



What parents need to know about bullying

It's common, it's dangerous, and the long-term consequences are frightening. Here's how to protect your child. *by Lisa Pilnik*

You've taught your child to wear a helmet while in-line skating and to never talk to strangers, but if you really want to keep her safe, you need to help protect her from her peers. Surprised? Then you should know this: In a recent survey, 78 percent of kids in grades three through eight said they had been bullied physically or verbally by a schoolmate in the past month.

And the consequences are serious: The National Education Association estimates that 160,000 children miss school each day for fear of being bullied. What's more, research has found that even in their 20s, bullying victims are more likely to have low self-esteem or suffer from depression than those who weren't harassed as children. Another study of badly bullied kids found that one in five boys and one in four girls had attempted suicide.

Most elementary-school children have witnessed another kid being bullied and/or have been an aggressor or victim themselves, says Peter Sheras, Ph.D., author of *Your Child: Bully or Victim?* That's all the more reason to take steps right now to keep your child safe. Here's how.

The truth about bullying

Believe it or not, bullying behavior starts as early as preschool, says Sheras. But it's most common during the fourth and fifth grades and throughout middle school.

You might also assume that bullying means physical aggression—period. Not so. Just as serious (and sometimes more so) is being the target of repeated insults, taunts, or rumors. “Studies show that kids need more guidance to deal with emotional and social maltreatment by their peers than they do if they're being physically bullied,” says Jaana Juvonen, Ph.D., a professor of developmental psychology at the University of California, Los Angeles.

And lest you think that only boys are bullies, the fact is that girls often prey on other girls (and occasionally on boys), says Cheryl Dellasega, Ph.D., author of *Girl Wars*. “Girls tend to use their relationships to hurt each other—for instance, by excluding someone from a group,” she says. “But physical violence between girls is becoming more common.”

Jennifer, a mom from Huntington Woods, Michigan, has an 11-year-old, Lizzy, who was bullied by a female

classmate this year. The girl taunted her and told lies to Lizzy's friends so they'd stop talking to her. A miserable Lizzy complained to her teacher, but because it was one child's word against another's, nothing was done. Her meetings with the school social worker were also fruitless, since, according to Lizzy, the counselor didn't take the situation seriously. Ultimately, Lizzy started seeing a therapist outside of school to learn coping strategies and help raise her self-esteem. She's now better able to stand up for herself, but the situation is still something she struggles with.

Is your child being harassed?

Your kid may not want to talk to you about bullying, even if he's a victim. He may be embarrassed or think you'll be disappointed or angry with him or that you won't be helpful. So look for the signs: a sudden reluctance to go to school, a drop in grades, frequently coming home with clothing or possessions damaged or missing, nervous behavior around other kids, or difficulty sleeping. Even if you don't notice any changes, discuss bullying with your child by the time he enters first or

second grade to find out if he is being picked on or to help him feel comfortable coming to you if it does happen.

Can't get him to open up? Tell a story about how you were bullied as a child (even if you have to fictionalize it). Sheras suggests saying something like, "When I was your age, there was a boy in my school who was a real bully. He said a lot of mean things to some kids, including me. Do you have anyone like that in your school?"

If you have noticed changes in your child, ask about them (as in, "I see that your shirt is torn. I'm not mad, but I was wondering how it happened. Did someone do that to you?"). If your child admits he's having problems with another kid, develop an action plan.

And make sure it's the right one. "You may want to call the other child's parents or demand that the school put a stop to it, but that may not be the best idea," says Dellasega. True, if your child is being physically harassed or is depressed, withdrawn, and/or doesn't want to go to school, you should intervene. But if things aren't at that level, work with him on a solution; that will empower him and help him overcome challenges. To find out how, read on.

Help your kid protect himself

Discussing and practicing different ways your child can react when confronted is the best way to keep him from being victimized. Some suggestions:

For kids ages 3 to 6:

● **Walk toward a teacher or other grown-up.** That can often be enough to get the abuser to back off, says Caroline Clauss-Ehlers, Ph.D., a psychologist in New York, who specializes in remedying bullying. Bullies prefer one-on-one odds and usually don't act out in front of adults.

● **Just say "So?"** Most bullies won't know what to do when they tell a child, "You're ugly," and their victim responds, "So?" says Judy S. Freedman, author of *Easing the Teasing*, who adds that it's an easy strategy for young children to remember and use.

For kids ages 7 and up:

● **Ask a disarming question.** A slightly more sophisticated spin on the "So?" trick is to take the wind out of the assailant's sails by saying, "Who cares?" or "Your point being?" Older kids often like this method because it lets them respond to the bully and feel in control.

● **Create a compliment.** If your child doesn't take a hurtful comment as an insult, it may not bother her as much or give the kid who's teasing her as much satisfaction—making him more likely to stop. For instance, if she's teased for being a "nerd" or a "brain," she can say, "I'm glad that you think I'm so smart. It's something I'm really proud of."

If your child has tried handling the bully on her own but it isn't working out, or if she doesn't want to confront her tormentor directly, encourage her to alert her teacher to the problem.

Target-proof your child

If a kid doesn't have friends who can stick up for him (or at least witness incidents), he'll be a much more attractive victim. Children also have a greater chance of being victimized if they're shy or lack confidence.

To raise his self-esteem, buy your child a blank book and write down three positive things about him on the first page, says Freedman. Then have other relatives each fill out a page. Encourage him to look at the book regularly.

And to help your child overcome his shyness, Sheras suggests encouraging him to speak up in situations where he isn't likely to be teased or hurt. (Don't tell your child why you're urging him to do this, since that may make him feel worse about being shy.) For example, if you're at a restaurant and he wants you to ask the waitress if they have chocolate milk, suggest that he ask for it himself and tell your child, "I know you can do it." Also help him brush up on his social skills by reminding him what a good friend does (e.g., smile and say hello when you see someone, ask about the other person's hobbies, and the like).

When you must step in

If your child asks for your help, you fear for her safety, or she's inconsolable, you need to take a more active role.

Unless you already have a good relationship with the bully's parents, your best bet is usually to contact your child's teacher about the problem. "If you go to the child's parents, they'll be defensive," says Juvonen. "They know you'd believe whatever your child tells you."

The teacher can then watch for the bullying, so he can stop it when it occurs and approach the other child's parents as a neutral adult. If your child's teacher is unable or unwilling to help, talk to the school's safety coordinator or principal. If the school refuses to alert the bully's parents to the problem, let them know yourself.

How? "Approach them in a calm, nonblaming manner," urges Freedman, who suggests simply saying, "I am very concerned about a situation

my child is experiencing and I need your help to deal with it."

Know that resolving a bullying situation can take some time and that your child may not want to attend school if she fears being harassed.

To ease her anxiety, talk to the principal about having a teacher's aide or the school nurse keep an extra-watchful eye to see if she's being bullied, says Freedman—and let your child know you've done that. Tell her that if she feels physically threatened, she can call you (make arrangements with the school nurse or principal's office to allow her to do so).

Also ask her if she'd like to see a counselor, and talk to her each night about how the situation is progressing.

If your child is becoming increasingly depressed, doesn't feel safe, and refuses to go to classes, and if the academic officials won't help, consider switching schools. What's most important, after all, is your child's safety. □

