

Banishing Bullying

How to Keep Your Child from Being a Victim or a Bully

By Ed Dunkelblau, Ph.D. (This article originally appeared in [Chicago Parent](#), magazine, ©2002)

The start of a new school year can be very exciting for kids. But for those who have been bullied in the past, it can only stir up feelings of dread.

Bullying, teasing and intimidation are experienced by an alarming number of children as part of their school experience and social relationships. These upsetting experiences can affect our children physically, socially and, most importantly, psychologically. They can alter how children feel about themselves and how they see others and the world at large. In fact, the effects of bullying are so powerful, they can last well into adulthood.

Bullying often occurs at school, where it can interfere with our children's ability to learn and succeed. A recent study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association (April 25, 2001) found that 29 percent of U.S. school children in grades 6 to 10 reported that they had been involved in some aspect of bullying during the school year, either as a bully, the target of a bully or both. The study defined bullying as behavior intended to harm or disturb the victim that occurs repeatedly and involves an imbalance of power.

As strikingly high as this number might appear, it is probably a significant underestimate because children are often hesitant to report instances of being bullied or acting as bullies. We do know, however, that bullying represents one of the most painful memories of a child's school experience.

Defining bullying

The growing awareness of how painful and permanent the effects of bullying can be--and the extreme examples of Columbine and Santee, among others, where children who had been bullied act out in violent ways--has led schools to dedicate much more attention and resources to preventing and responding to bullying.

As of August of this year, the State of Illinois requires all schools to have an anti-bullying program in place. These programs must include provisions to address students who are at risk for aggressive behavior, including bullying.

And yet, many people still aren't clear on the basic definitions. What is bullying? Is playful teasing bullying? Is all bullying bad?

Bullying is an act of aggression, intimidation or threat that occurs within a relationship where there is a mutually agreed upon differential in power. To put it more simply, one person does something hurtful to another person because he is seen as stronger and because he can. Although many of a child's relationships involve a differential of power, it is the aggression, intimidation or threat that defines the bullying relationship.

Children can experience bullying in many forms. They may be teased, hit, attacked, ignored, left out or called names. They may have their backpack or other possessions taken or defaced, have rumors spread about them, be made to feel embarrassed, or be publicly or privately victimized or humiliated.

These acts take a toll on all concerned. Victims can feel depressed, lonely and full of rage. Bullies are likely to engage in other problem behaviors, such as smoking and drinking alcohol, and do poorly academically. And those who watch from the sidelines may feel guilty and helpless.

Bully-proofing your kid

I recall a popular cartoon show from my childhood, "Popeye, the Sailor Man." Popeye was a skinny seaman with huge forearms and an odd speech impediment. He had an extremely slender girlfriend, Olive Oyl, who had a child, Sweet Pea, of unclear origin. Every episode involved Popeye and Olive Oyl setting out on some activity only to be interrupted by Bluto, the bully.

Bluto also was a sailor: tall, husky, bearded and mean. He forever wanted to win Olive Oyl's affections but would do so through bullying and aggression.

Much of the action depicted Popeye being pushed, beaten and intimidated by Bluto. Only after Popeye reached his limits would he summon his special source of power, spinach, to save him.

After eating spinach, Popeye felt strong, powerful and energetic. It enabled him to face Bluto, confront the intimidating behavior and triumph over the bully. The cartoon would end with Popeye singing, "I'm strong to the finish 'cause I eats me spinach. I'm Popeye the sailor man."

I remember wondering as a child why Popeye waited to eat his spinach until after he got beaten to a pulp. Wouldn't it have been better to eat the spinach all the time and never worry about being overpowered and intimidated?

If we want our children to deal with their relationships in an effective, fair and caring way, then we must be sure that they have the skills required to deal with their own emotions and the emotions of others, and the ability to make good decisions.

Parents can help by encouraging their children to talk about their feelings and helping them understand how others feel. Parents also should make it clear to children that everyone is different, and those differences should be embraced, not shunned. And parents should make sure their children recognize that helping others in need is the right thing to do. We know that these skills are highly correlated with success in the future. We also know that they are best learned when children see their parents engaging in them naturally and consistently.

Finally, parents should make sure their children feel loved and supported, even when things go wrong. Children who feel confident in their parents' love and uncritical support are able to withstand the challenges of their peer relationships much better than those without that solid foundation.

These things are our children's "spinach," and we must be sure that they are eating their "spinach" all of the time.

Is your child being bullied?

If you are concerned that your child is being bullied, here are some signs to look for:

- A strong and persistent desire to avoid school.
- A decline in school performance.
- Depression during the week but a normal, happy attitude on weekends.
- Changes in behavior, such as withdrawal, depression, hopelessness, lack of concentration, dependence, fear or unexplained bouts of rage or sullenness.
- Physical symptoms, such as stomachaches, headaches, sleep problems, and regressive behaviors like bedwetting.

Any of these can be a sign of bullying or some other psychological stressor and should not be ignored. Parents who suspect their child may be a victim of bullying should speak to their child, help him express himself and problem-solve ways to handle the situation, and involve appropriate school personnel.

Even if a school has an anti-bullying policy in place, incidents of bullying can occur. Parents should be vigilant for these signs, and encourage school staff to go beyond having an anti-bullying policy to create an effective, school-wide program for teaching social and emotional skills.

Is your child inviting bullying?

Sometimes a child's behavior can invite bullying. Take note of any provocative or extremely non-assertive behaviors and address them with your child. These include:

- Being very hesitant to speak up for him or herself.
- Acting in an annoying fashion, seemingly to be provocative.
- Having difficulty reading social cues to keep a distance or leave a person alone.
- Dressing or acting in a way that will lead to ridicule or social stigma.

How to help a child who is being bullied

When parents learn that their child is being bullied, they may not know how to help. The most effective way is to engage your child in the process of problem solving. Here are some things you can do, adapted from *Emotionally Intelligent Parenting* by Maurice Elias, Steven Tobias and Brian Friedlander (Three Rivers Press, 2000):

- Encourage your child to express his or her feelings. Being bullied can sometimes cause children to have negative thoughts about themselves, to feel embarrassed or ashamed, or to get depressed, frustrated and anxious. By helping your child verbalize these reactions, they can be held up for a reality check. For example, if your child is able to say, "I'm a wimp" or "Nobody likes me," the two of you can explore examples of how these things are not true.
- Calm down and think clearly. It's hard to tackle problems when you and your child are agitated. Take some deep breaths, take a walk, do something athletic...whatever enables your child to calm down.
- Clearly define the problem. When does the bullying occur? By whom and under what circumstances? How is this a problem for your child? Try not to overreact and continue to listen carefully to his or her experiences.
- Ask your child how he or she wants things to be. What relationship would your child want with the bully, the bystanders, and others in his or her class? What would your child like his or her own behavior to be?
- Think of responses. This is where you and your child can discuss, generate ideas and plan an effective strategy for problem solving. Be careful to not be critical or dismissive of ideas; openly discuss different possibilities. Invite actions like talking to the teacher, having a parent/teacher/student conference, talking to a counselor, asking for support from peers, letting the bully know how he or she causes your child to feel, and joining groups where your child feels safe or accepted. All are potential ways to respond.
- Consider possible outcomes. Encourage discussion of both good and bad outcomes if your child were to try the responses you discussed.
- Help your child decide what to do. Let your child discuss what he or she wants to do and why that is the best choice. Also invite your child to discuss why the other choices were less attractive.
- Make a plan of action. Help your child scan the plan for potential problems, difficulties or pitfalls. Think through what your child wants to do and how he or she will do it. Try to encourage your child to be as specific as possible about time, place, other circumstances and action.
- Do it and review it. Encourage your child to follow through with the planned strategy for dealing with the bullying situation. Be sure to keep the dialog going. Ask your child how everything went. If it didn't go well, go back to your list of possible responses and consider other alternatives.
- Be unflagging in your support. Make sure your child knows that he or she is not alone, that you are supportive and encouraging, and that it is OK to ask for help. If your child is hesitant to talk to you, you might encourage him or her to talk to a friend, teacher or other trusted adult. It is most important that your child not keep his or her reactions "locked up" inside. When your child is able to involve others, the intimidating power differential with the bully grows smaller.
- Reassure your child about "tattling." It's important to explain the difference between letting the teacher know what is going on because of fears for safety and wanting to stop behavior, and tattling, which is designed to get someone else in trouble.

You may have to partner with the school to be sure that these issues are being addressed specifically with your child and, more generally, in the school culture.

How to keep your sanity

When your child reports being victimized at school, you can become anxious and angry, or feel a sense of denial or helplessness.

It is important that you maintain an open mind or think clearly. Here are some guidelines for reacting if your child reports being bullied:

- Don't dismiss it as "a natural part of growing up."
- Don't encourage using violence against the bully. This may escalate the problem or result in the victim being labeled a bully as well.
- Don't push the problem back on your child by blaming him or her or telling your child to deal with it him or herself. If your child felt able to do that, he or she would not have asked for help.
- Don't be critical or aggressive toward your child. Open, patient acceptance of the child's experience and descriptions seem to work best.

All of our children deserve a safe, secure learning environment where they are free from teasing, acts of aggression and intimidation. At times when bullying occurs, it is our job as parents to listen to our children and to intervene with them and with the school to be sure that bullying does not continue and that the likelihood that it will occur in the future is reduced.

Why do people bully others?

Many bullies have their own problems. They may feel angry or frustrated with themselves. They often experience aggression at home and grow up in an environment that is not nurturing or empathic. They may get bullied themselves either at home or in another setting. They feel little or no responsibility for their actions, and often feel the need to control, dominate or win. Most critically, they are unable to understand and appreciate the emotional experiences of others.

Even though bullies appear to be the source of the problem, they, too, need help. If their behavior does not change in childhood, their outlook as adults is very poor. By age 24, 60 percent of people who were childhood bullies have at least one criminal conviction. Children identified as bullies also show more alcoholism, antisocial personality disorders and need for mental health services.

If you become aware that your child is bullying others, make it clear to him or her that you disapprove of and discourage any continuation of the behavior. Have clear, nonviolent consequences for the bullying that include apologizing to the victim, restitution for any damage and some restriction of privileges relating to being with peers. Consider reducing or eliminating your child's viewing of violent TV, movies and video games.

Very often bullying behavior occurs at unsupervised times. Parents can intervene by increasing the amount of supervision of their child's activities and companions. Parents also can maintain contact with school personnel to monitor their child's progress.

During all this, it's important to catch your child doing things well. Praise him or her for acts of kindness, tolerance and caring. Make a special point of recognizing your child's attempts to change past aggressive behaviors.

Also monitor your own behavior. Children often learn by modeling their parents' behavior. Make sure that your child is not seeing violence in your own family. Your behavior is an important influence on helping your children become less violent.

Finally, consider involving a counseling professional to help your child understand and learn the effects of his or her actions and develop alternative ways of dealing with the feelings that lead to those actions.

Everybody loses

When a child is bullied, there are three affected parties. There is the child who is victimized by the bully, the child doing the bullying, and the bystanders who look on as the bullying occurs.

The victim can feel helpless, depressed and full of rage. He or she can feel that the world is a threatening, unsafe place and become suspicious, withdrawn or joyless. These feelings can lead to loss of self-esteem and a lack of trust in his or her own judgment.

The bully can learn that "might makes right" and that being cruel is the route to social status and acceptance. In the long run, the bully can lose respect for social norms and fair play, and be unable to feel genuine empathy and caring.

It was once believed that bullies were reacting to feelings of inferiority and incompetence, but researchers now believe that many bullies feel quite good about themselves and feel justified and even supported in their actions. However, the act of bullying still does harm to them, as well.

Bystanders can feel guilty or helpless as they watch the bullying occur. They may also fear that if they intervene, the bully will go after them next. Some bystanders align themselves with the bully, either out of fear or vicarious pleasure.

Recognition of the damage to all three groups has led to recent legislation in Illinois that requires all schools to have a bullying policy and a plan for intervention.