

TOPIC

Helping a Child Combat Bullying

THE MANY FACES OF BULLYING

Bullying used to be considered a normal, albeit undesirable, part of growing up. But scientific and anecdotal evidence have definitively debunked that as a misguided, harmful myth. Bullying causes the targeted child's academic performance, emotional health, and physical well-being to suffer not only while the harassment is occurring, but it's increasingly evident that the effects are more enduring. Adults who were bullied as children are at higher risk of suffering from low self-esteem and depression, and there's mounting evidence that they're likely to experience poorer physical health, have lower educational attainment and earn less income than do their non-bullied counterparts. At its most extreme, bullying can result in suicide and devastating acts of revenge like school shootings. We've seen it on the evening news; the name Columbine evokes it.

Bullying is intentional tormenting in a variety of ways:

- Verbal bullying: saying (or writing) mean things—taunting, teasing, name-calling or threatening, for example
- Psychosocial bullying: damaging someone's reputation or relationships by embarrassing the target publicly, spreading rumors about him/her, intentionally shunning the target, and encouraging others to shun him/her
- Physical bullying: harming a person's body or possessions or taking the person's possessions

Before the internet, bullying was mostly limited to specific times and specific locations (e.g., on the way to/from school). However, digital technology and social media have given bullies a powerful new forum for inflicting damage. "Cyberbullying" operates around the clock and at an accelerated pace, has no physical boundaries, and can be done anonymously. Now a child can't feel protected even in his/her own home.

RECOGNIZING THE SIGNS OF BULLYING

The surest way to know your child is being bullied is if he/she tells you. But many children are afraid to open up about it. They may think it's their own fault (e.g., if they looked/acted differently it they wouldn't be a target), feel embarrassed and ashamed, fear how their parent(s) might respond, or have concerns that the bully will find out they "tattled" and things will get even worse.

Recurrent bruises/injuries and "lost" or damaged clothing, schoolbooks and other possessions can be visible signs if the bullying is physical. In general, your child's moods and behaviors will offer the best indication of some sort of problem. Common signs are:

- Declining grades, loss of interest in schoolwork and activities, anxiety about or refusal to attend school
- Change in physical appearance – clothing, hair, makeup, piercings/body art
- Changes in eating habits and other routines
- Changes in/avoidance of computer and mobile technology use
- Change in or loss of friends; spending more time alone

You know what's normal for your child; if you think there may be a problem, there probably is one. It's always best to calmly and supportively explore the matter further.



SUPPORTING A BULLIED CHILD

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to helping a child who's being bullied. The most appropriate or effective course of action will depend on multiple variables such as the age of the children involved, where the bullying takes place, the specific types of bullying behaviors, and the duration and severity of the bullying. But it's always important to listen attentively, assure your child you're in his/her corner, and refrain from acting rashly or in a way that disregards your child's wants, needs and fears. Work with your child to find solution, get help from your child's school or other authority (resist the urge to contact other parents involved as you can't predict how they'll respond) and seek professional mental health counseling if necessary. It's important not just to your child's present well-being, but most likely to his or her future well-being, too.

"Bullying is a common experience for many children and adolescents, but repeated aggression, threats, assault and intimidation can interfere with a student's emotional, social and educational development. Parents should always take bullying complaints seriously, and work with the schools to investigate the situation."

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