullying); teasing or name-calling (verbal bullying); intimidation using gestures or social exclusion (nonverbal bullying or emotional bullying); and sending insulting messages by phone or computer e-mail (cyberbullying).* Many children, particularly boys and older children, 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, stomachaches, or other physical ailments;
- Has trouble sleeping or has frequent bad dreams;
- Experiences a loss of appetite; or
- Appears anxious and suffers from low self-esteem.

What to do if you *suspect* that your child is being bullied?

If your child shows any of these 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.

1. Talk with your child. Tell your child that you are concerned and that you'd like to help. Here are some questions that can get the discussion going:

Some direct questions:

- "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 or exclude you on purpose?"

Some subtle questions:

- "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 and 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 or leave you out of things?"

*Children with disabilities may be at a higher risk of being bullied than other children.

2. 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 other 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 or her class?"
- "With whom does he or 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 whether 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 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 that 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. Some of the warning signs above (e.g., depression, social isolation, and loss of interest in school) may be signs of other serious problems. Share your concerns with a counselor at your child's school.

References

Olweus, D. (1993). Bullying at school: *What we know and what we can do*. NY: Blackwell.

Olweus, D., Limber, S., & Mihalic, S. (1999). *The Bullying Prevention Program: Blueprints for violence prevention*. Boulder, CO: Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence.