# Bullying and your child

In the past, bullying was played down or condoned, and considered a natural part of growing up. But as waves of extreme cases of bullying continue to gain attention, its damaging effects on children's self-esteem and social development have surfaced. The physical and emotional scars that bullying causes are real and not to be taken lightly.



Whether your children are leaders or followers, confident or socially awkward, they probably see, 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 who show aggressive, bullying behaviour.

**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
- Lessened interest in daily activities like outdoor play, walking the dog, etc.

**Uncovering bullying**

Keep the lines of communication open at all times so that your child is comfortable coming to you with any problems that he or she may have. Asking, "How was your day?" rarely gives you a true picture of your child's social life. Instead, 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?

Creating an atmosphere that is open, honest and non-judgmental prompts your child to share ups and downs with you.

**Putting the brakes on bullying**

As a parent, you've done your best to protect your children from the negative forces of the world. Then one day, your son or daughter returns home from school in tears. Your nagging suspicions are finally confirmed: Your child is being bullied. Below are some useful tips to get to the bottom of the situation and help put the brakes on the bullying:

- **Stay calm.** 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.
- **Don't brush off the claim.** Assure your child that you're relieved that he or she told you. Be understanding and explain that you'll work with their teacher and/or the parents of the bully to make sure that it doesn't happen again.
- **Investigate.** Gather as much detail as you can about the incident from your child before jumping to any conclusions.
- **Make contact.** Get in touch with your child's teacher, principal and/or guidance counsellor and alert them to the situation.
- **Contact 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 bullying. They'll probably appreciate your concern, though, if you are polite and non-threatening.
- **Role-play.** Act out situations and demonstrate useful responses—e.g., ignoring or directly questioning the bully—that might throw the aggressor for a loop and cause him or her to back down.
- **Ensure that your child is well-supervised.** Accompany your child to and from school or assign the task to a relative or older child that you trust. If the bullying is taking place in the schoolyard, encourage the principal and teachers to increase monitoring at recess and lunchtime.
- **Foster self-confidence.** Encourage participation in activities that your child enjoys or excels at, especially outside of school (if that's where the bullying is occurring). Consider enrolling him or her in a self-defence course; it can help build self-esteem and discipline.
- **Get involved.** 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.
- **Ask for help.** Seek support for your child if he or she is showing signs of emotional distress. Contact your a counsellor to discuss options that can help your child through this difficult time.

**When your child is the bully**

If you're like most parents, you don't want to believe that your child is capable of bullying. Suggestions that this is the case 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 or she has to say, honestly consider the situation and:
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.

- 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 or her.
- Clearly lay out the consequences if your child continues to bully.
- Work together with the school to focus on tackling the issue.
- Determine if your child is 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 children when they deserve it. Give your child positive feedback when they've improved or accomplished something worthy. Aggressive kids are often rewarded with attention for the wrong reasons.
- Do not use corporal punishment to discipline your child. This sets a poor example and teaches your child that conflict is resolved through physical force.
- If the bullying continues, or if you're worried about deep-rooted issues, consider consulting a counsellor.