

# Bullying: Helping Handout for Home

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## INTRODUCTION

Bullying is unwanted acts of aggression that are meant to harm the victim. The acts can be physical (e.g., hitting, shoving, stealing, or damaging property); verbal (e.g., hurtful comments or threats); or social (e.g., excluding the victim or spreading rumors). When it occurs over digital devices or social media, it is called cyberbullying. To be considered bullying, the acts must be repeated over time. An imbalance of power also must exist, which means that the bully is in a position of strength relative to the victim. For instance, the bully may be bigger or older than the victim or may have more social “strength,” such as popularity or access to embarrassing information. For several reasons, reported rates of bullying in schools vary greatly, especially because of differences in how it is defined and measured (Bear, Mantz, Glutting, Yang, & Boyer, 2015). However, national studies suggest that approximately 20% of students ages 12 to 18 have been bullied (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2017).

Bullying has become a great concern because of its negative outcomes. For example, victims are at increased risk for low self-esteem; depression or anxiety (and potentially self-harm or suicide); social isolation; poorer academic achievement; and “acting out” behaviors (Rueger & Jenkins, 2013). The impact on bullies—especially when their behavior does not coexist with other significant concerns—is less clear (Rodkin, Espelage, & Hanish, 2015). In other words, when students bully, but do not otherwise show major social, emotional, or academic problems, they do not seem to experience poor outcomes later in life. Bullying can also affect those less directly involved, such as classmates, teachers, and parents—creating an overall negative school climate that interferes with learning, teaching, and social relationships.

No one can say with certainty who will become a victim. However, research tells us that students who

are seen as different from their peers are at greater risk. This includes students with disabilities, especially ones with obvious physical features or with behaviors such as poor social skills (Bear et al., 2015). Students who are much smaller or heavier than their peers are more at risk, as are students who belong to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (LGBTQ) community or who have a nonnormative sexual orientation or gender identity (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009). Less is understood about the characteristics of bullies, and it can be difficult to tell which students will bully others. Some bullies are well accepted by their peer groups; others are rejected. Some bullies lack social skills, but others don't (Gini, 2006). In addition, *a bully can also be a victim!*

## WHAT TO CONSIDER WHEN SELECTING INTERVENTIONS AND SUPPORTS

Many factors contribute to bullying—from home to school to social environments. Individual characteristics of the victim or the bully can affect situations too. Some factors, such as a child's gender, sexual orientation, or disability, are unchangeable. Other factors, such as models of bullying in the media, are difficult for parents to alter. However, parents can play an important role in preventing and responding to bullying by (a) being proactive and engaged and (b) understanding the importance of the home environment.

### Being Proactive and Engaged

Parents have a wide range of knowledge and personal experiences that can affect their thoughts about bullying. However, many parents would benefit from more information on how to deal with bullying. Parents may be unsure what behaviors qualify as bullying or may see it as a normal part of childhood. It can also be hard for parents to navigate the strong emotional reactions that occur when their child is identified as either a victim or a bully.

As a parent, it is important for you to educate yourself. Your child's school is a good place to turn for more information, and parent–school partnerships are a critical way to help prevent bullying. By understanding what constitutes bullying (including the school's definition), what rules and consequences apply, and what services and supports exist, you can help the school carry out its antibullying efforts. For example, you can help by (a) reinforcing lessons that your child has learned in the classroom, (b) becoming involved at your child's school and supporting the school's work in the community, and (c) remaining vigilant for signs that your child may be involved in a bullying situation. Even if you know (or suspect) that bullying has occurred, remember that children do not always reveal the extent of what has happened. Therefore, you should be particularly mindful if your child is more likely to be a target (for example, if he or she has a disability), or if your child is prone to bully others (see [www.stopbullying.gov/at-risk/index.html](http://www.stopbullying.gov/at-risk/index.html) for specific risk factors).

### Understanding the Importance of the Home Environment

Overall, positive home environments—those characterized by warmth and support—can help prevent behaviors associated with bullying. Such environments also help children to develop resilience if they are involved in a bullying situation (Bowes, Maughan, Caspi, Moffitt, & Arseneault, 2010). For instance, an authoritative approach to parenting can help reduce the likelihood that a child is either a victim or a bully. This approach balances *social support*, by building and maintaining a positive relationship with the child and responding to psychological needs, with *structure*, by having clear behavioral expectations, closely monitoring behavior, and setting rules and consequences that are clear and fair.

In addition, various relationships at home may affect children's behavior. For instance, sibling interactions can affect how a child relates to peers. A child who is often aggressive with siblings may show more bullying behaviors at school. Likewise, a child who is targeted by siblings may be more vulnerable to victimization at school.

## RECOMMENDED INTERVENTIONS AND SUPPORTS

The following interventions and supports are arranged in two general categories: (a) preventing bullying and (b) responding to bullying.

### Preventing Bullying

The following strategies apply to all children, including victims and bullies.

1. **Teach and encourage important social behaviors.** Positive classroom and school climates are critical for preventing bullying—and how students relate to each other is critical for developing healthy climates. Thus, children need to learn and understand the importance of social–emotional skills that help develop strong peer relationships, such as cooperation, respect, empathy, caring, kindness, and responsibility. Help to model and promote these behaviors in your own child. Check with the school to see if they place an emphasis on certain behaviors and highlight them at home.
2. **Help your child understand what bullying is—and what it is not.** Explain what bullying is and why it is harmful. Your child's school should be able to provide you with a definition if you are unsure. Parents should be encouraged to discuss different types of bullying with their child and to talk about how individuals, schools, and communities are affected. It also is important to teach children that *not all acts of aggression, fighting, exclusion, or teasing constitute bullying*. For instance, when two close friends have a disagreement and call each other names (or even fight physically), this behavior, while hurtful, is not bullying. Recognize that the term *bullying* is now used frequently, and casually, in our society. Therefore, *be careful*. Using the word too often or incorrectly can lead to unfair accusations. It also makes children and adults less sensitive to real incidents of bullying.
3. **Teach children how to respond to bullying.** Victims are unlikely to stop the bullying they are experiencing on their own. However, there are things that victims or other children might do:
  - Be assertive and tell the bully to stop in a firm and calm voice.
  - Act as if the bully is joking and try to laugh it off.
  - Tell a teacher, parent, or other adult who may be able to help.
  - Try to avoid meeting the bully, especially when alone. If the bully is nearby, try to stay around adults and friends.Children should understand that these strategies do not always work. Also, tell your child that he or she should *never* ignore or laugh off a serious or violent threat.

4. **Help your child understand the school's expectations, rules, and consequences related to bullying.** Reinforce the school's policies with your child. The school may also have authority beyond the building, such as at the bus stop. In addition, when off-site behavior, such as cyberbullying, significantly affects the learning environment, schools may discipline students for it (see <https://cyberbullying.org/bullying-laws>).

5. **Recognize signs of bullying.** Many students hesitate to report bullying. Victims might feel ashamed or embarrassed. Both victims and witnesses might fear retaliation. Watch for signs that your child may be either a victim or a bully. The federal website [www.stopbullying.gov](http://www.stopbullying.gov) gives the following warning signs.

*Signs that a child is being bullied:*

- Has mysterious injuries or destroyed or “lost” clothing, electronics, books, etc.
- Feels sick or fakes illness (e.g., frequent headaches or stomachaches)
- Has changes in eating habits (e.g., skipping meals at school or home, eating too much at one time)
- Has frequent nightmares or trouble sleeping
- Loses interest in school or schoolwork or has worse grades
- Avoids social situations or has a sudden loss of friends
- Feels helpless or has decreased self-esteem
- Exhibits self-destructive (e.g., running away), self-harming, or suicidal behaviors

*Signs that a child is bullying others:*

- Is increasingly aggressive and gets into verbal or physical fights
- Receives frequent consequences at school (e.g., detention, office visits)
- Has extra money or new belongings without any explanation
- Blames others for his or her problems or doesn't accept responsibility for his or her actions
- Is competitive and worries about his or her reputation or popularity
- Has friends who bully others

6. **Learn how you or your child can report bullying—and do so when necessary.** There may be specific people you need to contact or certain forms to fill out. *Do not wait to file reports with the school.* As time passes, the accuracy or efficiency of an

investigation and resolution often decreases. In addition, always report *each* case of suspected bullying. Do not assume that the school is aware that something has occurred.

7. **Build and maintain positive relationships with your child's teachers and encourage your child to do the same.** Strong relationships between students and teachers are related to less bullying in the classroom, and victims are more likely to report bullying to adults with whom they have a good relationship (Cortes & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2014). Encourage your child to build trust with teachers. If a connection with the teacher does not form, help your child identify another adult in the school who can be a source of support.
8. **Keep communication open between you and your child.** Children, especially older children, often don't tell their parents when they are involved in a situation with bullying. Therefore, ask your child daily about school, friends, and activities; for example, “What was one good thing that happened today? Any bad things?” This relays interest in your child's life and can encourage him or her to confide in you if something is wrong. Make sure to read school newsletters and websites and attend open houses and conferences to remain aware of what is happening at school.

In addition, talk with your child *directly* about bullying, asking questions such as: “Why do you think people bully?” or “What do you think parents can do to help stop bullying?” Visit [www.stopbullying.gov](http://www.stopbullying.gov) for questions to guide these conversations.

9. **Help your child build wider social networks.** Both victims and bullies often feel less support from other people in their classrooms, schools, or lives. Encourage your child to do things that help him or her feel confident and connected; this can increase self-esteem, social skills, and friendships. Creating wider systems of support may help your child avoid bullying—or be more resilient if it occurs.
10. **Buffer your child from poor role models.** This is not an easy task in today's society, especially when children are exposed to frequent acts of aggression and bullying in videos, movies, games, and the media. Nevertheless, make every effort to reduce your child's exposure to games that reward children for bullying behaviors, videos in which others laugh at or make fun of victims, or friends who engage in or support bullying.

11. **Reflect on your own behavior and experiences.** Parents should exhibit positive social behaviors too. Take time to recognize your own attitudes toward bullying and how your actions may model undesirable behaviors for your child. These would include sarcastic, humiliating, or otherwise hurtful comments—especially in the presence of your child.

Also, parents' childhood experiences can affect how they react when their own child is involved in a situation with bullying. For instance, if you were victimized, you may develop more overwhelming, complicated feelings that could affect your ability to remain objective, calm, or supportive.

### Responding to Bullying

The following interventions and supports help parents respond when they believe—or are told—that their child may be involved in a bullying incident. *Remember that the reported behavior may or may not be bullying.* For example, it may be unclear if the behavior has continued over time. Regardless, reports of bullying should be investigated further. A school's response will depend on a number of things, such as the seriousness of the behavior, the ages of the students, and the relationships between those involved.

Note that the classroom teacher is unlikely to be solely responsible for intervening at this point. Many schools have a clear process for reporting and investigating bullying, and the policies and procedures of a school or district often specify who handles reports. Therefore, your child's teacher may not be your primary contact during an investigation.

12. **Respond right away.** If you believe your child may be a victim or a bully, don't overreact but don't ignore the situation. Always communicate that you are taking the situation seriously and that the behavior will not be tolerated. In addition, get help immediately if your child appears at serious or immediate risk of being hurt or of hurting others.

13. **Try to determine what has happened.** Listen to your child and try to answer questions such as: "Can you tell me exactly what happened? Has this happened before, and if so, when? Who else was involved?" It can be helpful to write down your child's answers so that you can more accurately describe the experience to the school.

14. **Do not contact the parents of other children involved or take matters into your own hands.**

It is usually best to allow the school to address the behavior, especially when someone involved has a documented history of bullying. Getting parents and children together to settle the problem can be humiliating to one or both children and could make the situation worse (e.g., the victim is embarrassed and withdraws socially or the bully seeks revenge).

15. **Be patient—bullying investigations can take time.** Sorting out all the facts and information can take a while. Expect the school to act in a timely manner, but do not rush the process. When you interact with the school, remember to stay respectful. Although emotions can be heightened, you still remain a model of behavior for your child. Try not to act in ways that could embarrass your child or make school more difficult.

The school's response, including disciplinary action, will typically depend on whether or not the behavior is considered bullying. In addition, if the situation involves certain populations (e.g., a student with a disability), further steps may be necessary. However, even during an investigation, a school can begin to implement a response plan to support your child (whether he or she is a victim or an aggressor).

16. **Communicate that you will work with the school to stop the behavior and make a plan.** Neither victims nor bullies should be responsible for ending the behavior on their own. Parents, along with school staff, also should assume responsibility. Make this clear in what you say *and* do—children are more likely to report bullying when they feel their parents or teachers will do something (Cortes & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2014). Provide your child with advice but also ask what else could help, and use his or her ideas when appropriate. Work with the school and agree to a plan that includes action steps, both for your child and for the adults.

If your child is a victim, remember that the school will not be able to share information with you about the aggressor, including any consequences. An exception would be a plan that includes "reparative" consequences, such as apologizing to your child (preferably in writing), replacing a broken or stolen item, or doing an act of kindness for your child.

17. **If your child has been identified as a victim, avoid advice that can make the situation worse.** Instead, use the following approaches to support your child:
- *Don't blame your child.* Instead, reassure your child that it is not his or her fault.
  - *Don't tell your child to simply ignore the bullying.* In some situations, it may be appropriate for a child to ignore verbal aggression (e.g., walking away)—but only when used in combination with other strategies. In addition, a child should never be told to ignore serious threats or physical aggression.
  - *Don't encourage your child to “work it out” with the bully.* This can help when there is a problem between two equals (e.g., friends) but not when there is an imbalance of power (i.e., a victim and a bully).
  - *Don't encourage your child to retaliate.* Do not endorse behavior that could aggravate the bully or result in disciplinary action for your child.
18. **Do not label the bully as a bad person.** Emphasize that it is the behavior—not the child—that you strongly dislike. Children can change their behavior, but being labeled a bad person suggests a more permanent personality trait. Therefore, if your child has been identified as an aggressor, clearly communicate that you disapprove of your child's actions, emphasizing that they will not be tolerated. Then focus on the behaviors that your child needs to change and express optimism that he or she will do so. For instance, identify appropriate opportunities that highlight your child's strengths. Likewise, if your child is a victim, do not stigmatize the bully.
19. **Consider the need for more support.** This is most important when your child—whether a victim or a bully—exhibits more serious symptoms of depression or anxiety, or when behaviors such as physical aggression do not stop. Getting help from a private mental health specialist can help both you and your child cope with more challenging situations.

## RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

### Websites

<https://www.stopbullying.gov>

This website, managed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, is a gold mine of resources. It offers substantial guidance and recommendations on what schools, parents, and students can do to prevent bullying. It also

provides information on research, training, and state laws.

<https://cyberbullying.org/bullying-laws>

This website for the Cyberbullying Research Center is maintained by two professors and researchers of cyberbullying. It offers a wealth of information and resources for parents on cyberbullying.

### Related Helping Handouts for Victims of Bullying

Anxiety: Helping Handout for School and Home

Depression: Helping Handout for Home

Engagement and Motivation: Helping Handout for Home

Friendships—Lacking a Friend and Feeling Lonely: Helping Handout for School and Home

Happiness and Self-Esteem: Helping Handout for School and Home

Social and Emotional Learning: Helping Handout for Home

Teasing: Helping Handout for School and Home

Trauma: Helping Handout for Home

### Additional Helping Handouts for Perpetrators of Bullying

Anger and Aggression: Helping Handout for Home

Self-Management: Helping Handout for School and Home

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