



Questions Parents Ask About ...

# Bullies





## Bullies and Bullying

**W**hen most people think about bullies, they think about the stereotypical “big boy in class.” But not all bullies are boys—and not all bullies are physically big. Girls are just as likely to be bullies as boys. Boys tend to use physical force, threats and ridicule to intimidate their victims. Girls often use more subtle, emotional methods of bullying, such as spreading rumors or excluding others.

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 victim and the bully.

Studies show that as many as one out of four kids has been the victim of bullying at some time. And research has made it clear that this growing problem can’t be dismissed as “kids being kids.” This booklet raises questions parents frequently ask about bullies and bullying, and provides answers that will help you help your child feel safe at school.



*Note: Every child is unique, so we often use the singular pronoun. We’ll alternate the use of “he/him” and “she/her” throughout this booklet.*

*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 often dangerous behavior.

Bullying is the act of repeatedly inflicting physical and/or psychological harm to another person or persons. It can take many different forms, both direct and indirect. Direct behaviors include verbal taunts, name-calling, teasing, threats and intimidation, menacing gestures and physical violence. Indirect bullying behaviors include intentional exclusion from a group, spreading rumors, cyberbullying and creating situations where victims feel like social outcasts.



Bullies don't usually act alone. They are often part of a group where intimidating others establishes group identity and status. Bullies often depend on "assistant bullies" for support.

## Teasing can be bullying, too

Teasing is a slippery slope. Sometimes the teaser 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 victim can interpret teasing meant with good intentions as mean and hurtful.

*My normally happy son has become withdrawn over the past couple of weeks. I'm beginning to suspect he's being bullied at school. How do I tell if my child is being bullied? And what should I do if he is?*



**B**ullying is damaging—it can affect a child's schoolwork as well as his sense of self-esteem and safety. Many children who are bullied don't tell anyone about it. They think complaining about bullying will make them look weak or invite more harassment from bullies.

Some signs that your child is being bullied include:

- » **A drop in grades.** It's hard for a child to concentrate if he's worried about his safety.
- » **A sudden loss of interest in school.** Most 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 bully-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 for him to tell you the truth.

If you find out that your child is being bullied, be patient—solving the problem can take time. Solutions may not be simple.

If your child is being bullied:

- » **Stay calm.** Don't allow your anger at what has happened to your child to cloud your judgment.
- » **Assure your child that it's not his fault.** Encourage him to report any bullying incidents to you or to an adult at school.
- » **Empower your child.** Make sure he feels like part of the solution. Has he tried to solve the problem on his own? What happened?
- » **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 stay in touch—it's often not enough to have one meeting with the school and expect everything to be solved. If your school does not have a policy about bullying, offer to serve on a parent committee that will help the school develop clear guidelines about bullying.
- » **Decide with school officials** whether to contact law enforcement authorities. If the abuse is physical and ongoing, contact law enforcement authorities right away.
- » **Do not contact the parents** of the bully. Let a school official set up a meeting if necessary.
- » **Provide an emotional refuge for your child.** Let him know that he 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. It is your job to advocate for your child.



**My daughter is being bullied. I have informed the school, but want to protect my daughter while they begin to look into the case. What can I tell her to do to protect herself from the bully?**



**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. Tell your daughter that even though she is being bullied, she isn't helpless. Let her know that it's not her fault. Encourage her to:

- » **Walk away.** It's harder to bully someone who won't stand still to listen.
- » **Try not to show any emotion.** Bullies tend to target kids who respond to their taunts—kids who cry easily or get really angry. It's not fun to bully someone who doesn't seem to care.
- » **Avoid being alone**—especially when near the bully. It's tougher to pick on someone who has a friend with her for support.
- » **Write it down.** Keep a written record of what happens—dates, times, places and exactly what the bully says and does. That way, you and your daughter have evidence to show the school.



Remind your child that people matter more than things. If a bully is attacking your daughter for her money, sneakers or jacket, she should give up the property. A jacket can be replaced—*your child* can't. She should tell an adult immediately if she feels threatened.

*I got a call from my son's school today. Apparently he has been bullied by another student for the past month. I feel like a bad parent for not realizing it! Why didn't my son 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.** Bullies tend to make their victims feel unworthy of respect, unpopular and alone. Boys are especially unlikely to tell a parent because popular culture tells them they are supposed to “be strong.” Girls, on the other hand, might keep quiet because the bullying is so subtle that they aren’t sure how to explain what’s going on.



- » **Fear retaliation.** Most bullies threaten their victims with even worse treatment if they tell 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 victim feels.

Talk to your child about school. Ask him what it’s like walking home from school or how he spends his lunch hour. Keep the conversation general. Then ask about the other children at school—how they act or how they treat each other. Once he has started talking about school in general, it may be easier for him to talk about being bullied.

***My daughter's best friend has "disappeared." When I ask why she doesn't hang out with Katie anymore, my daughter avoids the question. Could she be a victim of bullying by her best friend?***



**G**irls tend to use a much more subtle form of bullying than boys. Instead of punching or hitting, the bully often uses her relationship with the victim as a weapon. The bully ignores her victim in order to punish her. She decides who will be allowed to join her clique, and who will be treated as an outcast. She spreads rumors and sabotages relationships.

The biggest problem is that her bullying behavior is generally invisible to the adults around her.

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

If she confides in you, be thoughtful. Let her know how sorry you are. Make sure that your home and family provide an emotional refuge for her—a place where she can feel safe expressing her emotions. Try to accommodate special requests—like dropping her off at school just before the bell rings and being there to pick her up right when school ends.

One of the best things you can do is to help find a new activity for her. A class at the community center or a volunteer opportunity will allow her to focus on what she likes to do. And she will be able to get together with some new people who aren't connected with her problems at school.



*I've heard "cyberbullying" mentioned in the news. What is it and what can parents do about it?*



**C**yberbullying refers to any bullying done over the Internet or through a cell phone. A bully can spread rumors quickly through email, text messages or social networking sites. A bully can send or post pictures meant to insult, offend or frighten. A bully can even taunt a victim through chat or instant messages.

But a victim isn't powerless just because he isn't face-to-face with the bully. If you suspect your child is being harassed by a cyberbully:

» **Tell him not to respond.**

Writing back to a cyberbully encourages the bully to keep the communication going.

» **Keep records.** Have your child print out everything—any email he receives from the bully, any instant

messages the bully sends, or anything your child finds posted about himself on a website. Write down the dates and times the messages were received or found, too.

» **Go to the authorities.** Encourage your child to tell you if he receives a cruel or hurtful email—or even a text message. If the cyberbullying doesn't stop, go to school officials or the police and show them what your son has printed out. Cyberbullying is just as serious as face-to-face bullying.

» **Keep the home computer** in a place where you can monitor what your son is reading online. Monitor his cell phone use.





**Why do some kids become bullies?**



**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 kids become bullies as a way to feel more important, popular or in control. Some kids bully to get attention. Others just like making children feel afraid of them. In some cases, the bully may be jealous of his victim. Occasionally, a bully may be a victim of bullying himself.

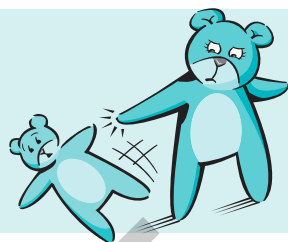


Peer pressure is also a factor in bullying. Children who bully are more likely to have friends who are bullies. These groups often share positive attitudes towards violence.

For more information about bullying, ask your local librarian to help you find books on the topic, like:

- » ***The Bully, the Bullied, and the Bystander*** by Barbara Coloroso.
- » ***Bullying at School: What We Know and What We Can Do*** by Dan Olweus.
- » ***The Complete Guide to Understanding, Controlling and Stopping Bullies & Bullying*** by Margaret R. Kohut.

*My daughter has started pushing around her younger sister. Now my neighbor's child isn't allowed to play with her anymore. I'm afraid my daughter is a bully. What should I do?*



If you suspect your child is a bully, 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 her 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 daughter 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 for your child.** Make sure you know where she’s going, what she’s doing and who her friends are.
- » **Praise your child for the things she does right**—and for making an effort to improve.



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

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



**S**adly, students often know that a child is being bullied before any adults do. Ignoring the problem won't make it go away—and may lead the bully to think that everyone supports what he is doing. Tell your daughter that bystanders need to act.

## Your child should:

- » **Persuade the victim to tell an adult.** Or offer to tell an adult for the victim. She may also want to ask if her school can start an anonymous way for students to tell adults about bullying.
- » **Let the bully know she disapproves of the bullying.** Your daughter and another friend can tell the bully that bullying is “not cool.”



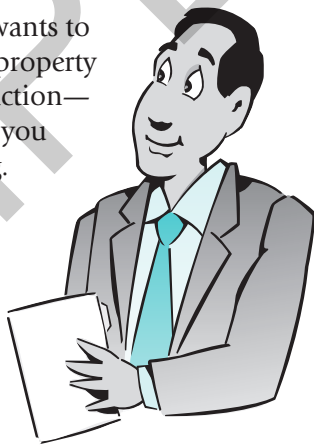
- » **Remain calm.** She may get hurt or even be blamed for being a bully herself if she retaliates with violence.
- » **Talk to a responsible adult.** She should not try to handle the situation herself.

*I know I'm supposed to contact my child's school if he is involved in bullying, either as a bully or as a victim. 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.** She 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. He 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.
- » **A 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 be a bully. What can I do to prevent this?*



## To help your child stay safe:

- » **Build your child's self-respect.** Teach him that he is 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 other kids. 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:



- » **Set an example.** Be caring. When angry, act calm—avoid lashing out at your child.
- » **Pay attention.** Notice how your child behaves. Address problems immediately.
- » **Monitor influences.** Avoid letting your child see violence on TV or elsewhere.
- » **Discipline well.** Enforce firm, fair and consistent rules.
- » **Encourage values.** Say, "Treat others as you want to be treated."



***“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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