

White Paper Tips for Handling Bullying at School

1. *Bullying*
2. *Who are the bullies?*
3. *Who are the targets?*
4. *If your child is a target*
5. *What bystanders can do*
6. *Responsibilities of schools*
7. *Is your child a bully?*
8. *What parents can do*

Bullying has been reported as occurring in every school, kindergarten or day-care environment in which it has been investigated.

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A bully is part of a system of players, each of whom can behave in ways that either exacerbate or diminish the problem. When everyone works together within an agreed set of policies, rules and consequences; where everyone is helped to behave constructively and to support one another, bullying behavior amongst children can be controlled, if not eliminated completely.

1. Bullying

Bullying is not about anger, disagreement or conflict. It is the deliberate and repeated display of aggression, domination and intention to harm, by one child toward another. It's about contempt, and reflects the bullies' perception of their power over their targets.

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It can take *various forms*. Physical bullying includes hitting, pushing, grabbing toys, pulling hair and playing rough. Psychological bullying involves teasing, name calling, taunting, spreading rumours and making threats. It can also be excluding a child from a group or refusing to be friends.

Bullying can be physical, verbal, on social media and mobile phones. It has been going on for ever but is only now being recognized as a serious social problem.

Bullying is tolerated by some parents and teachers on the basis that it is a normal stage of childhood development. As a result, they do not intervene. Current research however strongly suggests that this is not so. Bullying has been shown to be a precursor to more serious criminal behaviour in adult life and must be addressed if we want a less violent society.

Some of the resistance to addressing bullying comes from people who maintain that being bullied at school never did them any harm. They say that they responded to the challenge, became tougher for the experience and even claim that being bullied did them good.

Perhaps they were lucky enough to be tough, resilient children. However, children who are sensitive and quiet, who are lonely, lack close friendships, and who are continually bullied, are at risk of lowered self-esteem, misery and depression, ill health, and in extreme circumstances, suicide.

The hard evidence on the physical and mental harm that continued bullying does to vulnerable children means that it's not enough for a school to proclaim a zero tolerance policy on bullying or for parents to say that their children are merely standing up for themselves when they exhibit bullying behavior.

All children deserve to learn, play and grow up in safe supportive environments. The adults who love and care for them carry the responsibility for creating and maintaining these environments.

2. Who are the bullies?

Bullies come in all shapes and sizes. Although it has long been assumed that bullies suffer from low self-esteem, research shows they have a variety of profiles. Some do show signs of low self-esteem, but others demonstrate an exaggerated air of self-confidence and feelings of power. In general the self-esteem of children who bully, is average or above average.

Some children bully to feel powerful and superior, and if their self-regard is threatened they may respond with increased aggression. Some bullies use their social skills to form groups that use bullying to demean or exclude others. Bullies can be children who have suffered physical or emotional abuse themselves. Almost all bullies are impulsive, dominate others and show little empathy. They can be ruthless in how they meet their needs to win and control.

Bullies are made not born. Children can learn to bully by pre-school age when they are unable to develop emotional maturity or learn empathy and effective problem solving skills from their parents, and so respond to situations requiring these abilities with impatience and anger.

Physical bullying peaks during junior years at high school, especially amongst boys. Then it drops off. Verbal bullying, used more by girls, also increases during these years but does not seem to drop off at the same rate.

If bullies do not experience any negative response to their behavior, the satisfaction they gain from bullying leads to an increase in its frequency and severity. There is now increasing evidence of a strong link between bullying in early life and a pattern of violence in adult life.

Research shows that children are highly susceptible to media violence on TV and in games. On its own the media does not cause bullying but provides a social structure for bullies to use, and in affirming bullying as a legitimate mode of problem solving, it can be used to justify the bully's actions. Repeatedly watching scenes of violence can also desensitize children to its effects.

When children observe other children or adults using violent behavior without experiencing any negative consequences, the possibility that they will imitate what they have seen increases. If bullying is tolerated and allowed to go unchallenged, it therefore promotes further bullying.

3. Who are the targets?

It's no fun to be targeted by a bully. The immediate effects: physical injury, humiliation, rejection and unhappiness are bad enough. But knowing that it will continue to happen

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makes it all the worse. It's not surprising that targets of bullying become fearful and anxious, their schoolwork and their health suffer, and they want to avoid school.

What makes a child a target? Temperament has a lot to do with it. Many children who are targeted tend to be sensitive, shy, quiet and submissive. They may also be physically weak, afraid of being hurt and not good at sports.

Children who are over protected by their families tend to become targets as they grow up insecure, uncertain when they are away from their parents, and lacking confidence to explore new surroundings and new friendships.

When children with these characteristics move to a different class or school they communicate their insecurities to their new classmates; bullies sense their vulnerabilities and continue to choose the easy targets. They also sense when children are loners, won't fight back, and are without a close circle of friends who might stand up in their defense.

Targets can also be children who have come to the aid of other children and in showing kindness and compassion toward others, appear to be vulnerable. Bullies sometimes test their targets for vulnerability and a target who effectively rebuffs these initial steps may persuade the bully to go in search of easier prey. In a culture of bullying anyone can attract a bully. It can be on the basis of physical differences; hair colour, height or ear size, ethnicity or academic excellence. Bullies are often driven by envy and jealousy of anyone they consider better than they are, so almost anyone can attract their attention.

When children react passively to bullying by crying, showing fear or running away, bullies are rewarded for their behavior and so it escalates. Bullies often work in networks where others join in the abuse.

Not all targets become passive victims. Some fight back, becoming 'aggressive victims'. Mostly, this is ineffective because aggressive victims, like children who bully, are likely to be impulsive, hyperactive and volatile. They are generally emotionally immature and poor at school work and tend to come from harsh and abusive family backgrounds.

The relationship between bullies and their victims can be complex. For example, children who bully others on the playground, may themselves be bullied by children who excel academically.

There are long term risks for children who are consistently bullied. Depression and low self-esteem turn to ill health, suicidal thoughts and in some instances suicide. Their school work suffers along with their ability to form healthy friendships. The effects of emotional and psychological bullying are shown to last well into adult life as anxiety, depression and loneliness.

4. If your child is a target

Children who become targets of bullies are often told to 'stand up for yourself' But they are seldom shown how to actually do it, because most adults don't know how to do it either.

Referring to the targets of bullies as 'victims' is not helpful. Often the targets are children who are respectful, who have integrity, are honest, hard-working and have a sense of fairness as well as the emotional maturity to resolve problems through dialogue and negotiation. They have been taught not to resort to physical violence or thuggery to get their own way, and are mostly aware that if they do respond to a bully with violence it is they who will be punished when the bully feigns victimhood.

The best way to deal with a bully is to avoid being targeted in the first place. If that's not possible, targets can decide not to become victims by rebuffing the bully's advances from the very start. Children can be supported in various ways.

- Make it safe for children to talk. These conversations initially help children decide if they are being bullied and reassure them that there is help and support available to them.
- Help children understand the basis for bullying behaviour and that it typically stops when two or more people stand up to the bully.
- Help them meet friends and join up with small groups of friends. They can also be helped to develop buddy or mentor relationships.
- Coach children to rebuff the first minor advances of a bully with humour and a show of confidence or if possible, by ignoring the bully's threats.
- Help children practice emotional intelligence skills such as: telling a bully to stop their behaviour and then walking away with confidence; practice in how to own a criticism so as to take the power away from the bully; managing their feelings so as not to give the bully the satisfaction of knowing that he or she has been hurtful. Children can also learn the assertive skill of confronting a bully with detail of his or her behaviour and its implications; then asking the bully to account for what they have said or done.

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If none of these tactics works children should be advised not to use aggression in response to the bully or inflame the situation in any way. They can get hurt and will possibly be blamed for the outcome.

They should rather stay with other children, stay safe and ask for help from an adult they can trust as soon as possible. Some bullies stop their behaviour as soon as they know adults have been told what is going on. Bullying is wrong and can only be tackled when everyone who gets bullied or sees someone being bullied speaks up.

5. What bystanders can do

All that is necessary for the triumph of evil over good is for good men to do nothing.

Edmund Burke

In schools across the world, many anti bullying interventions have been tried, but few have met with much success.

Most have concentrated on supporting teachers and counselors in being aware of bullying behavior and in taking disciplinary action to control it. However, bullying mostly takes place in the company of other children, at times and in places where there is little adult supervision. Over 90% of children report that they have observed bullying. Children see it, but teachers seldom do.

Interventions fail when they are not supported by the children themselves. Bullies like attention, and may seek out the presence of an audience. Other children are involved as bystanders in over 80% of bullying incidents. Some enjoy the spectacle; others are disengaged or disinterested. Very few intervene or speak up to discourage the bullying.

Children give a variety of reasons why they do not intervene or object when they see their peers being bullied. Some feel the problem is not their concern, or that the bully might turn on them. Others feel that it would be useless to try to intervene. As children get older and enter their early teens, more of them think that the victims should stand up for themselves.

Some actually approve of what is happening and admire the bullies!

Many more children express good intentions about supporting victims of bullying, than actually do so in practice. However, when children do object to bullying, their behavior is

much less influenced by their parents or teachers, than it is by the influence of their peers. This supports other views that by the time children are in upper primary school, parents and teachers have almost no influence on their behavior.

On the rare occasions however, when children do object, they are effective in discouraging bullying at least half the time. As a result, educators are starting to be convinced that the most effective anti-bullying programs are bystander programs which include changing attitudes and developing skills. They have four elements:

- interventions to encourage good intentions so that children will object to bullying even when there are no adults around
- skills training that shows children how to intervene with bullies effectively and safely
- guidance for children on when not to intervene directly with a bully but to speak up to someone in authority
- indirect involvement of parents, counselors and teachers in training and coaching, guiding and supporting.

A bystander program as outlined above involves changing attitudes and developing skills. Both are gradual processes requiring input, practice, feedback, support and reinforcement.

6. Responsibilities of schools

If children are to succeed at school they must feel that they are in a safe secure environment. If a blind eye is turned to bullying or if the measures taken are inadequate to deal with bullies, school becomes a place of fear and victimization for many.

The guidelines below are based on the principles that acceptable and unacceptable behaviour must be clearly defined; behaviour must be monitored, and consequences must be applied consistently.

- Every school should have a clear policy with regard to bullying and a practical plan to implement it.
- The message to bullies should be 'Your behavior is inappropriate and must stop'. The message to other children should be 'No one deserves to be bullied and we are going to everything we can to stop it.'

- Both children and parents should have input to decisions on the behaviour that is acceptable or unacceptable and the consequences that will be applied for bullying.
- This information and regular updates should be communicated in face to face meetings and in newsletters. It should be presented in ways that are credible and impactful, making the school's stand on bullying and the actions that will be taken against it in no doubt.
- All school staff must act as positive role models for non-violent behaviour.

- Classroom time should be allowed for open discussion of bullying and its consequences; coaching in the words and actions to use with bullies; the support available to children; guidance on building friendships; projects that involve co-operation, collaboration and development of empathy
- As most bullying takes place when there is little or no adult supervision, arrangements should be made for supervision of children in playgrounds, at lunchtimes and when they travel together, as well as in class rooms.
- The consequences agreed for bullying should be applied consistently
- Staff as well as children should be assisted to acquire the skill to deal with bullies.
- Problems with individual bullies should be handled in private. Bullies should be offered coaching so they can develop better skills in problem solving and building relationships.

7. Is your child a bully?

There are serious consequences for everyone involved in bullying, not just the victims. Scandinavian research shows that 60% of bullies will have criminal records by the time they are 24 years old. Other findings corroborate this. It is estimated that in the UK at least 16 children commit suicide each year because they have been bullied.

Bullies find that as they enter their teen years when bullying typically decreases, they will experience a decline in their status with their peer group if they continue with their abusive behaviour. As they become adults, those who continue bullying have greater difficulty developing and maintaining good relationships. Bullying may also affect their career success.

No-one wants to accept that their child is a bully and no one behaviour is a guaranteed indicator. Bullies are also skilled at lying or giving plausible explanations for their behaviour. However, if a child consistently exhibits some of the following behaviours you should consider intervening.

- Makes threats or talks of plans to hurt others
- Shows signs of rage or bottled up anger
- Frequently calls others names such as 'wimp' or 'jerk'
- Has a need to get his or her own way
- Regularly boasts about his or her own achievements
- Has a defiant or hostile attitude and takes offense easily
- Shows a lack of empathy for others
- Shows signs of being depressed, lonely, or feeling rejected

8. What parents can do

Bullies aren't born. Overwhelmingly they are a product of the environments in which they grow up and the quality of the parenting they receive. Creating a positive, caring and supporting environment in which children grow up is the most important of your responsibilities as a parent. It cannot be delegated entirely to caregivers outside the family, older siblings, teachers or counselors no matter how skilled they may be.

1. Be a positive role model for your children. Model respect, kindness and empathy. Show how problems can be solved without the use of power or violence. Start early in your child's life. Children can learn to bully before they reach school.
2. Be there for your child and be attentive to his or her behaviour. Most bullying takes place at times and in places where adult supervision is absent. Acknowledge the problem. Let your child know that you are aware of their behaviour and that you take bullying seriously.
3. Examine things in your home which may be encouraging a child to use violent behaviour. Are media, TV or computer games modeling and encouraging violence? Do siblings tease or taunt each other? Is discipline harsh or punitive?
4. Make clear to your child the difference between acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Establish consequences for inappropriate behavior and apply them consistently. Acknowledge and reward examples of positive behaviour.
5. Find out about your child's friends and whether he or she hangs out with others who bully. Then you can intervene to help him or her choose other interests and other friends.
6. Where possible discuss with the parents of your child's friends how you can work together to stop bullying.

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7. Talk to your child's teachers about his or her behavior and its possible causes. If necessary obtain professional help.

Website references

www.education.com

www.kenrigby.net

www.bullyonline.org