

THE PARENT LETTER



About Our Kids:
A Letter for Parents by the
NYU Child Study Center

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BULLIES AND VICTIMS: WHAT A PARENT CAN DO

What is bullying?

Teasing may be an unavoidable fact of life, but once teasing turns to taunting and a child is afraid that the aggressor will cause harm, the situation is more serious and crosses the line into bullying. In general, bullying involves repeated behaviors intended to harm that are aimed at achieving and maintaining an imbalance of power. Bullying typically consists of direct behaviors such as teasing, taunting, threatening, hitting, and stealing that are initiated by one or more children against a victim or victims. In addition to direct attacks, bullying may also be done indirectly such as by spreading rumors that cause victims to be socially isolated or socially excluded. Although boys who bully typically engage in direct physical methods, girls who bully are more likely to use more subtle indirect strategies such as ridicule and rumors. Whether the bullying is verbal, physical, or social, the key components of bullying are (1) intent to do harm, (2) imbalance of power, and (3) repeated behavior.

How extensive is bullying?

Bullying is a pervasive problem for school children worldwide. Professor Dan Olweus, the pre-eminent researcher of bullying among school-aged youth has found that about one in seven students are involved in bully/victim problems at any given time and two out of five students are involved in a bully/victim problem at some point in their lives. Direct bullying seems to increase through the elementary school years, peak in the middle school years, and decline during the high school years. Although direct physical aggression decreases with age, verbal maltreatment appears to remain constant.

What does a bully look like?

Children who engage in bullying behaviors seem to have a need to feel powerful and in control. They appear to derive satisfaction from inflicting suffering on others, seem to have little empathy for their victims, and often defend their actions by saying that their victims provoked them in some way. There is little evidence to support the opinion that bullies victimize others because they feel bad about themselves. Bullies have different styles. Some bullies are aggressive and get their way by brute force or openly harassing someone. Other bullies are more reserved and manipulative; they try to control by smooth-talking and lying. Studies have shown that kids who bully grow up to be bullies as adults. Also, as adults, they have a higher chance of having a criminal record and substance abuse problems.

What does a victim look like?

Children who become repeated victims of bullying tend to be quiet and shy in temperament. They are less inclined to fight back or make any assertive responses to the initial aggression, which is then repeated by the bully. Children who become victims typically lack friends and social support at school, and they are often not confident in their physical abilities and strengths. Being targeted lowers the self-esteem of victims and can cause physical illness, depression, lower academic achievement, and can leave lifelong scars. Girl victims tend to experience more emotional distress than boy victims.

What can I do as a parent?

It is important to realize that much bullying occurs without the knowledge of teachers and parents. However, children should not be expected to handle bullies on their own. Kids need to be taught that bullying is unacceptable and this message must be reinforced and supported at home and in school. Often bullying does not occur solely in the context of a one-to-one relationship. In fact, there is usually more than one bully and more than one victim in any situation.

Regardless of whether your child is a victim or a bully, encourage your school administration to implement a comprehensive school-wide anti-bullying program. A well-implemented program with parent, teacher, and community support can significantly reduce the number of bullying-related incidents. Such programs teach children how to differentiate between tattling and speaking up and reward children when telling an adult about a bullying situation. Kids also need to be taught the difference between confronting a bully and diverting attention from a bully by supporting the victim. For example, a bystander can say, "Johnny, come play with me over here" and lead the victim away from a bullying situation. Bullying affects everyone in a group, so individual attempts to stop a bully can never be highly effective. Therefore, the most effective means of taking power away from a bully is for a community to band together. It takes a whole school to stop bullying.

What can I do if my child is a victim?

- Watch for signs that your child may be a victim, such as avoiding going to school, lack of friends, suddenly "lost" belongings, torn clothing, unexplained cuts or bruises, and increased anxiety about school and/or school activities.
- Ask your child directly and take complaints of bullying seriously. Children are often ashamed or afraid to report that they have been bullied, so further inquiry into a seemingly minor complaint may uncover more serious maltreatment.
- Work with the school immediately to make sure your child is safe, that the bully is reprimanded in an appropriate way, that monitoring at school is adequate, and steps are taken to spread anti-bullying messages.
- Tell your child that being bullied is not his or her fault and you are on his or her side.

What can I do if my child is a bully?

- Watch for signs that your child may be bullying others; using verbal or physical aggression to deal with conflict, acquiring items that belong to others, and talking about getting even with others.
- Make it clear to your child that you will not tolerate this kind of behavior and arrange for an effective, non-violent consequence. Praise the efforts your child makes toward non-hostile behavior as well as for following home and school rules. Keep an on-going dialogue with your child.
- Talk to your child's teachers and administrators. Frequent communication is important.
- Increase supervision of your child's activities and whereabouts and who he or she is associating with.
- Monitor your own behavior and aggression and provide appropriate models of conflict resolution.

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ABOUT THE NYU CHILD STUDY CENTER

The NYU Child Study Center is dedicated to the research, prevention and treatment of child and adolescent mental health problems. The Center offers evaluation and treatment for children and teenagers with anxiety, depression, learning or attention difficulties, neuropsychiatric problems, and trauma and stress related symptoms.

We offer a limited number of clinical studies at no cost for specific disorders and age groups. To see if your child would be appropriate for one of these studies, please call (212)263-8916.

The NYU Child Study Center also offers workshops and lectures for parents, educators and mental health professionals on a variety of mental health and parenting topics. To learn more or to request a speaker, please call (212) 263-2479.

For further information, guidelines and practical suggestions on child mental health and parenting issues, please visit the NYU Child Study Center's website, AboutOurKids.org.



**Changing the Face of Child Mental Health
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