

## What to do about bullying?

It is both painful and frightening to suspect that your child is being bullied by another child at school or in the neighborhood. It is also painful and frightening to suspect that your child habitually bullies others. How do you know if there is a problem?

It is normal for children to tease one another. Arguing is also common and should not be regarded as a problem, provided the balance between the children is relatively equal. Even physical roughness, while undesirable, is common enough in school yards that it should not by itself be interpreted as evidence of bullying behavior.

Parents should be concerned if they learn that a child is repeatedly and deliberately victimizing other children. Examples include vicious and persistent teasing, poking or hitting, or taking advantage of another child by extorting money, food, toys, or assistance with school work. Children who come home with unexplained money or toys should be suspected of bullying or stealing. School yard bullies usually engage in similar activity in other settings. At home they may defy authority figures, including parents, and engage in angry or destructive behavior.

Sorting out whether your child is being bullied or simply getting his or her fair share of teasing can be more difficult. Children who are by nature shy or lacking in confidence are especially susceptible to bullying. Obviously, if a child regularly reports being taunted, hit, or having belongings damaged or stolen, you should be concerned. Watch too for the child who starts to demonstrate fearful behavior or refuses to attend school or participate in activities with other children.

If you are not sure whether your child is being bullied, ask indirect questions about how he or she is spending lunch periods and about what it is like walking to school or taking the bus. Ask if there are children at the school or in the neighborhood who are bullies, without personalizing it to your child. Remember that children feel humiliated if they are victims. Often, they doubt the willingness or capacity of adults to help, and they fear that complaining to the authorities will provoke further retaliation from the bullies.

### If your child is a bully:

- Take the problem seriously. Children who are aggressive and bullying when young are at high risk for social problems later on in life.
- Look for underlying problems that may be causing your child to feel angry or frustrated. Is your child experiencing bullying from someone else, then passing it on to the next victim? This "food chain" phenomenon can be observed in children who are themselves exposed to verbal or physical abuse from parents, siblings, or other children.
- Supervise your child's behavior more closely. Arrange to increase his or her participation in supervised, organized activities such as sports or scouting. Stay in the vicinity as much as possible when your child is playing with others.
- Make sure your child understands that you won't tolerate behavior that hurts other people. Talk about the rights and feelings of others. For example, if you hear that someone has been hurt physically or emotionally, share the story with your child and ask, "How do you think he is feeling now? How would you be feeling if that happened to you? What might help him feel better?" Talk about TV shows or films: "How do you think Forrest Gump felt when everybody teased him? How can you tell?"
- Respond to incidents of bullying behavior with negative consequences. A particularly good consequence is withdrawal of time with others. Most bullying children do not like being alone.
- Teach alternative approaches. Bullies may be in the habit of coercing others rather than negotiating. Teach and practice negotiating skills. Many schools now offer programs or have materials on nonviolent problem solving. Talk to your principal or parent-teacher group to find out about these.
- Notice and reward good play and good negotiation. Your praise and attention along with tangible rewards such as special outings can encourage your child to stick with nonbullying behavior.

### If your child is bullied:

- Do not overreact. Take a deep breath while you look at your options. Depending on the severity of the problem, you will need to decide whether to notify school authorities and other parents.
- Listen to your child. Remember that your child has been victimized. Do not add to his or her burden with an angry, blaming, or anxious response. Avoid questions such as "Why don't you just stand up to him?" Let your child tell you how he or she feels. The act of unburdening can be very helpful to your child.
- Talk to your child about what makes people act like bullies. Help your child understand that he or she is not to blame in any way and that the bully is the one with the problem. Explain that children who bully are usually confused or unhappy.
- Review options with your child. It is not a good idea to tell the victim of bullying to respond in kind. Remember that children who are bullied are often shy and nonaggressive and it is unrealistic to expect them to change. Responding in kind, especially to physical aggression, also places your child at risk. The other extreme, going along with whatever the bully says, is equally unacceptable.
- Offer your child the option of maintaining some dignity while trying to get out of the situation. Suggest that he or she look the bully in the eye, say, "I don't like your teasing. Stop," and then walk away from the situation, ignoring any further taunt. Suggest that your child seek the company of others. Discuss whether your child can avoid, within reason, situations that place him or her at risk of being bullied.
- Encourage other friendships. Some children get stuck in relationships with bullies, especially within neighborhoods, for lack of other social options. Create other options by encouraging your child to join clubs or teams. Invite other children over to play on a regular basis.
- Remember that your child's self-confidence needs boosting. Praise him or her for facing up to fears. Remember that the simple act of going to school knowing that one may be bullied is an act of bravery. Make sure your child participates in activities he or she enjoys and can excel at or develop expertise in.

### Community approaches:

- Rather than accepting the bully/victim phenomenon as part of childhood, families, schools, and the larger community should work to eliminate these behaviors.
- Talk to neighborhood parents and school parent/teacher associations about your concerns regarding aggression and bullying. If the problem is widespread, it may be an indication for action at a broader level, such as development of social skills programs, better supervision of play, richer community recreation options, and support from mental health services.

This material is adapted from *Contemporary Pediatrics/Canada*, June 1994, p 14, and used with permission.