



How to help kids when you think they are being bullied

by Michael Grose

Bullying is a word that's wrapped in emotion. For many people bullying is associated with bad childhood memories. It's been estimated that around 40 per cent of people have experienced some type of bullying in the past.

The ghosts from the past are never far away for parents and can sometimes influence the way we react to current circumstances, including when our own children experience difficulties in their relationships inside or outside school.

Bullying is an insidious behaviour that transgresses children's natural right to feel safe and secure. It can adversely affect their learning, emotional wellbeing, sense of self and further peer relations.

Bullying takes many forms including physical and emotional abuse, intimidation, harassment and exclusion.

It now has a well-publicised cyber dimension, which has moved the goalposts for many kids. In the past, being at home was one way children could escape bullying behaviours they may have been experiencing. Cyberbullying now means that kids can't avoid the bully like they once could.

Girls bully just as much as boys but they do it in less physical ways. While boys use physical intimidation or verbal abuse to wield power, girls are more likely to use exclusion or verbal sarcasm to assert themselves.

Bullying should not be confused with teasing, rejection, random acts of violence or physicality and conflict. Children will often tease or fight in short episodes but this bickering should not be equated with bullying.



What's bullying about?

Bullying is about lack of power as one person is powerless to stop the teasing or physical abuse. Bullying is the selective, uninvited, repetitive oppression of one person by another person or group. It should not be tolerated (or practised) by the adults who inhabit a child's world.

If you think your child or young person is being bullied, then handle them with care as many kids don't want to admit that they are on the receiving end of bullying. Some kids keep bullying close to their chests so it helps to be on the lookout for warning signs such as items being stolen, a changed route to school and withdrawal from usual activities.

If your child is being bullied:

Remain calm: This can be very difficult as your emotions can easily escalate into anger. But your child needs you to remain unemotional so he or she can talk with you and feel safe.

Listen to her story: Children who are bullied need someone to believe their story. Take them seriously and avoid dismissing complaints as tell-tale. Use common sense to differentiate between bullying and random, non-selective antisocial acts that, while they may be distressing for your child, don't amount to being bullied.

Deal with their feelings: A child who is bullied probably feels scared, angry and sad. While boys are more likely to act out and display anger, girls are more likely to 'act in', feeling sad and depressed. Recognise and validate their emotions. It's normal to feel sad, scared or just plain confused.

Get the facts: Get a clear picture of what is happening, including who is involved, the frequency and what happens prior to any bullying. Get your child to be as specific as possible by asking good questions. An accurate picture will help you determine your next course of action.

Give them coping skills: With a clear picture you can start giving your child some help about how he or she might deal with bullying including using avoidance strategies, being more assertive and changing poor body language.



Get the school involved: Bullying is best handled when parents and teachers are involved together. Some parents tell me that schools can be reluctant to become involved however my experience is that schools take bullying very seriously. Most schools will go to great lengths to support and empower those on the receiving end while also looking for ways to change the behaviour of bullies. Approach your school through the appropriate channels, make yourself aware of your school's anti-bullying procedures and programs and be willing to work within these guidelines.

Help build your child's or young person's support networks: Your child will need a group of friends to support them and insulate them against further social exclusion so look for practical ways to broaden friendship groups.

Build your child's self-confidence: Nothing saps a child's confidence like bullying so provide your children and young people with plenty of encouragement and loving support. Let them know through your words and treatment that they will get through this difficult period in their lives.

It's worth remembering that children and young people who experience some form of bullying can come out stronger and more resourceful because they have experienced difficulties and now know they can overcome them. However, continuous, long-term bullying can have a long-term negative impact so it needs to be taken seriously. Children and young people need the adults in their lives to do all they can to make it stop.



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