

My Child Is a Bully: What Should I Do?

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How to find out what's behind the bullying behavior, and foster healthy friendship skills

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Gina, the mother of a 12-year-old boy, got a disconcerting phone call from his school. A student had complained that her son was bullying him. After looking into the matter, the school staff concluded that her child had been tormenting a number of his classmates with name-calling, physical violence, and even sexual harassment. “Needless to say, we were mortified and ashamed,” Gina remembers. “But not only that, we were heartbroken.”

No parent wants to hear that her child is a bully. It’s painful to think of your child inflicting harm on other kids. But bullying is also a serious issue for the aggressor. Kids’ friendship skills are an important indicator of their overall mental health. If your child is said to be engaging in bullying behaviors—whether physical or verbal—it might be a sign of serious distress. He might be experiencing anxiety or depression, and have difficulty regulating his emotions and behavior.

Why do kids bully?

It’s important to keep in mind that kids don’t bully because they are “bad kids.” “Kids engage in all kinds of behavior that isn’t a reflection of who they are as a person,” says Jamie Howard, PhD, director of the Stress and Resilience Program at the Child Mind Institute. “They’re still figuring things out. They can be nice kids who have made some mistakes.” There are many reasons why an otherwise well-behaved child might be unkind to other kids. Here are a few:

- The child wants to fit in with a group of friends who are picking on one classmate.
- She is getting bullied at home or at school, and is trying to regain a sense of power by acting aggressively toward others.
- She is looking for attention from teachers, parents, or classmates, and hasn’t been successful getting it other ways.
- She is by nature more assertive and impulsive than her peers.

- She has a tendency to perceive the behavior of other kids as hostile, even when it is not.
- She does not fully grasp how her behavior is making the victim feel. This is particularly true of younger kids.

By talking with your child about it, understanding from her point of view what's going on, and guiding her through appropriate friendship behaviors, you can curb bullying and address the issues that might have caused it to happen in the first place. Here are some tips for ensuring that your child fosters respectful relationships with her peers.

Communicate

If you hear from a teacher or another parent that your child is being a bully, the first thing you should do is talk to your child about the situation. Be direct about the issue, but make it clear that you are open to hearing your child's side of the story. Say something along the lines of: "I got a call from the school today, and the teacher indicated that you were involved in some bullying. I'm really concerned about this, and we need to talk about it. Please tell me what happened."

Talking through the situation with your child can help you understand why the social aggression is happening, and what steps need to be taken in order to stop it. After Gina was told that her son was harassing other children, she and her husband had many long talks with him about why he was acting out in that way.

"We asked him lots of questions about why he did those things," Gina explains. "Our child had incredibly low self-esteem. Bullying gave him power and control over something. He told us that it was nice being known as 'the worst kid in school,' rather than not being noticed at all."

Other kids might not be able to articulate why they are acting out. This is especially true of younger children and kids who are struggling with anxiety, trauma, or another mental health issue. If you are having trouble getting to the bottom of why your child is acting out, consider consulting a childpsychologist

or psychiatrist who has a lot of experience evaluating kids' behaviors.

Cope ahead

Once you have investigated the roots of the problem, you can tailor your response to the specific challenges that your child faces in her social interactions. Discuss scenarios that might prove difficult for her to handle, and guide her through appropriate responses. If, for example, your child has been deliberately excluding one

of her classmates from social activities, tell her: “When someone asks to play with you, you should say yes. I want to see you including kids, and I want to see you using only respectful language.”

“Have lots of different solutions to various issues that are likely to come up, and give clear examples about how you expect your child to respond,” says Dr. Howard. “I would try to frame it as friendship behavior, rather than, ‘Don’t be a bully.’ Kids respond better to being told what to do than what not to do.”

Encouraging your child to take the perspective of the person who is being bullied can be another helpful way to cope ahead. Ask your child: “Can you think of a time when you felt left out or sad because somebody wasn’t being nice to you? That feeling you had is the same feeling your classmate is having because you aren’t being nice to her.”

Look inward

Children who are exposed to aggressive or unkind interactions at home are likely to repeat those behaviors at school. “It’s important for parents to think about how their behaviors might influence their kids—the way they speak to their children, the way they speak to their spouses, the way they handle anger—and to be realistic about whether or not this might be something that’s been modeled for the child,” says Kristin Carothers, PhD, a clinical psychologist.

It is possible that bullying takes place in your home, and that you are not even aware of it. Do members of your family engage in yelling, name-calling, or putdowns? Do your children pick on one another, or hit each other? If so, it is important to start fostering a positive home environment, where members of the family treat one another with kindness and respect.

After Gina learned about her son’s bullying, she took great pains to ensure that her home life reflected the sort of behavior that she wanted her son to practice at school. “We didn’t allow any ‘bully type’ talk or jokes, we practiced manners, and we encouraged helping and lifting each other up,” she says. “Things weren’t always perfect at home, but if we or the other kids didn’t behave appropriately, we talked about it as a family.”

Provide meaningful consequences

Punishments for bullying behavior can be effective, but they should be meaningful and limited in scope. If, for example, you find out that your teenager is engaging in cyber bullying, her actions should be met with an immediate loss of Internet or phone privileges. In the case of particularly severe offenses, revoke the privileges for the

foreseeable future, and seek the help of a therapist. But for less acute forms of bullying, the child should be able to earn her privileges back over the course of a few days.

“If you remove a privilege for too long, it may actually lose validity,” says Dr. Carothers. “The kid’s like, ‘OK, well, I can never get it back, so I’m just not going to try.’ You want to make it so that the time within which punishment happens and the amount of time for which it happens are really balanced to have the biggest effect.”

Make it right

Once your child has regained her privileges and is calm, explain that she made a mistake that needs to be fixed. Your child might choose to apologize—in person, in a letter, via text message, and so on—but repairs can take many different forms. You can encourage your child to bake cookies for the whole class, for example, or to play a game with a peer whom she had previously been excluding.

Dr. Howard recalls a former patient who had been name-calling and very patently excluding other children from her social group. As a means of repair, the girl’s mother had her daughter invite all the children whom she had bullied to a social event. “It was a correction,” Dr. Howard explains. “And it was sort of Mom’s way of re-establishing control.”

Monitor the situation

If another parent approaches you about your child’s bullying, notify teachers right away so they can be on the lookout for problematic behavior. Follow up with teachers on a regular basis and give plenty of labelled praise when your child is being a good friend.

Cyberbullying can be particularly difficult to monitor because it doesn’t take place in plain sight. If your child has bullied other kids over the Internet, obtain passwords to her Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter accounts, and check them regularly to make sure that she is using social media in a kind manner. Be upfront about this: let your child know that you will be monitoring her social media activity until she proves that she can handle it responsibly. “If you’re paying the phone bill, and you’re paying for the Internet, you should be aware of what’s going on with your child,” Dr. Carothers says.

Seek help

If you are continually working on building friendship skills with your child and the bullying does not stop, seek a mental health evaluation. Your child might need a therapist’s help to work through underlying issues.

Stay connected

In some ways the most important action you can take is to build an open channel of communication with your child about his day-to-day life that will put you in a better position to recognize signs of bullying and trouble. Dr. Carothers recommends asking your child a few open-ended questions on a daily basis. “I believe in general check-ins with kids,” she explains. “If you want your kid to talk to you, you have to go and talk to your kid.”

In the morning, ask your child what she has planned for the day; after school, ask your child to tell you about one really great thing that happened that day, and one not-so-great thing. It can be tough to get started, but kids who are regularly expected to share details of their lives with parents are more comfortable continuing *into adolescence*

to clue their parents in to what they are doing.

Gina found that staying connected to her son in a supportive, non-judgmental way was key to minimizing his aggressive behavior. “Talk to your kids and be very present in their lives,” she suggests. “They need to feel like you care and that you hear what’s going on with them. Fill their heads and hearts with love.”