



Stop Bullying in Its Tracks

By Margie Markarian

Bullying is not “just part of growing up,” and it needs to be addressed. Here’s how you can help your child successfully navigate these troubled waters.

Don’t let the catchy “We’re All in This Together” theme from *High School Musical* lull you into thinking that bullying behavior isn’t a problem in your kid’s school and social life.

“Bullying is a pervasive issue,” says Joseph Wright, M.D., M.P.H., FAAP, chair of the American Academy of Pediatrics’ Violence Prevention Subcommittee. “Studies show that about 30 percent of students in grades 6 to 10 are involved in bullying either as a victim or as a bully, sometimes as both.” Even kids who aren’t actively involved in bullying are likely to feel an emotional tug from incidents they see or hear about at school, on the bus, around the neighborhood, or on the Internet.

Defining the Problem

Pediatricians define bullying as aggressive behavior that is both repetitive over time and intentional. “The bully intends to harm, harass, and intimidate,” says Dr. Wright.

For bullying to take place, there also has to be an imbalance of power. “With direct bullying, which is more prevalent among boys, the bully is almost always physically larger and stronger than the victim,” explains Robert Sege, M.D., Ph.D., FAAP, director of ambulatory pediatrics at Boston Medical Center. They inflict physical injury by hitting, shoving, pushing, tripping, kicking, and/or restraining.

“In indirect or relational bullying, which is more common among girls, the bully is much more socially powerful than her victim,” continues Dr. Sege. Spreading rumors, ruining friendships, creating embarrassing situations, and excluding someone socially are typical ways girls bully each other.

Verbal bullying almost always goes hand-in-hand with direct or indirect bullying. Boys and girls are equally adept at name-calling, taunts, racist remarks, and other derogatory comments about sexual orientation and/or sexual activity. The newest

phenomenon is cyber-bullying via text messages, email, instant messaging (IM), blogs, and social networking sites such as Facebook and My Space.

“If you really want to see what happens in bullying, watch any of the reality TV shows,” says Stan Davis, a bullying expert and school guidance counselor who authored *Schools Where Everyone Belongs: Strategies for Reducing Bullying*. “That’s where kids get their ideas. I’ve had kids tell me after they’ve been mean to another kid, ‘Well, she just needed to be voted off the island.’”

The High Price of Bullying

The consequences of bullying are significant. In addition to the physical injuries, there is the hard-to-heal emotional damage from all the fear and humiliation. “For kids who continue to internalize, there appears to be a higher association with mental health problems, including depression and, on the extreme end, thoughts of suicide,” warns Wright.

For the bullies themselves, there’s emerging evidence that links bullying behaviors to carrying weapons, criminal activities, and fights that end up in the emergency departments at hospitals. “That’s not to say, if your child is a bully, that he’s going to be a criminal,” points out Dr. Wright. “But the association exists.”

Fortunately, more and more schools are starting anti-bullying programs. These programs focus on getting bystanders to be more empathetic and to disapprove of bullying behaviors and reach out to kids who are socially awkward, isolated, or bullied.

For parents, the first step in stopping bullying is becoming aware that the problem exists. Kids have often been warned not to “snitch,” or the bullying will get worse. They may blame themselves or be too embarrassed to talk about it. Many convince themselves that there is nothing a parent can do anyway. That’s why it’s important to keep the daily lines of

See “Bullying” on page 28

communications open and watch for even the subtle signs of bullying, which can include:

- **Tattered or torn clothes**
- **Frequent reports that money or valuables were lost or stolen at school**
- **An abrupt lack of interest in school and/or school-related activities your son or daughter usually enjoys**
- **A sudden slip in grades (because bullied kids are often too anxious stay focused on school work)**
- **Taking different routes to and from school**
- **Missing the school bus so you have to drop off and pick up**
- **Extreme hunger after school (harassment may involve bullies confiscating lunch/lunch money)**
- **Racing to bathroom when getting home (avoiding school bathrooms because that's where bullying takes place)**
- **Being withdrawn or lonely**
- **Difficulty sleeping, frequent headaches and/or stomachaches**
- **Talking negatively about peers, or not talking about peers or school at all**

Remediating the Situation

Once you get your preteen or teen to open up and talk about bullying, it's important to be supportive and to reassure your child that he or she is not the problem, advises Dr. Sege. "It's the bully who has the problem, not your child."

Experts also warn against telling your kid to fight back with physical violence. "The focus should be on safety," says Dr. Wright. "Young people should not take situations into their own hands by retaliating. Columbine is an egregious example of responding to bullying at an extreme level."

Don't Keep It a Secret

One of the most important actions you can take to stop the abuse is letting school leaders know there is a problem and advocating for your child. "Go in as calmly as possible and with a list of the exact events — this bullying activity happened on Thursday, these words were said on Friday," explains Davis. "Then ask what the school is going to do make sure it doesn't happen anymore — that being slammed into lockers or being called names about ethnic origin are unacceptable. Tell them you're looking for some level of supervision so

your child will be safe. Most schools will respond positively."

Many schools have specially trained personnel on staff to intervene appropriately and identify solutions, including disciplining bullies. Counselors can work with your child on ways to respond safely to physical, verbal, and social bullying.

Here are some other things you can do to help your son or daughter build self-esteem and form healthy peer relationships after experiencing bullying:

- **Explore social opportunities away from the bully.** Start with activities offered by local park and recreation programs, sports leagues, boys and girls clubs, the Y, museums, religious groups, and nature trails. The idea is to get your adolescent involved in something where she can be a part of the social mainstream and make friends.
- **Encourage hobbies.** "Whether it's drawing, playing the guitar, running, brushing down a horse, or doing origami, you can always make yourself feel better by spending a half-hour on a hobby," says Davis. "It's something to do that can help a person heal him- or herself."
- **Suggest journaling.** If the bullying behavior has stopped but your child is still having emotional troubles, it can be helpful for kids to keep a journal of what happened and how they felt about.
- **Teach relaxation techniques.** Deep breathing is especially useful for sensitive kids who get upset and cry easily. So is muscle relaxation.
- **Plan more family time.** More time together helps kids of all ages become stronger, happier, and more resilient. Friday night pizza, bicycle rides, walks around the block, and watching favorite TV shows and movies together are few simple ways to create more family time.

Ultimately, a coordinated effort at school and on the home front should help a bullied child feel safe again. Of course, if emotional troubles continue, talk with your pediatrician for advice and a referral to a mental health professional. In extreme cases, it may also be necessary to switch schools so your troubled adolescent can literally leave the past behind. ●

Quick Tips

- **Be aware of the signs that your child is being bullied.**
- **Talk with school officials about what can be done to stop bullying.**
- **Discourage your child from responding with violence against the bully. Instead, find healthy family activities away from the bully where your child will be reassured and become more resilient.**