

“Bullying” — How to Stop It!

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“Bullying” is a common experience for many children growing up. According to the National Association of School Psychologists, about one in seven school children—that’s about 5 million kids—has been either a bully or a victim. And the costs of this situation are enormous. Children who experience persistent bullying may become depressed or fearful. They may even lose interest in going to school or being involved in church or other activities.

What can a parent do? It’s important to arm kids against bullies early on—to teach them how to avoid being bullied and how to defend themselves when such abuse occurs. It’s also important to teach your children not to be bullies.

Before you can take steps to protect your child, you need to understand what bullying is and why some kids tend to get picked on more than others.

What is bullying? Bullying is defined as any kind of *ongoing physical or verbal mistreatment where there is dominance and control*—usually a bigger, older child picking on a smaller or weaker one. Bullying is a game of usurping control in an attempt to win while the other loses. Another characteristic of bullying is that the assaulted person appears to be very upset by the incident, while the bully is saying things like, “What’s the big deal?” or “The kid asked for it,” according to William Porter, author of *Bully Proofing Your School*.

This difference in attitudes distinguishes bullying from more normal childhood conflicts—for example, a dispute during a kickball game or a heated argument over whose turn it is on the swings, where both children are equally upset and angry over what happened. It’s important for adults not to mistake bullying for normal childhood conflict. Some conflict between kids is expected. Bullying, on the other hand, should not be tolerated.

Who gets picked on? Bullies tend to zero in on children who appear vulnerable for some reason. Children who are picked on are usually passive, anxious, sensitive, quiet or stand out in some way: perhaps they are taller or shorter, wear braces, are overweight or have a physical disability. At the same time, youngsters who are provocative and annoying, who seek negative attention from peers, also tend to get picked on. Both passive and aggressive children tend to have few friends, and, therefore, few allies to rally to their defense in a sticky situation.

How to help your child. Realizing that some kids seem doomed to be picked on because of their very nature or physical status, is there any real hope of bully-proofing your child? Yes, you can help your child develop a psychic bully-proof vest to deflect the insults and physical abuse that bullies like to dish out. It’s never too early to begin laying this foundation for self-preservation. Following are steps you can take to help bully-proof your own youngster:

- **Teach self-respect.** A confident child is less likely to be assaulted by a bully. How can you help? A pat on the back every once in a while works wonders. Make positive comments. “I like the way you picked up your toys without being asked” or “You did a great job getting yourself dressed this morning,” outweigh negative ones. Avoid labeling or name-calling (such as calling a child lazy, for instance) that may make a youngster feel bad and have low self-esteem.
- **Let your children know it’s OK to express anger or dissatisfaction.** Don’t chastise or stop your children when they are blowing off steam. Show them you value their opinions—even if it means listening to a 4-year-old argue about why a nap is not necessary or a 12-year-old explain why you are a mean parent. Letting your children stand up to you now and then makes it more likely they will stand up to a bully. However, don’t allow your children to put you down or call you names. Teach your children to be respectful to you and others while being assertive.
- **Stress the importance of body language.** Verbally asserting oneself is not very effective if one’s body language tells another story. Teach children to hold themselves confidently, to bolster assertive words by relaxing their bodies (deep breathing helps), keeping hands steady and maintaining frequent eye contact. Bullies tend to gravitate toward kids who are unsure of themselves. These practices will help youngsters seem self-assured, even if they are not.
- **Encourage friendships.** Children who are loners tend to be more vulnerable to bullies. Start early to help your children develop friendships and build social skills. By

elementary school, it may be more difficult for a shy child to make friends. Perhaps your child needs help in learning how to initiate friendships or join in group activities. If your child has problems fitting in, encourage your child to seek out another youngster who's alone a lot, rather than try to break into a group of two or more children. It's easier to participate in unstructured activities, such as playing on the jungle gym, than to join an organized game in progress.

- **Teach your children to express themselves clearly, yet diplomatically.** Help your youngster learn to use "I" statements. This form of self-expression works for two reasons: first, it's indisputable. For example, if your daughter tells a friend, "I don't like to play that game anymore," who can argue with her? After all, that's how she feels. Second, the statement is nonjudgmental. Your child is not putting the other youngster on the defensive. When children know how to express themselves without stepping on other people's toes, they tend to get along better with peers — and, as mentioned, having friends is a good way to ward off bullies.

Is your child being bullied? Too often, parents are the last to know their child is in trouble. Remember, bullies work through fear and manipulation. They often intimidate children into silence by threatening to harm them or by labeling them "wimps" or "babies" if they tell an adult what's going on. Therefore, it's important for parents of school-age children to be on the lookout for signs of bullying. If your son routinely comes home from school extremely hungry, ask him why. Maybe someone is taking his lunch. Does your daughter rush to the bathroom as soon as she gets off the bus? Maybe she's afraid to enter the school bathroom because a child uses this place to threaten or intimidate her.

It's a good idea to make it a habit to ask your child what's happening at school, especially if you suspect a problem. Ask pointed questions ("Who's the bully in your class?" or "Who bothers kids on the bus?"), particularly if you are unable to be home when your child gets off the school bus. Every day, parents must ask children how their school-day went and how they felt about the day's happenings (at school, on the playground, at day care or on the bus).

Defensive Strategies

What should you do if you discover your child is being bullied? Discussing some of these bully-busting strategies with your youngster may help:

- **Practice self-affirmation.** One tactic is called "self-talk," or teaching children to give themselves a silent pep talk whenever they are being picked on. For instance, a child could repeat: "Even though you're saying those things about me, I know they're not true. I don't feel that way about myself." Positive self-talk addresses the issue of self-esteem. The better children feel about themselves, the less likely they are to be bullied.

- **Know when to assert oneself.** Put the bullies on notice that their actions won't be tolerated. This can be as simple as telling the bully, "You can't talk to me like that. Leave me alone." (A word of caution here: Some bullies actually feed on getting a response. Therefore your child should try being assertive once. If it doesn't work, move on to something else or the bullying may escalate. This may be a case for adult involvement.)

Whatever you do, don't encourage your child to fight the bully. Bullies tend to pick on kids who are smaller and weaker. That means your 80-pound child could be duking it out with a 130-pound aggressor. The bully is going to prevail. Such victories only encourage a bully to carry on with abusive behavior.

- **Use humor to deflect an onslaught.** Doing or saying something funny or unexpected is another effective means of deflecting a bully. Help your child come up with a silly one-liner ("You yellow-bellied school bus") that could throw the bully off balance. It might be enough to make the bully stop.
- **Never let the bully see you sweat.** Teach your children not to let a bully see that they're upset or scared. Anxious children who show emotions easily may be letting the bully know the dominating tactics are working. Help children find ways to display emotions to caring, responsible adults. If possible, children should try to hide feelings from a bully.
- **Avoid bullies when necessary.** One of the best ways to avoid bullying is to avoid the bully. Suggest that your children go down a different stairwell or take a new bike route home. However, don't view running away as a long-term solution, since it may only delay the bullying attempts. Rather, it should be looked at in terms of safety—a way to avoid immediate harm.
- **Don't be ashamed to ask for help.** As a last resort, if the above solutions don't work, encourage your child to report the bullying to a teacher or other responsible adult. There are times when parents must be an advocate for their children. Sometimes bullying is a problem that needs parental involvement and intervention.

Why Does a Child Become a Bully?

No one thing in particular turns a child into a bully. However, studies show that the problem is generally triggered by something at home in the youngster's environment. This could include having parents who are overly punitive or verbally or physically abusive. A bully might have been assaulted by a sibling or another child. Children can easily do something hurtful to another person because it was done to them. You can discourage a child from becoming a bully. Here's what to watch out for:

- **Take a look at your parenting practices.** Are you a bully at home? Do you frequently criticize your child or demand unquestioning obedience at every turn? Do you use spanking as a punishment? Are you abusive to your partner/spouse? Do you use put-downs or call others demeaning names? Stop and get help. If you send the message to your child that anger, violence and intimidation are ways to get what you want, your child very likely will turn around and use similar tactics on peers.
- **Watch your tone—and your message.** It's important for parents and caregivers to examine the tone of voice they use when speaking to children. Avoid undue criticism. Children learn by example, and someone who is belittled at home may resort to such tactics when dealing with peers.
- **Teach the art of negotiation.** The preschool years are the time to begin to teach children to mediate their own disputes. If your toddler is wrestling a toy from the hands of a playmate, offer an alternative. Parents and caregivers need to watch toddlers closely and intervene when trouble arises. Teach children to negotiate. "How do you think we can resolve this problem?" If children don't want to share, you could say, "Samantha can play with the train and Antonio can play with the truck. Then in 10 minutes you can exchange toys."
- **Parents must set limits.** Parents may encourage bullying by being overly permissive. By giving in when a child is obnoxious or demanding, parents send the unintended message that bullying pays off. Children actually feel more secure when they know parents will set limits. Parents must be firm, yet kind, to their children. Set fair rules and follow through with reasonable consequences for misbehavior.
- **Make it clear that bullying will not be tolerated.** Although it's important to determine why your child is behaving like a bully, emphasize that you won't allow such actions and outline the consequences. If the problem occurs at school, tell your child that you respect the school's right to determine consequences. Tell your children they also are accountable to you for misbehavior or bullying at school, on the playground, at day care or on the bus.
- **Have your child walk in the assaulted child's shoes.** Since bullies have trouble empathizing with those they assault, it's important to discuss how it feels to be bullied. How would your children feel if it happened to them?
- **Help your children feel successful.** It's important to emphasize your children's good points, so they can start to experience how *positive* feedback (rather than negative attention) feels. Are your children good with animals? Do they do well in math? Are they proficient at team sports? Put your children in situations where their strengths make them shine. Find opportunities for each child to help others, perhaps by volunteering or helping a teacher after school. Helping others in a positive way increases a child's sense of self-worth.

Although it might be unrealistic to expect that your children will *never* cross paths with a bully, it is possible to teach them the skills needed to avoid being bullied. Children who feel valued and respected, and have been taught appropriate skills probably fare well when approached by a bully. However, adult supervision and intervention may be necessary.

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If you discover your child is acting like a tyrant, don't panic. It's important for parents to realize that all kids have the capacity to bully. Here's what to do if it's your child who's doing the bullying:

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