

# Bullying 101

## *The Basics for Parents and Caregivers of a Bullied Child*

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**D**uring the school-age years, relationships with peers become the focus of a child's attention. These years provide a child many opportunities to grow, learn social skills and develop conflict resolution skills. Unfortunately, sometimes relationships at this stage can be negative and harmful to the development of a child or young adolescent. Behavior such as teasing and name-calling can lead to more serious situations that involve intimidation and verbal and physical abuse.

Bullying is a serious issue that has been the subject of discussion for several years. This publication will help parents identify the symptoms of a bullied child, understand why they don't report the abuse and learn how to support them during their coping process.

### **What Is Bullying?**

Parents today have a lot to deal with while raising a family. In addition to everyday activities such as meal preparation, homework and finding time to be together as a family, some families deal with an additional force that is out of their control—the classroom or neighborhood bully. It is easy to think back to our own school-day experiences and remember the class bully. He was usually the largest (or the toughest) kid in the class who dominated the playground and terrorized his fellow students on the bus ride to and from school. But today's bullies are not just the toughest and meanest boys. Today's bullies are

girls and boys of all ages and sizes, and they bully in many different kinds of ways.

In general bullying involves aggressive behavior that is intentional and involves an imbalance of power or strength. Bullying is usually repeated over time and can occur in several forms: physical bullying (hitting, kicking, pushing, intimidation), verbal bullying (name-calling, threats, rumors), and other types of bullying (making faces, social exclusion, and cyber bullying).

Cyber bullying occurs when a child is harassed, threatened or embarrassed by another child using technology such as the Internet, text messaging, You Tube,



and mobile phones. Cyber bullying is a particularly scary form of bullying because we live in a very technical world that is made up of computers, cell phones, social networks and online chat rooms. Not all of these avenues of technology are monitored by parents and caregivers. Cyber bullying is quick and allows a bully to keep his business at arm's length. It can also be challenging for a victim to track the bully. Children and young adolescents may not even identify cyber bullying as "real" bullying, but it can be just as or even more damaging than physical bullying.

Cyber bullying can involve:

- Sending mean, vulgar or threatening messages or images
- Posting sensitive, private information and/or lies about another person
- Pretending to be someone else in order to make a person look bad

Cyber bullying is a growing problem. In a recent study led by Cox Communications (2009), 655 13 to 18 year olds reported involvement with cyber bullying:

- 15 percent had been cyber bullied online
- 10 percent had been cyber bullied by phone
- 7 percent admitted to cyber bullying another person online
- 5 percent admitted to cyber bullying another person by cell phone

## **Symptoms of the Bullied Child**

Since most children will not report incidents of bullying, it is important for parents to recognize the common signs of a bullied child. These include, but are not limited to:

- Refusal to go to school
- Bed-wetting
- Health complaints (i.e. sleeping problems, headaches, stomach aches)
- Lack of self-esteem (i.e. making negative "I am" statements, fearing new experiences and/or people, lacking trust in others, having difficulty making eye contact, feeling sensitive to criticism, always apologizing)
- Depression (i.e. sadness, crying over seemingly minor setbacks, increased irritability, loss of interest in previously pleasurable activities, changes in appetite, changes in sleep pattern, fatigue, poor concentration)
- Suicidal thoughts (i.e. anxiety, withdrawal from friends and family, making a will, giving possessions away, making statements such as "Maybe my family would be better off without me")
- Acting aggressively toward friends or family members they view as weaker

## Why Didn't They Tell Me?

Sometimes parents and caregivers are unaware of the degree of bullying that occurs in a child's life. Children and teens do not always talk about being bullied and parents may not always think to question their child about whether or not they are being bullied.

Why don't children tell their parents about cases of bullying?

- Child fears the reaction of the parent or caregiver. Some parents blame their child for being "too weak" and take on the attitude that the child deserves the bullying or that the bullying will "toughen them up."
- Child fears retaliation from the bully.
- Child may feel overcome with feelings of shame and rejection.
- Child does not want to bother or worry parents or caregivers.
- Child may fear that parents will overreact and make the situation worse.
- Child may fear that their parent will take action against his will.
- Child may have the fear of being labeled a "tattle tale" by friends or classmates.
- Child may recognize that parents lack resources to provide support.
- Child may feel it is his responsibility to stand up for himself.

## The Good News about Bullying

As bullying continues to gain increasing public attention, more and more children are becoming confident in reporting the abuse to make it stop. Children are increasingly telling their parents, family, and teachers about bullying. Family members—parents, siblings, grandparents, and others—play key roles in helping to prevent or stop bullying, and to help children and youth cope with bullying that they already have experienced.

- 53 percent of regularly bullied children told a teacher.
- 67 percent of regularly bullied children told a parent.
- Victims of bullying reported that telling a family member had a positive impact on their situation.
- Students who did report a bullying incident were more likely to tell family members first.

## Ways to Support a Child Who Is Being Bullied

Nearly one-half of the parents and caregivers of bullied children do not know that their child is a victim.

How can parents support their children and encourage their children to talk if they are not aware of the problem?

Keeping an open line of communication with your child is important to assure that your child will come to

you in a time of need. Kids appreciate parents who do not doubt their stories and who are prepared to discuss strategies WITH them. To help foster healthy communication:

### What Adults Can Do

- Communicate acceptance. Accepting the child for who he is makes it easy to communicate with him.
- Use "Door Opener" communication statements that do not include evaluation or judgment. Questions may include: "What do you think?" "Would you like to share more about that?" "Do you want to talk about it?" "Tell me more, I want to be sure I understand you." Such open-ended questions tell your child that his ideas and thoughts are important, that you are interested in his ideas and thoughts, and that you respect him.
- Listen attentively. Get rid of distractions and pay attention to what the child is saying. If you are too busy to actively listen (i.e. on the phone), tell your child then give a specific time that you will give him/her your full attention.
- Talk with, not at, your child. Talking "at" a child is a one-sided conversation, but talking "with" your child involves both people in the communication process.

- Use “I” messages.” “I” messages are statements of fact. They tell your child how you are feeling. (i.e. Instead of saying, “I can’t believe you didn’t tell me you were being bullied!” Say, “I understand that telling someone else about being bullied is a hard decision to make. I want you to know that you can share this kind of information with me and that I am here to support you.”

**Ways to strategize with a child who is being bullied:**

- Listen carefully to your child and gather information about the event before reacting.
- Find out about your child’s schools anti-bullying policy. What is the process for dealing with bullying? What are the consequences to the bully and support for the victim?
- Contact your child’s teacher or principal to discuss what has happened.
- Continue conversations with your child even after you think the problem has been fixed. Bullying doesn’t just stop.
- Spend time talking with your child about bullying. Find out what is happening at his/her school.

Being able to identify the symptoms of the bullied child, understanding why they don’t tell and keeping



an open line of communication with your child will assist you in supporting your child in the event that he or she becomes the victim of a bully. Bullying does not just stop; your bullied child will need your ears and, most important, your heart. Be that supportive person that your child needs to deal with being a victim of bullying.

**What Children Can Do**

Share feelings and ask for help. Tell a parent if you are sad or struggling with something; they may not know that you are having a problem.

- Be kind. Little things might mean a lot to your mom or dad, and being kind opens the lines of communication much easier than fighting.

Show you care. It is important to let your parents know that you care about them. Some families show they care by hugging and kissing, but not all families are like this. You can show someone you care about them by respecting them and by being polite and thoughtful.

## For More Information

Stop Bullying Now, [www.stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov/adults/default.aspx](http://www.stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov/adults/default.aspx).

American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, <http://aacap.org/page.ww?name=Bullying&Section=Facts+for+Families>.

University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service Offices, [www.ca.uky.edu/county/](http://www.ca.uky.edu/county/). Each county office has access to multiple resources on bullying for families.

## Resources

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