

Bullying

Bullying is ongoing physical, emotional or verbal aggression by one or more people against others. It is widespread and commonly found where children gather. It can have detrimental effects on all involved, including the bully.

Schools, early childhood services and sporting or interest groups have a responsibility to ensure a safe environment and should have policies to prevent bullying. Parents can help by believing and supporting their child. This includes helping your child to develop coping techniques and speaking to those in authority where the bullying is occurring.

Bullying is more than just physical aggression

Bullying is the deliberate desire by one or more people to hurt, threaten or frighten someone with words, behaviour or actions. Bullying can vary in its severity. It can include threatening, teasing, name calling, excluding, preventing others from going where they want to or doing what they want to, pushing or hitting, and all forms of physical abuse.

Bullying affects everyone involved

It is now recognised that long-term bullying can be very damaging for all involved. There are three groups involved in bullying who are affected:

- **The child being bullied** – who may experience effects on their health and wellbeing, including their sense of self and place in their world.
- **The bully** – who needs to learn more appropriate ways of interaction and peaceful problem solving.
- **The audience** – who witness bullying.

We are now learning the power of the audience. They are the ones who can stop the bullying from occurring by telling responsible adults what is going on. It is important that all children recognise that bullying is not acceptable, even if they are not involved, and that they can make a difference to help prevent bullying from occurring.

Victims of bullying

The bully can pick on anyone around them. Sometimes, though, they will choose children who seem easy to hurt and who they can successfully intimidate. They may pick on children who:

- Look or are different in some way
- Are loners
- Are stressed, either at home or at school
- Have a disability
- Struggle with schoolwork or other tasks set for the group
- Are not good at sport
- Lack social confidence
- Are anxious
- Prefer books to people
- Are academic
- Are unable to hold their own because they are smaller, weaker or younger.

Occasionally, children provoke other children to bully. Very competitive environments can contribute to bullying.

Adults may not be the first to know

Children who are being bullied may not always tell adults first. They usually tell a friend or sibling before they will confide in other family members. Most children will not tell those in authority at the place where the bullying is occurring. They may be afraid or ashamed, or they may not have any confidence that those in authority can do anything about the bullying.

Look out for signs and effects

Some signs of a child being bullied may include the child:

- Not wanting to go to the place where they are being bullied and finding excuses to stay at home (for example, feeling sick)
- Wanting to travel a different way, rather than the most obvious or quickest way, to avoid the children who are bullying them
- Being very tense, tearful and unhappy after attending the place where they are being bullied
- Talking about hating the place where they are being bullied or not having any friends
- Being covered in bruises or scratches
- Wearing torn clothes and not being able to explain how this happened
- Going without lunch as lunch or lunch money has gone missing
- Refusing to tell you what happens at the place where they are being bullied
- Changing in behaviour and demeanour
- Gaining or losing weight
- Suffering from an eroding confidence
- Producing varied academic achievements, with poor results in a particular area where previously these were much better.

Your child may show other signs such as unhappiness, being teary or withdrawn, or changes in behaviour. These may include problems with sleeping, bedwetting and general regression. These signs may not necessarily mean your child is being bullied, but you need to check out what is worrying your child. You can do this by spending time encouraging your child to talk to you about their worries. This means listening (without interrupting) and believing your child.

Parents can help

There are several things parents can do to help. These include:

- Listen to your child and take their feelings and fears seriously.
- Try not to take everything into your own hands (depending on the age of the child), as this is likely to make your child feel even less in control.
- Help your child to work out their own non-violent ideas and strategies for coping with the problem as a first step.
- It is not helpful to call your child names (such as 'weak' or 'a sook') and don't allow anyone else do so.
- If the bullying involves verbal teasing, you may be able to help your child to learn to ignore it. Practise at home ways to help your child gain confidence (for example, walking past with their head up).
- Help your child think of ways to avoid the situation (for example, by going home a different way or staying with a supportive group).
- Some children are helped by imagining a special wall around them, which protects them so that the hard words bounce off.
- Work on building your child's confidence in things they do well.
- Be very careful that your child does not feel that being bullied is their fault.
- Encourage your child to have different groups of friends and be involved in different activities so they can see clearly where the bullying is occurring and where it is not. This helps children know where they can feel safe and to know it is not their fault.

At the place where the bullying is occurring

Talk to those in authority about the bullying. All schools, early childhood services and sporting or interest groups should have policies that deal with bullying. Some suggestions include:

- Make a list of the things that have happened to your child. Be clear and firm about their suffering. Be prepared to name the children who bully. If bullying persists, write down 'who', 'what', 'where' and 'when'.
- Talk to those in authority about how they deal with bullying – what steps they take to prevent bullying occurring and how they protect children.
- Talk to the appropriate person about what can be done to help your child. Keep in contact until the problem is sorted out.
- If you find it difficult to go to the authorities to talk about this, take a friend with you.

It is important for your child's ongoing wellbeing to get professional support if bullying is an ongoing problem for your child, or if it happens to your child in a lot of different situations and with different children.

Why children bully

Although the research is not entirely clear, it is generally recognised that bullies engage in this behaviour because it enables them to feel important. They may need to have control over something (or someone) to compensate for other areas in their lives where they feel alone or outcast, or they may be being bullied themselves. Bullies learn this behaviour from their environment. Bullies also suffer in the long term through poor academic achievements, poor social skills and poor adult relationships. Without support and guidance to change their bullying behaviour, the child bully can take this behaviour into adulthood.

If your child is the bully

If your child is bullying others, it is worth looking at the home environment and reflecting on a few questions:

- How is discipline handled with your child?
- What problem-solving skills are your children exposed to? How is conflict handled?
- Is your child exposed to helpful ways to communicate with other people?
- Is there unhappiness, arguing, relationship problems, conflict, fighting or violence at home that the child might be witnessing? Do they somehow think they are to blame?
- Is your child worried or frightened about something?
- What inappropriate, perhaps violent, interactions is your child exposed to through the media?

Where to get help

- Your child's school or early childhood service
- Kids Helpline Tel. 1800 551 800
- Parentline Tel. 132 289
- Your doctor
- Your local community health centre
- Youth worker

Things to remember

- Let your child know that bullying is wrong. Take your child's fears and feelings seriously, and help work out ways of dealing with them.
- Reassure your child that being bullied is not their fault and that something can and will be done about it.
- Let your child know that bullying happens to lots of children.
- Protect your child by involving the school or club, or those in charge of wherever the bullying is happening.
- Help your child to feel good about the other things in his or her life.

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