

Help for Victims of Bullying

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Bullying is a common occurrence during childhood and often experienced as early as the preschool years. It is difficult for a parent to hear that their child has either been the victim of bullying or the perpetrator of bullying. Bullying is any kind of ongoing physical or verbal mistreatment where there is unequal power between two or more people, such as bigger children picking on smaller ones or bullying a child who is thought to be different. It occurs when a child purposely and repeatedly holds power over another with the intent of being hurtful.

Behaviors that are considered bullying include: insulting, teasing, verbally and physically abusing, harassing, gossiping, spreading rumors, humiliating, rejecting and excluding. Typically, boys tend to use physical intimidation and threats regardless of the gender of their victims and girls often target other girls with indirect methods such as spreading rumors. Victims of bullying tend to be upset about the occurrence but bullies are described as being "matter-of-fact", offering justifications such as "it didn't really hurt," or "he deserved it and started it."

The phenomenon of bullying can start early in life. Preschoolers who engage in bullying may do so to get others' attention, to show off, or to get what they want (toys, objects, clothes). They may also be engaging in what they have experienced from older siblings, or day care experiences. The most susceptible children to be bullied are the younger children. Adult intervention is crucial. An attitude that this is just part of growing up and believing it will just disappear is indeed a risky one. A University of Michigan research study found that 8 year old children who had been identified as bullies in their schools were often bullies for the rest of their lives, if appropriate intervention steps were not applied.

The ability to alter the course of bullying is very strong. There are simple steps that parents can do to help bully-proof their child. For example:

- Teach self-respect – A confident child is much less likely to become the victim of a bully
- Encourage friendships – Children who don't have friends tend to be more vulnerable to bullies. Start early in helping your child build social skills and make friendships.
- Start teaching the art of negotiation early – The preschool years are the best time to begin teaching children to settle their own disputes and solve problems. Encourage and model for your child how to deal with conflict over two children wanting the same toy at the same time. Encourage sharing. Explore children's literature that deals with conflicts and positive solutions and options.
- Stress the importance of body awareness – Help your child develop ability to relax and use deep breathing. This conveys strength and calm and helps children appear and be less reactive, thus less vulnerable to bully or be bullied.

If you find that your child may be bullying others there are also simple steps to intervene and turn the situation around. Some interventions include:

- Make it clear that bullying will not be tolerated. Your words and response must convey this attitude clearly and consistently. Tell your child you will not allow such actions and state the consequences. If the problem occurs at school, develop a plan with school personnel to also address and intervene when the behavior occurs.
- Increase supervision of your child's activities and whereabouts. Make sure you know who your child is associating with. Spend more time encouraging pro-social activities and set limits and guidelines on behavior.
- Praise – Find the positive and accentuate it A LOT. The good focus should outweigh the bad. What you focus on most increases, so this is an important awareness.

If the bullying continues it may be helpful to seek the advice of a mental health professional to establish a plan for the child and family to stop the behavior. Most bullying is readily modifiable and can be seen as a teaching opportunity for the family and learning and growth opportunity for the child. When everyone works together to discourage bullying and responds to incidents, the surroundings become more positive, and the environment and everyone in it feels safer.