Bullying: the silent struggle

Bullying used to be thought of as a "natural" part of schoolyard struggles. But a recent wave of high-profile, extreme cases has brought its damaging effects to light. Whether your children are leaders or followers, confident or socially awkward, they no doubt witness, instigate or experience bullying first-hand. By being more informed and aware, you'll be able to spot and support a bullied child, and learn to deal with children that show aggressive, bullying behaviour.



Ask the right questions

Talking to your child goes beyond asking, "How was your day?" This rarely gives you a true picture of your child's social life. Instead, the Canadian Medical Association Journal suggests that you ask your child specific questions such as:

- Who do you usually play with at recess? Do you play alone or with other children?
- At school are you ever teased?
- What things do other kids tease you about?
- How long have they been teasing you?
- Did you tell the teacher when it happened?
- Are other children being teased?

Signs of bullying

Even if your child doesn't admit to being bullied, many signs may point to it. These include:

- Avoiding or refusing to go to school.
- Missing money, personal items or torn clothing.
- Constant but vague complaints of sickness.
- Changes in eating habits, sleep patterns, school work/grades and grooming habits.
- Mood swings.
- Difficulty making friends.
- Lower interest in daily activities like outdoor play, walking the dog, etc.

Stay in the know by keeping the lines of communication open. Encourage your child to speak up if he/she or another kid is being bullied. Explain that reporting the problem is not tattling. Most importantly, remember to listen carefully and talk openly with your child about daily successes, failures and everything in between.

What to do if your child is being bullied

1. **Don't lose your cool!** One of the worst ways to respond is to let your anger bubble over. Do your part to end the cycle of aggression by being calm and reasonable.

2. **Don't brush off the claim.** Assure your child that telling you was a smart choice. Be understanding and explain that you'll work with the teacher to make sure that the bullying doesn't happen again.

3. **Gather as much detail as you can about the incident** from your child before jumping to any conclusions.

4. **Get in touch with your child's teacher, principal and/or guidance counsellor and alert them to the situation.**

5. **Consider contacting the bully's parents.** Calmly explain the situation. Keep in mind that they might feel defensive at first, especially since they may not know about the situation. They're more likely to appreciate your concern if you are polite and non-threatening.

6. **Role-play responses**, especially if your child is verbally bullied. Act out situations, and demonstrate useful responses—such as ignoring or questioning the bully—that might throw the aggressor for a loop.

7. **Champion the introduction of bullying awareness and prevention programs in your child's school.** Organize a parents group and approach the school board with your ideas.

My baby a bully?

If you're like most parents, suggestions that your child is a bully are likely to make you feel defensive. Take a deep breath, step back, and ask the accusing parent or teacher to describe the details of the incident clearly and objectively. Listen to what he/she has to say and honestly consider the situation.

For years psychologists and psychiatrists blamed the tendency to bully on low self-esteem. A leading researcher, however, found the opposite to be true; bullies often have an exaggerated feeling of self worth.

Keeping this in mind, there are several things you can do if your child is demonstrating bullying behaviour:

- Without accusing or blaming, calmly ask your child to explain what happened without getting bogged down in the whys.
- Explain that bullying is unacceptable behaviour.
- Discuss different ways to deal with anger or aggression and role-play scenarios with him/her.
- Clearly lay out the consequences if your child continues to bully.
- Work together with the school to focus on tackling the issue.
- Is your child modelling adult behaviour? Are you too aggressive? Is your child bullied or teased by older brothers or sisters? If so, change your own approach or work to end sibling conflicts.
- Praise your child when deserved. Give positive feedback when he/she has improved or accomplished something worthy of it. Aggressive kids are sometimes rewarded with attention for the wrong reasons.
- If the bullying continues, or if you're worried about deep-rooted issues, consider consulting a professional for counselling.

Though discovering that your child is bullying might not be pleasant, deal with it before it gets out of hand. A swift and honest response on your part will go a long way to getting your child back on social track.

Healthy bits

- Boys generally participate in direct, physical forms of bullying.
- Girls are more likely to bully indirectly. "Leaving out" a girl is very common. This kind of emotional bullying—which is sometimes more hurtful than punching and kicking—is difficult to spot and often played down by parents.
- Over the past 10 years, school violence has doubled (Canadian Safe School Network—CSSN).
- A young person is bullied every seven minutes (CSSN).
- Classroom bullying occurs once every 25 minutes (CSSN).

Children must deal with many issues related to growing up. Openly talking to your child about bullying will teach them how to recognize and react to it, regardless of who the victim is. Parents with questions can seek additional support from their child’s teacher, principle, doctor or professional.