

"Bullying"

How to Prevent it, how to Stop it!

"Bullying" is a common experience for many children growing up. According to the National Association of School Psychologists, about one in seven school children — that's about five million kids — has been either a bully or a victim. And the costs of this situation are enormous. Children who experience persistent bullying may become depressed or fearful. They may even lose interest in going to school.

- Herbert G. Lingren, *Extension Family Scientist*

What can a parent do?

It's important to arm kids against bullies early on — to teach them how to avoid being bullied and how to defend themselves when such abuse does occur. It's also important to teach your children not to be bullies. Before you can take steps to protect your child, however, you need to understand just what bullying is and why some kids tend to get picked on more than others.

What is bullying?

Bullying is defined as any kind of ongoing physical or verbal mistreatment where there is an imbalance of power — usually a bigger, older child picking on a smaller or weaker one. Bullying is a game of "one-upmanship" — an attempt to win while the other loses. Another characteristic of bullying is that the victim appears to be very upset by the incident, while the bully is matter-of-fact, saying things like "What's the big deal?" or "The kid asked for it," according to William Porter, author of *Bully Proofing Your School*.

This difference in attitude distinguishes bullying from more normal childhood conflicts — fisticuffs during a kickball game or a heated argument over whose turn it is on the swings, for instance — where both children are equally upset and angry over what

happened. It's really important for adults not to mistake bullying for normal childhood conflict. Some conflict between kids is expected. Bullying, on the other hand, shouldn't be tolerated at all.

Who gets picked on?

Bullies tend to zero in on children who appear vulnerable for some reason. Victims are usually passive, anxious, sensitive and quiet, or stand out in some way. Youngsters who are provocative and annoying, who seek negative attention from peers, also tend to get picked on. Both passive and aggressive victims tend to have few friends, and therefore few allies to rally to their defense in a sticky situation.

How can you help your child?

Realizing that some kids seem doomed to be victimized because of their very nature or physical status, is there any real hope of bully-proofing your child? Yes, say the experts, you can help your child don a sort of psychic bully-proof vest to deflect the insults and physical abuse that bullies like to dish out. And it's never too early to begin laying this foundation for self-preservation.

The following are steps you can take to help bully-proof your own child:

- **Teach self-respect.** A confident child is less likely to become the victim of a bully. How can you help? A pat on the back every once in a while works wonders. Make sure positive comments, "I like the way you picked up your toys without being asked" or "You did a great job getting yourself dressed this morning," outweigh negative ones. Avoid labeling or name-calling (such as calling a child lazy, for instance) that can make a youngster feel bad about herself.
- **Let your child know it's OK to express anger or dissatisfaction.** Don't chastise or stop your child when she's blowing off steam. Show her that you value her opinions by listening to them. Letting your child express herself to you when she is angry will make it more likely that she will have the fortitude to stand up to a bully in the future.

- **Stress the importance of body language.** Verbally asserting oneself is not very effective if one's body language tells another story. Teach your child to hold himself confidently, to bolster his assertive words by relaxing his body (deep breathing helps), keeping his hands steady, and maintaining frequent eye contact. Bullies tend to gravitate toward kids who are unsure of themselves. These tricks will help your youngster seem self-assured, even when he's not.
- **Encourage friendships.** Children who are loners tend to be more vulnerable to bullies. So, start early in helping your youngster to develop friendships and build social skills. By elementary school, it may be more difficult for a shy child to make friends. Perhaps your child needs help in learning how to initiate friendships or join in group activities. "If your child has problems fitting in, suggest she seek out another youngster who's alone a lot, rather than try to break into a group of two or more children," recommends William Porter. "It's also easier to participate in unstructured activities, such as playing on the jungle gym, than to join an organized game in progress."
- **Teach your child to express herself clearly, yet diplomatically.** Help your youngster learn to use "I" statements. This form of self-expression works for two reasons: first, it's indisputable. For example, if your daughter tells a friend "I don't like to play that game anymore," who can argue with her? After all, that's how she feels. Second, the statement is nonjudgmental. Your child is not putting the other youngster on the defensive. When a child knows how to express herself without stepping on other people's toes, she tends to be popular with her peers — and, as mentioned, having friends is a good way to keep bullies at bay.

Is your child being bullied?

Too often, parents are the last to know their child is in trouble. Remember, bullies work through fear and manipulation. They often intimidate children into silence by threatening to harm them or by labeling them "wimps" or "babies" if they tell an adult what's going on. Therefore, it's important for parents of school-age children to be on the lookout for signs of

bullying. If your son routinely comes home from school extremely hungry, ask him why. Maybe someone is taking his lunch. Does your daughter rush to the bathroom as soon as she gets off the bus? Maybe she's afraid to enter the school bathroom because a child uses this place to threaten or intimidate her.

It's a good idea to make it a habit to ask your child what's happening at school, especially if you suspect a problem. Ask pointed questions ("Who's the bully in your class?" or "Who bothers kids on the bus?"), particularly if you are unable to be home when your child gets off the school bus. The reason? "By the time you arrive home and talk with your child about the day, she may no longer be focusing on the fact that Susie is bothering her on the bus. But that doesn't mean it wasn't upsetting to her."

Defensive Strategies

What should you do if you discover your child is being bullied? Discussing some of these bully-busting strategies with your youngster may help:

- **Practice the art of self-affirmation.** One tactic is called "self-talk," or teaching the victim to give herself a silent pep talk whenever she's picked on. For instance, she could repeat to herself: "Even though you're saying those things about me, I know they're not true. I don't feel that way about myself." Positive self-talk addresses that all-important issue of self-esteem. And the better a child feels about herself, the less likely she is to be bullied.
- **Know when to assert oneself.** Put the bully on notice that his actions won't be tolerated. This can be as simple as telling the bully, "You can't talk to me like that. Leave me alone." (A word of caution here: Some bullies actually feed on getting a response. Therefore your child should assert himself just once. If it doesn't work, move on to something else, or the bullying may escalate.) Whatever you do, don't encourage your child to fight the bully. Bullies tend to pick on kids who are smaller and weaker. That means your little 80-pound Johnny could be duking it out with a 130-pound aggressor. The bully's going to prevail. Such victories only encourage a bully to carry on with the victimization.

- **"Never let him see you sweat."** Teach your child not to let a bully see that he's upset or scared. A child who is obviously anxious or tends to wear his heart on his sleeve — thereby letting the bully know his tactics are working — may need help finding ways to better hide his emotions.
- **Avoid, when necessary.** One of the best ways to avoid bullying is to avoid the bully. Suggest to your child that she duck down a different stairwell or take a new bike route home. However, don't view running away as a long-term solution, since it may only delay the bullying attempts. Rather, it should be looked at in terms of safety — a way to avoid immediate harm.
- **Don't be ashamed to ask for help.** As a last resort, if the above solutions don't work, encourage your child to report the bullying to his teacher. Parents need to get beyond the misguided idea that kids always need to solve their own problems; that it toughens them up.

Why does a child become a bully?

There is no one particular thing that turns a child into a bully. However, studies show that the problem is generally triggered by something at home in the youngster's environment. This could include having parents who are overly punitive or verbally or physically abusive. A bully also could have been victimized himself, perhaps by a sibling or another child. It becomes very easy for a child to turn around and do to someone else what's been done to him because he knows exactly how it feels. So, how do you discourage a child from becoming a bully? Here's what to watch out for:

- **Take a look at your parenting practices.** Are you a bully at home? Do you frequently criticize your child or demand unquestioning obedience at every turn? Do you use spanking as a punishment? If so, you're sending the message to your child that anger, violence, and intimidation are ways to get what you want. Very likely, your child will turn around and use similar tactics on peers.

- **Watch your tone — and your message.** It's important for parents and caregivers to examine the tone of voice they use when speaking to children. Avoid undue criticism. Children learn by example, and someone who is belittled at home may resort to such tactics when dealing with peers.
- **Start to teach the art of negotiation early on.** The preschool years are the time to begin to teach children to mediate their own disputes. If your toddler is wrestling a toy from the hands of a playmate, swoop in and offer an alternative. With toddlers, parents and caregivers need to watch and intervene when trouble arises. Then try to move things from "might makes right" to "let's make a deal."
- **Don't be bullied yourself.** Parents may also breed a bully by being overly permissive. By giving in when a child is obnoxious or demanding, they send the message that bullying pays off. Children actually feel more secure when they know parents will set limits.

What if your child is the bully?

If you do discover your child is acting like a tyrant, don't panic. It's important for parents to realize that all kids have the capacity to bully. Here's what to do if it's your child who's doing the bullying:

- **Make it clear that bullying will not be tolerated.** Although it's important to determine why your child is behaving like a ruffian, emphasize that you won't allow such actions, and outline the consequences. If the problem occurs at school, tell your child that you respect the school's right to exact punishment if it persists.
- **Have your child walk in the victim's shoes.** Since bullies have trouble empathizing with their victims, it's important to discuss how it feels to be bullied. How would your child feel if it happened to her?
- **Help your child feel successful.** It's important to emphasize your child's good points, so he can start to experience how positive feedback (rather than negative

attention) feels. Is he good with animals? A math whiz? Proficient at team sports? Then put him in situations where his strengths make him shine. Find opportunities for your child to help others, perhaps by volunteering or helping a teacher after school. Doing well increases a child's sense of self-worth.

Although it might be unrealistic to expect that your child will never cross paths with a bully, it is possible to teach him the skills needed to avoid becoming the victim. Children who feel valued and respected and who have the proper tools in their arsenal have the wherewithal to withstand the slings and arrows the meanest bully dishes out.