

Bullying: How Parents Fight Back



Kids are often reluctant to talk about bullying. Here's how to spot it and what to do if your child is a victim.

by Evelyn Beck

Bullying is all too common among school-age children. In 2005, one out of four children had been a recent victim of bullying, with 6th graders the most vulnerable, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

As a parent, the challenges include identifying when your child has been bullied and determining the best response.

First, it's important to be alert to signals that something is wrong. "If your child is not sleeping, not enjoying herself, not eating, or eating too much, you know there's something going on," says Stan Davis, author of two anti-bullying books and publisher of the website [Stop Bullying Now](#). "That's an indication to increase the amount of time you're spending with her. And point out what you're seeing. Say 'You don't seem happy. What's going on?'"

He cautions that the root of the unhappiness may simply be puberty or other anxieties. But spending time together doing activities you both enjoy can be a way to help your child heal as well as a way for you to glean more information.

If your child is being bullied, determine the seriousness of the behavior and whether it is being repeated. On the low end of the spectrum, if another child is sticking his tongue out at your child or acting unfriendly, you may just want to help your child deal with that. In that case, Davis says, "It's fine to acknowledge that there are people who enjoy being mean and that young people will have distress but will have to get used to it."

Kids can also distance themselves from this kind of bully. But understanding the need to do that can be hard for children, who tend to see only two kinds of people: friends and enemies. Parents can help them understand that there are also people you just avoid. In the middle range might be name-calling. Davis advises asking your child what he has already tried before offering advice; that way, you won't look stupid by suggesting ideas that have failed. Then strategize for other possible approaches. If those don't work, it's time to involve the school.

Then there is behavior that Davis calls “completely intolerable.” This could include threats or physical harm. In this case, involve the school immediately. But don’t overreact when speaking to your child or to the school. “It’s important for parents to have a real good check on their own emotionality before talking to their child,” he says. “The problem with showing that emotion is that the child may think Dad’s blood pressure is going up and won’t tell him the next time. Or the child worries that you’ll charge in angrily to the school and make things worse.”

The School’s Role

Davis often sees such hesitancy in children who are the targets of cyberbullying, such as harassing text messages. “Most young people think parents will say ‘No more cell phone or MySpace,’ ” he says. “A lot of kids have told me you can’t tell parents that stuff or they’ll overreact.”

Trevor Romain, author of the self-help book and video *Bullies Are a Pain in the Brain*, agrees. “Kids are afraid to tell,” he says. “They worry that parents will go to the other kid’s parents and cause a big stir. Listen to what your kids are asking for. It might be going to a counselor or teacher or helping the child to figure things out.” When you do decide to contact the school, Romain suggests calling or emailing first as a way to defuse tensions.

Davis advises bringing a list of exactly what’s been reported by your child. But don’t label it “bullying,” and don’t accuse the school of failure. “Go in with the assumption that the school is not aware of what’s going on and that they’ll do their best to fix it,” he says. “Don’t alienate people and make them defensive.” If you do, he explains, you risk driving away people who could be allies.

Instead, make a point of praising what the school has done well during your child’s time there. You might say, “I’m surprised this is going on because my child’s experience here has been so positive in this way and this way.”

Ask school officials what they plan to do and when you can expect to hear more details. Then check back to ask what’s been done and to share what you’ve heard from your child. If the solution isn’t working, ask what else can be done. Throughout this whole process, take notes so that you have documentation.

One solution you might expect from the school is increased supervision. “We see these problems with bullying happening during unstructured times during the day, when there are low levels of adult supervision—during transitions to and from classes, on playgrounds, during lunch periods, and during gym time when kids are changing,” says Duane Thomas, an education professor at the University of Pennsylvania who works with the Philadelphia Collaborative Violence Prevention Center. “That’s when schools could be more active in supervising the behaviors of students.”

He also recommends that parents ask the school to separate misbehaving kids. “We see increases in bullying behavior by the type of kids they hang out with,” he says. “There needs to be a concerted effort in breaking up these subcultures of bullies.” The school can place them in different classes, for example.

Thomas emphasizes that it takes a unified commitment to ending the behavior of bullying and that targeting one particular child will not work. “It takes focusing change on the whole schoolwide environment and the classroom climate, as well,” he says. “It takes parents being very vocal and advocating for their kids. At the school level, it takes parents, teachers, administrators, support staff, cafeteria workers, and janitors supervising students—and the students having a voice, as well, and making a pledge not to bully or to tolerate this behavior.”

You might also ask the school to encourage other kids to spend time with your child as an antidote to the social isolation that can result from bullying. “Other students may stay away from the kid getting picked on, or they’re embarrassed that they didn’t do anything to help,” says Davis. Such isolation can be even more damaging than the bullying. If the school is unable or unwilling to solve the problem, then approach the school board or superintendent.

What’s most important is to take action. “Involve the school very early when you start to see these problems,” says Thomas. “Two-thirds of students feel that schools and adults in general do a poor job responding to bullying.”