How to talk to your child about bullying

Recognizing which characters are villains, victims and superheroes in film and television isn't hard. When the victims are in trouble, they simply let out a cry for help and the superhero comes to the rescue.



Unfortunately, real life isn't quite as easy. This is especially true for tweens and teenagers, who may find it difficult to make that call for help.

Spotting signs of trouble

Bullying can take on many forms, including repeated verbal and physical harassment, social exclusion, or even online acts of harm—all of which can have devastating effects on a child. Though your tween or teen may not open up to you about being a victim of bullying, feeling depressed or struggling socially, there are some tell-tale signs to look for:

Frequent absences. Faking illness or using excuses can be a sign things are not okay. Even the route taken to school can raise a red flag, since your child may take a longer one to avoid danger.

Visible hints. Watch for bruises, cuts or ripped clothing, as these can be clues to bullying.

Cyber-bullying. Modern bullying isn't limited to schoolyards. Tweens and teens can be at home on their computer or cellular phone and receive hateful messages or even photos and videos posted online. Monitor your child's Internet use by "friending" them on social media sites and checking text activity from time to time. Keep a low profile online though, as being overbearing online could further make your child a target for teasing.

Social struggles. An active social life is a key part of childhood. If your child is avoiding events, it could point to a larger issue. Many online activities encourage users to share their photos, videos, events and number of friends. For tweens and teens that don't have a large social circle, this can lead to disappointment and feelings of social isolation.

By staying connected to your child and their social life, you'll be able to spot signs of trouble sooner. Monitor your child's mood and behaviour changes. Perhaps your child is not getting a good night's sleep, is visibly upset many days at a time or often has no appetite. These factors can point towards depression, anxiety or social isolation and should not be ignored.

How you can help

"Take it seriously," says Barb Veder, LifeWorks•fgi's Clinical Director of Regional Clinical Services. "Doing so has a big impact on your child's self-worth and identity. Talk to your child about what is bullying behaviour. Reassure them that if they ever see this behaviour there are ways to get help. Build their skills and confidence through planning and role playing to help them manage bullying situations."

Regardless of whether or not you suspect your child is a victim of bullying, talk to them directly and let them know you're there. Veder notes that parental comfort and reassurance can also have a huge impact in helping kids feel supported. "Let your kids know how proud you are of them and the skills they have to handle situations they are faced with each day." Be sure to:

Take an interest. Find out about your child's social life and who their friends are. If you're worried they don't have any friends, suggest they join a school club or take up an extra-curricular activity they enjoy. These are both great ways to meet new friends with similar interests.

Stay determined and persistent. Sometimes, it may be difficult to get your tween or teenager to share their true feelings. It may take time to get them to open up but it's well worth the effort to keep trying.

Ask specific questions. Many parents overlook simple direct questions such as, “Are you sad?” in getting their kids to reveal their true feelings. These are more effective than general questions such as, “How was school?” which your child may be used to answering a certain way.

Listen actively. Open your ears to what your youth is telling you and reassure them you understand the situation. Try to show empathy and relate by sharing examples from your own childhood. Avoid “closed” body language like crossed arms and frowning.

Have a heart to heart discussion about emotions. Depression, bullying and social isolation can lead to thoughts of suicide. If talk of suicide is ever mentioned, never take it lightly. The majority of youths who have committed suicide have left verbal clues beforehand so seek professional support immediately.

According to Barb Veder, “There is no 100 per cent way to prevent bullying, but encouraging your child's self-confidence and teaching them to ask for help when they start to feel uncomfortable is key. Instructing them on how to rely on their own judgment is important, as often they may have to face a bully alone. Encourage your kids to walk away from situations they’re not okay with and remind them that they shouldn't follow peers when they don’t agree with their behaviour.”

Seeking outside help

Despite your best effort to get your child to open up, sometimes a little extra support can go a long way. Your child may feel more comfortable sharing their feelings with a medical professional, guidance counsellor or even their teacher. The teenage years are hard for anyone. But with open communication and empathy, you can help give your child the strength and skills to cope with difficult times.

Fearful figures

- A comparison of 13-year-old students in 2001/2002 from 35 countries placed Canada 26th and 27th for bullying and victimization
- Only 27 per cent of kids bullied told a parent or guardian about the incident
- University of Toronto researchers suggest that one in four kids (Grades 6-11) reported being cyber-bullied while one in five children admitted to participating in cyber-bullying