

What Families Should Know About Bullying

What is bullying?

In the *Steps to Respect* program, children learn the following definition: Bullying is unfair and one-sided. It happens when someone keeps hurting, frightening, threatening, or leaving someone out on purpose.

Bullying may consist of hitting, teasing, taunting, spreading rumors and gossip, stealing, or excluding someone from a group. It is carried out with the intent to harm someone.

Bullying is often a repeated activity. However, bullying may also occur as a one-time event. Bullying always involves a power imbalance. The person bullying has more power due to such factors as age, size, strength, support of friends, or access to resources (such as toys and other belongings), and uses this power in a deliberately hurtful way.

Who bullies?

People sometimes assume that only boys bully, but that is not true. Girls also bully others. Boys tend to use methods such as hitting, fighting, and threatening. These face-to-face behaviors are easy to observe.

Girls bully using physical and verbal attacks, but they often use behind-the-back methods that are harder to see. These more subtle behaviors include getting peers to exclude others and spreading rumors and gossip. It's important to remember, though, that girls *and* boys use both face-to-face and behind-the-back bullying methods.

What are the consequences of bullying?

The serious consequences of bullying go beyond those that result from violations of school disciplinary rules. Bullying jeopardizes children's safety and potentially creates both short- and long-term problems for all children involved.

Children who are bullied are more likely to develop future academic problems and psychological difficulties. Serious problems such as depression and low self-esteem can result, and they can continue into adulthood.

Children who bully and continue this behavior as adults have greater difficulty developing and maintaining positive relationships. Research shows that without effective intervention, children who regularly bully others may grow up to become perpetrators of domestic violence, child abuse, hate crimes, sexual abuse, and other illegal behavior. In fact, children with bullying problems at age 8 are six times more likely to be convicted of a crime by age 24 than children who do not have bullying problems.

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How many children does bullying really affect?

Bullying affects virtually all children. Although it is true that some children will never be bullied, research shows that children witness 85 percent of school bullying incidents. Child witnesses, or *bystanders*, may feel powerless to stop bullying. They may fear being bullied next. And they may feel sad or guilty about the abuse others experience. Additionally, bystanders may see those who bully succeed at getting what they want. This may tempt bystanders to take part themselves and may lead to an overall increase in bullying.

Improving social skills and creating a safe, caring, respectful school environment can help all children deal with bullying. With the *Steps to Respect* program, children learn acceptable ways of influencing others. And they practice the responsible behavior that contributes to a school climate in which bullying is not tolerated.

Isn't bullying just a normal part of growing up?

The many myths about bullying include the notion that bullying is a harmless childhood activity and a normal part of growing up. Confusion about the difference between *conflict* and *bullying* can fuel this myth. While occasional peer conflict is inevitable, bullying is not inevitable. It should always be avoided. In a conflict, both sides have equal power to resolve the problem. But bullying involves the intentional, one-sided use of power to control another. Its harmful consequences can affect people for the rest of their lives.

Wouldn't my child tell me about being bullied?

Not necessarily. Children may not tell adults—not even their parents—about being bullied at school. Studies show that children don't tell because they believe adults won't help stop the bullying. Children may also think that they should be able to solve their own problems. Or they may not even recognize that they are being bullied. Other children are afraid. They think that telling an adult will result in worse treatment from the child doing the bullying.

Watch your child for the following signs. Any one of them could indicate that she is being bullied:

- Fear of riding the school bus
- Cuts or bruises
- Damaged clothing or belongings
- Frequently "lost" lunch money
- Frequent requests to stay home from school
- Frequent unexplained minor illnesses
- Sleeplessness or nightmares
- Depression, or lack of enthusiasm for hobbies or friends
- Declining school performance

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Could my child be bullying others?

A child who bullies others may exhibit some of the following behaviors:

- Frequent name-calling (for example, describing others as “wimps” or “dummies” or “jerks”)
- Regular bragging
- A constant need to get his own way
- Spending time with younger or less powerful children
- A lack of empathy for others
- A defiant or hostile attitude; easily takes offense

What can you tell me about bullying among siblings?

Some degree of conflict among siblings is to be expected. In some situations, however, sibling rivalry can develop into bullying as children jockey for power.

Given the normal amount of teasing and bickering in any family, it can be difficult to know where to draw the line. Ideally, we want our children to learn to work out disagreements among themselves. But when is adult intervention necessary?

Here’s a good rule of thumb: Behavior that would be unacceptable between two unrelated children is unacceptable between two siblings. When one child intentionally and consistently hurts or frightens a smaller or less powerful sibling, that’s bullying—and it needs to stop. Like all forms of bullying, bullying among siblings can have long-term effects. It can damage self-esteem and set the pattern for abusive relationships in the future. That’s why family involvement in stopping bullying is so important.

What can I do if my child is bullied?

Help your child learn to avoid responding in ways that reward bullying behavior. Explain to your child that people who bully are hoping to get certain reactions. For example, one child might try to bully another by making him feel angry or sad. When the bullied child responds instead with an assertive response (such as “Stop! That’s bullying!”), the child doing the bullying may lose interest, and further bullying may be prevented.

Additional ideas for helping your child cope with being bullied include:

- Assuring your child that she is not to blame.
- Instructing your child *not* to fight back. Bullying lasts longer and becomes more severe when children fight back. Physical injuries are often the result.
- Advising your child to report all bullying incidents to an adult at school or a parent.
- Role-playing friendship-developing social skills with your child. For example, you could help him practice making conversation, joining a group activity, being respectful, and being assertive. Friendships can help buffer a child from the harmful effects of bullying.

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How can I help promote respectful behavior?

The *Steps to Respect* program stresses that respectful behavior is an essential part of all relationships. Below are some strategies for reinforcing that idea with your child.

- **Spend time with your child.** Plan time each day to talk with your child about any joys or difficulties she encountered. When problems come up, help her think of respectful, cooperative ways to solve them.
- **Know your child's friends.** When your child is away from home, make sure that you know and trust the children he spends time with.
- **Be consistent about discipline.** Hold your child responsible for negative or hurtful behavior, but avoid using public put-downs and physical punishment. (These methods validate causing shame and using physical violence as solutions to problems.) Make sure that your child understands the consequences of her actions.
- **Eliminate toys, games, and TV shows that reward aggression.** Villains—and heroes—often successfully use violence and aggression to reach their goals. The negative consequences that should follow are rarely seen. Some children learn how to bully by seeing it on television or in video games.
- **Encourage your child to be slow to take offense.** Often, children who bully are quick to interpret innocent actions as hostile (such as being hit by a stray elbow in the hall). Teach your child to stay cool and calm by counting to ten or trying self-talk. For example, your child could say to himself, "I don't get mad about little stuff like this." Praise your child for choosing respectful, nonaggressive responses.
- **Make sure your child knows what other children expect.** Respectful behaviors we have all learned include taking turns or apologizing when you accidentally hurt someone. Observe your child playing with others. Are there unspoken rules that she doesn't understand? If so, discuss them with her privately.
- **Help your child see other points of view.** Children who bully often have difficulty interpreting facial expressions or tone of voice. They forget to consider other children's feelings. Explore with your child how he might feel "in someone else's shoes."

What does the *Steps to Respect* program do for my child?

Bullying is a serious problem for school-age children. When children are overwhelmed by bullying, their emotional well-being and academic development are at stake. That's where the *Steps to Respect* program comes in. It helps the school community as a whole find a solution to bullying and so much more:

- *Steps to Respect* participants learn to use respectful behavior toward others routinely.
- Children develop the skills they need to build friendships and cope with bullying.
- School staff learn to work closely with students to respond sensitively and effectively to bullying.
- All members of the school community become responsible for creating a safe, respectful, caring learning environment.