

*Questions Parents Ask About ...*

# Bullying





## What Is Bullying?

**W**hen you think about bullying, you may picture a bigger child picking on a smaller one. While not all students who bully are physically powerful, they do have *some type of power* over the children they target. For example, a more popular child may bully a less popular one. Or a student who has access to embarrassing information about a classmate may use that power to bully.

Regardless of the form it takes, bullying should always be taken seriously. It is a pattern of behavior that occurs repeatedly over time. And it is damaging to both the child who is targeted and the one doing the bullying.

Studies show that as many as one out of five kids has been bullied at some time. And research has made it clear that this problem can't be dismissed as "kids being kids." In fact, studies show that adults can send the message that bullying is unacceptable—and put a stop to it—by responding quickly and consistently to the behavior. This booklet raises questions parents frequently ask about bullying and provides answers that will help you help your child feel safe at school.



*What exactly is bullying? I always thought kids being mean to one another was just part of growing up.*

A common myth about bullying is that it's a "rite of passage" all kids go through. Nothing could be further from the truth—bullying is wrong, inappropriate and damaging behavior.

Bullying may be:

- » **Verbal.** This includes teasing, making threats, name-calling and inappropriate comments.
- » **Social.** This involves spreading rumors, embarrassing people in front of others, purposely leaving someone out and encouraging others not to be friends with someone.
- » **Physical.** When one child hurts or tries to hurt another child's body or belongings, that's physical bullying.

Both verbal and social bullying can take place online (cyberbullying) as well as in person.

Children who bully don't usually act alone. They are often part of a group where intimidating others establishes group identity and status. They often depend on "assistants" for support.

## Teasing can be bullying, too

Teasing is a slippery slope. Sometimes a child who teases has no intention of bullying and simply means to be playful or affectionate. The problem is that the distinction between teasing and bullying is very subtle. The child being teased can interpret teasing meant with good intentions as mean and hurtful.



*My normally happy child has become withdrawn over the past couple of weeks. How do I tell if my child is being bullied? And what should I do?*

**S**tart by talking to your child about school. Ask what it's like walking home from school or who your child sits with at lunch. Keep the conversation general. Then ask about the other children at school—how they act or how they treat each other. You might even ask if your child is aware of any bullying going on at school. Your conversation may help your child open up about bullying.

Some signs that a child is being bullied include:

- » **A drop in grades.** It's hard for students to concentrate if they're worried about their safety or reputation.
- » **A sudden loss of interest in school.** Most reported bullying takes place at school.
- » **Signs of physical abuse,** such as bruises, cuts or ripped clothing.
- » **Stomachaches, headaches,** panic attacks or difficulty sleeping. These can all be signs of bullying-related stress.
- » **Acting overly aggressive and angry** or unusually withdrawn. Children who are bullied often take it out on others or isolate themselves.

It's important not to ignore these signs—but equally important not to jump to conclusions. Tell your child you're concerned and why it's important to tell you the truth.

If your child is being bullied:

- » **Stay calm.** Don't allow your anger at what has happened to your child to cloud your judgment.
- » **Empower your child.** Make sure your child feels like part of the solution. Ask: "How did you react to the bullying? What happened?" Encourage your child to report any bullying incidents to you or to an adult at school.
- » **Keep a written record** of the times your child is bullied. This will show that the bullying is part of a pattern and not a one-time event.
- » **Talk to your child's teacher.** Discuss what is happening and what can be done at the school to prevent further bullying. Share everything you have learned about the problem.
- » **Contact the school principal and counselor.** And stay in touch—it's often not enough to have one meeting with the school and expect everything to be solved. Discuss the school's policy and procedures related to bullying.
- » **Decide with school officials** whether to contact law enforcement authorities.
- » **Do not contact the parents** of the child doing the bullying. Let a school official set up a meeting if necessary.
- » **Provide an emotional refuge for your child.** Explain that your child is not to blame and that no one should have to put up with bullying. Keep your child involved in finding a solution, but make sure you are taking action. Advocate for your child.





*My fourth-grader is being bullied. I have informed the school, but want to protect my child while they begin to look into the case. What should my child do to stay safe?*

**S**ome parents tell children to strike back at bullies. But that usually creates more problems than it solves. You've taken a great first step by telling the school. Steps your child can take include:

- » **Walk away.** It's harder to bully someone who won't stand still to listen.
- » **Try not to show any emotion.** A child who bullies may be looking for a reaction. If your child feels comfortable speaking up, suggest saying "Stop" in a calm, clear voice before walking away.
- » **Tell an adult right away.** Reporting the bullying can make your child feel safer and less alone.
- » **Try to avoid** places where bullying tends to happen.
- » **Stay near adults and other children.** It's tougher to bully someone who has people around for support.
- » **Write it down.** Keep a written record of what happens—dates, times, places and exactly what the other student says and does. That way, you and your child have evidence to show the school.



*The teacher just told me that my child has been bullied by another student for the past month. I feel like a bad parent for not realizing it! Why didn't my child talk to me about it?*

Unfortunately, parents are often the last to know that their child is being bullied. Children may be reluctant to talk about bullying because they:

- » **Feel ashamed.** Bullying can make a child feel unworthy of respect, unpopular and alone. Children who are bullied may feel like they are supposed to “be strong.” Or they might keep quiet because the bullying is so subtle that they aren't sure how to explain what's going on.
- » **Fear retaliation.** Your child may have been threatened with even worse treatment for telling an adult what has been happening.
- » **Think no one can—or will—help them.** The longer the bullying continues, the more helpless and isolated the child who is targeted feels.

Talk to your child about what the teacher said. Explain that the bullying isn't your child's fault and that you and the school will work together to solve the problem. Ask what you can do to support your child.



***My child's best friend has ended their friendship. This "friend" now ignores my child, whispers to other students and won't even let my child sit at their lunch table anymore. Is this bullying?***

It's normal for friendships to change and for children to drift apart. But when one child is repeatedly unkind or excludes another, the behavior crosses the line into social bullying. This type of bullying is generally invisible to the adults in a child's life.

If you suspect this may be the case, talk with your child. Say that you understand this kind of behavior often takes place at school. Ask what happens in class. What do students do when they want to be mean? Approaching the subject in a general way may make it easier for your child to open up to you.

Talk with your child and express your sympathy for the loss of this important friendship.

Make sure that your home and family provide an emotional refuge—a place where your child can feel safe expressing emotions. Ask if your child feels comfortable approaching this friend. Your child might say something like, "Our friendship was important to me. It hurts when you whisper about me and leave me out." Your child could also reach out to mutual friends to let them know their friendship is important.

One of the best things you can do is to help your child find a new activity. A class at the community center or a volunteer opportunity will allow your child to focus on interests and make new friends.





**What is cyberbullying and how can I protect my child from it?**

Cyberbullying refers to any bullying done online or through a digital device. A child who cyberbullies can spread rumors quickly through email, text messages or social media. Cyberbullying sometimes involves sending or posting pictures meant to insult, embarrass, offend or frighten. And it can include taunting through chat or instant messages.

If your child is being cyberbullied:

- » **Tell your child not to respond.** Writing back encourages the other person to keep the communication going.
- » **Keep records.** Have your child print out or take a screen shot of everything—emails, instant messages, texts or social media posts from anyone who participates in cyberbullying. Write down the dates and times the messages were received or found, too.
- » **Go to the authorities.** Contact school officials or the police and show them the printouts or screenshots. Cyberbullying is just as serious as face-to-face bullying. And even if it takes place at home, the school wants to know about it because it can affect students when they're at school.
- » **Limit home device use** to places where you can monitor what your child is doing online.





## Why do some children bully others?

**M**ost people believe that kids who bully others suffer from low self-esteem. However, research indicates the opposite: Bullies tend to have average or above-average self-esteem. Surprisingly, they're *not* bullying other children to feel better about themselves.

There are many reasons why some children bully others. Many bully as a way to feel more important, popular or in control. Some bully to get attention from peers or adults. Others may be jealous of the children they bully—or even be bullied themselves.

Peer pressure is also a factor in bullying. Children who bully are more likely to have friends who bully. These groups often share positive attitudes towards violence.





*I'm afraid my older child is bullying. First, my child started pushing around a younger sibling. Now my neighbor's child isn't allowed to play with my child anymore. What should I do?*

If you suspect your child is participating in bullying, take action right away. Bullying is a behavior pattern that can lead to serious trouble at school, loss of friends and problems later in life. You can:

- » **Talk with your child about the behavior.** Make it clear that your family does not tolerate behavior that hurts other people physically or emotionally. Be a role model.
- » **Avoid letting your child minimize the behavior.** Bullying is not “just kidding around.” Make sure your child understands that bullying is hurtful and potentially illegal—and that you expect it to stop immediately.
- » **Avoid physical punishments.** Try using time-outs, loss of privileges and reasonable consequences.
- » **Provide more supervision.** Make sure you know where your child is going, what your child is doing and who your child's friends are.
- » **Praise your child for showing kindness and empathy**—and for making an effort to improve.

Remember, the school is ready to help. If you suspect your child is bullying, contact your school principal or school counselor. Or ask your child's doctor to recommend a professional assessment to try to identify what is motivating this behavior.



*My child told me that a student at school is being bullied. I don't want my child to just sit there and watch this happen—but I don't want my child to get hurt, either. What should I tell my child to do?*

**E**veryone has a role to play in helping to stop bullying. That includes the bystanders who witness the behavior. While providing an audience can actually encourage bullying behavior, there are ways your child can make a difference—without getting in harm's way.

## Your child should:

- » **Offer the bullied child an "out."** Your child might say, "Come play on the swings with me" or "Hey, the teacher needs us. We have to go now." Then they can walk away together.
- » **Go get an adult** or persuade the bullied child to tell an adult. Your child may also want to ask if the school has an anonymous way for students to tell adults about bullying.
- » **Express disapproval of the bullying.** Your child can say to the person doing the bullying, "That's not OK."
- » **Remain calm.** Retaliating with verbal attacks or physical violence may result in your child getting hurt or even being blamed for bullying.





*I know I'm supposed to contact the school if my child is involved in bullying. But who exactly should I call?*

**S**chools today have entire teams of trained professionals, ready to help make your child's school experience a safe one. If you suspect your child is being bullied or bullying others, you should contact:

- » **Your child's teacher.** That is the first person you should contact.
- » **The school principal.** The principal wants to know about any activity on school property that needs immediate disciplinary action—especially bullying. The principal can also tell you about the school policy on bullying.
- » **The school counselor.** Counselors are trained to help children solve problems.
- » **The school psychologist.** School psychologists provide psychological counseling for children and families.
- » **The school social worker.** The social worker is trained to assist families in accessing community resources that can also provide help.

If the bullying takes place off school grounds, or if you fear for your child's physical safety, contact your local police department.



*I don't want my child to grow up to be bullied—or to participate in bullying. What can I do to prevent this?*

## To help your child stay safe:

- » **Build your child's self-respect.** Teach your child to feel strong and worthwhile. Your student's rights and opinions count just as much as anyone else's.
- » **Encourage friendships.** Give your child opportunities to socialize with peers. Joining a club or team may help.
- » **Stay involved.** Talk to your child. Know what's happening at school and with friends.
- » **Identify supportive people.** Tell your child where to get help—from you, teachers and other trusted adults.

## To prevent bullying behavior:

- » **Encourage empathy.** Experts call empathy "the bullying antidote." Talk frequently about how others feel.
- » **Set an example.** Be caring. When angry, behave calmly—avoid lashing out at your child.
- » **Pay attention.** Notice how your child behaves. Address problems immediately.
- » **Monitor influences.** Avoid letting your child see violence in the media or elsewhere.
- » **Instill values.** Say, "Treat others as you want to be treated."

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*Never be bullied into silence. Never allow yourself to be made a victim. Accept no one's definition of your life, but define yourself.*

—Henry S. Firestone

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