

Bullying What Can Parents Do To Help Their Children?

Bullying is an age-old dilemma that many children experience at some point during their young lives. However, this doesn't make it any less upsetting for the child. It may not be as easy as reciting 'sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me,' but parents can play an important role in helping their children to cope with and avoid this problem.

The first step in helping a child that is being bullied, is to recognise that this is taking place. Although you can learn a lot about your child's life just by talking to him/her, a child may not come right out and tell you that he/she is being bullied. However, there are ways of picking up on clues - if you pay attention to changes in your child's behaviour and personality.

Here are a few signs that may mean your child is the victim of bullying. Your child suddenly stops wanting to go to school or wants you to drive him/her to school. Your child comes home from school starving because either his/her lunch or lunch money 'went missing.' There are unexplained bruises, scratches or rips in clothing. Signs of more severe victimization from bullying may be that your child is introverted, has few friends at school, has low self-esteem and shows no self-defense skills.

Once you have recognised these signs and suspect that your child is being bullied, come right out and ask him/her. If the answer is yes (which may not come right away), it is important that you remain supportive of your child. Do not blame the bullying on him/her and provide reassurance that he/she is not the only victim - it is a common occurrence and the bully is the one with the problem. Provide your child with the help needed to cope with the emotional trauma, as well as work together to find a solution to stop the bullying.

It is important to note that the varied list of solutions to bullying does not include telling your child to 'fight back.' This can be more dangerous for your child (especially if the bully is older and stronger). This could also get your child into trouble with the school, because he/she may now be seen as the instigator of a fight, as opposed to the victim.

The following tips are healthy ways of dealing with this problem. Discuss these ideas with your child, and practice them if necessary. There are also things that you can do as a parent.

Specific tips on how to avoid bullying situations, and how to escape once in a bullying situation:

Stay with a crowd as often as possible - at school as well as on the way to and from school. (It's easier for bullies to pick on children who are alone.)

Ask friends for help. If a friend is with your child and can act as a witness, he/she can tell a teacher so that your child is not 'telling on the bully.'

Don't stop when a bully approaches, keep walking and run away if necessary.

If the bully is name-calling, teach your child to react without emotion. Practice responses like 'if that's your opinion,' 'whatever you say,' 'maybe,' etc. Laughing at the bully or just walking away is also helpful. The bully is looking to get a reaction of either anger or fear from the victim, if this does not happen, the bully will eventually get bored and stop.

General tips for coping with bullying and for preventing it from happening again:

First of all, let your child talk about the bullying, sharing his/her feelings. Your child may be scared, but he/she may also feel like it is his/her fault. Name-calling is common in bullying and can be very hurtful.

Work with your child to teach assertiveness skills. Practice saying 'NO.'

Work to improve your child's self-esteem. Ask your child to list his/her positive attributes and talk about them. Add to the list with your own suggestions. Make compliments and positive reinforcement a regular habit.

Practice acting with confidence (even if it isn't felt). It is easier for bullies to pick on weak children.

If this is an ongoing problem, parents should keep a written record of the events: who, what, when and where. This will be helpful when talking to the school or gardai.

There are also ways for a parent to help bring an end to the bullying. Call your child's teacher (if the bullying is taking place at school). Don't promise your child that you will keep this a secret, as he or she may ask you to do. The teacher can share insight as to why the bullying is taking place as well as help to keep a better watch over the school or school grounds to avoid further incidents. A teacher can also coordinate the presentation of a program on bullying to the school that may help in deterring future bullies.

Though parents can do a great deal in helping their children through a bullying incident, more serious cases may benefit from professional help. The following is a list of organisations and agencies designed to help children dealing with bullying. Also, please feel free to contact the ISPCC for further information on bullying and how to stop it.

ISPCC - 29 Lower Baggot Street, Dublin 2; Tel: (01) 6767960

**Bullying Behaviour Resource & Research Center - Department of Teacher Education,
Trinity College, Dublin 2; Tel: (01) 608 1240 or (01) 608 2573**

Bullying Helpline - (24 hours) Tel: (0502) 20598

**Campaign Against Bullying - 72 Lakelands Ave., Stillorgan, Co. Dublin; Tel: (01) 288
7976**

**Sticks and Stones Theater Company - 19 Watkins Sq., The Coombe, Dublin 8; Tel: (01)
280 7065**

What do you do if your child is the bully?

Children may turn to bullying for a variety of reasons. Often times, this develops out of unhappiness at home or out of habits learned at home. If a child is bullied at home, he/she may be more inclined to become a bully at school. If a child is constantly dominated over in the home, becoming a bully is a way of dominating someone else - compensating for his/her lack of personal control. Finally, if a child sees problems at home resolved with violence, the lessons learned will spill into the child's behaviour with his/her peers.

Another potential cause for a child's bullying may be a recent traumatic experience. A child, unable to deal with his/her emotions in a healthy way, may take his/her anger and frustration out on other children. The loss of a loved one, parent separation and the birth of a new sibling may all be instigators. In these cases, the bullying may only be a temporary problem, but intervention should still be taken.

Other children may turn to bullying because they don't fit in with the kids at school. They may look, sound or act differently and therefore feel themselves to be cast aside by their peers. These children may actually be bullied themselves.

And yet still other children act as bullies because they are spoilt in the home and know no boundaries for their actions.

Bullies can become caught up in this behaviour for a very short period of time, or it can become a way of life. For these long-term offenders, help is essential. Long-term bullies have

been found to keep these bullying habits with them as they grow through childhood and into adulthood - with continued violent and contrary behaviour. The best prevention for this lifelong dilemma is early intervention. A bully deserves as much help as his/her victim.

If you know your child to be a bully, or if other children/parents have accused your child of being a bully, don't simply ignore the situation. You will not be doing him/her any favours by not looking into the matter. If you have no firsthand knowledge of your child's bullying behaviour, contact your child's teacher. Teachers have a good grasp on their students' behaviour both inside and outside of the classroom. They can also provide useful suggestions and advice.

It is also important to speak directly with your child. Ask him/her about giving other children a hard time, and try to determine why. With the reason determined, it will be easier to find a solution. Do not be accusatory here (and do not bully your child into talking to you), this will only reinforce the negative behaviour and back the child into a corner.

Once the motivation, as well as the seriousness of the bullying has been assessed, decide whether you can work with the child to correct the behaviour or if outside help is needed. In more serious cases, professional help should be sought. (Please refer to the agencies listed above for professional support.) For less serious offenders, parents can help by providing their children with positive alternatives for their time. Sign him/her up for a club or sporting team or any other activity that may help boost his/her self-esteem.

The most important thing to remember about dealing with a child who is acting out as a bully, is not to ignore the situation. Be a supportive parent and work with your child to bring an end to this behaviour.