

Bullies and Their Victims
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Although kids of all ages can be bullied or be bullies themselves, it tends to escalate in the middle school years. Children often pick on each other verbally or shove and push a weak classmate. Overweight kids are often targeted, as are children who dress, speak or act differently than others. It's a shame that our culture allows and perhaps even encourages these types of behavior, but it's still a reality in many of our school grounds, classrooms and neighborhoods.

Many of us have some not-so-fond memories of having been bullied as kids, or of even being the bully ourselves. Looking back as adults it may not make sense to have hurt others or, as victims, to have tolerated the wrath of a bully. But things look different when you're a kid—maneuvering for social position, vying for admiration or attention and fitting in with the popular crowd may be all that seems to matter during the school years.

As parents we want to help our children to avoid this seemingly senseless situation, or to at least facilitate their understanding as to why kids pick on others. To get a grip on this it's important to consider the latest research on bullies and their victims, and what the best parental interventions are.

Bullies

Bullies are those who use negative actions (generally physical or verbal aggression) against others (their victims). Most research has focused upon boys rather than girls. The little we know about female bullying is that girl bullies tend to use tactics different than their male counterparts. Girls often employ indirect bullying such as socially isolating their victims by excluding them from the group, teasing or spreading rumors (known as *relational bullying*). Boys tend to use more direct tactics such as hitting, shoving, fighting or aggressive verbal abuse (teasing and taunting).

Children who bully their peers regularly tend to be impulsive, easily frustrated, lack empathy and have difficulty following rules.

Boy bullies tend to be stronger, larger and more aggressive than their peers. Some research suggests that bullies are also perceived as athletic, handsome, outgoing and socially magnetic. Therefore, the stereotype of the bully as a social outcast may be more myth than reality. Indeed, bullies tend to hang around other aggressive kids, and make up about 10 to 15% of the school-aged population.

Children who intimidate others are likely to hang out with those who bully and feel that they gain their popularity or “coolness” by teasing other students. Bullying thrives in schools where faculty and staff do not address harassment, where there is little policy

against bullying and where there is little supervision of students—especially during lunch, bathroom breaks and recess.

When interviewed, grade school bullies rate themselves as leaders, but they tend to be CEO's of aggressive cliques, those usually not accepted by more model students. They count on intimidation to raise and keep their status within the peer group. Even though bullies may be seen as hurtful to their victims their intimidation often provides a certain social status. Other aggressive kids hang around them for protection and affiliation, and bullies are often rated as some of the most popular and socially connected children, especially in the elementary school years. The myth of the "low self-esteem bully" may be just that—a myth, since aggression, especially in males, often equates with status and popularity.

Therefore, bullies, especially those who assume leadership roles, may be those who use aggression effectively. There's a great deal of competition for social resources during the school day (attention, friends and allies), and effective bullies seem to be those who have learned to use their aggression to maintain their leadership role in the peer group.

Cyber-harassment is another form of bullying behavior that has blossomed due to chat rooms, email and instant messaging. Girls tend to put down others, start rumors and say things that they would not be bold enough to say in person. Guys spread rumors, especially those sexual in nature, or resort to "in your face" threats or sexual suggestions that they wouldn't say face-to-face. The anonymity of the cyber situation seems to decrease social inhibition and promotes aggressive verbal behavior. And, cyber rumors spread like fire as the kids respond online or instantaneously forward messages to entire groups of friends. The message may be totally false, but once the rumor gets out, it tends to take on a life of its own.

What you can do if your child is a bully:

As a parent you can definitely tone down bullying at home by setting clear rules about verbal and physical aggression, and the negative consequences that the child will receive if they step over the line. This is one area of child behavior where, I believe, it is imperative for folks to lay down the law. Bullying and tormenting siblings, friends or animals should never be tolerated in your home and it's up to you to put a stop to it as soon as you see the perpetrator start the tease or the torment to begin. And, it also follows that neither parent should accept being bullied by any of the kids. That's ridiculous behavior, yet I know many moms and more than a few dads who are actually afraid of saying no to their kids or standing up to them. Not only is that intolerable, but it sure isn't doing the kids any good to grow up believing that they can manipulate, torment, or bully adults or peers and get away with it. Yes, it may work in the short run, but the real world will not tolerate that type of behavior and your child will pay dearly.

If your child is a bully at school review with him or her what steps administration may take to handle the behavior. Detention, suspension and expulsion may occur, and even involve law enforcement if necessary. Discuss how you will not be able to protect your

child from the consequences if he or she continues the taunting or fighting, and that school change or a move to a behavior-based classroom or facility may be necessary. Your child may be removed from his buddies and have to begin in a new situation with tighter controls and fewer freedoms. Also, review the privileges your child will lose at home if you get wind of aggressive behavior at school.

Bullying in the neighborhood? If that's the case then your child will need restrictions on his or her movements and privileges. Discuss other ways of getting attention or needs met rather than pushing, shoving or threatening. Is the bullying behavior more of a reflexive habit than a conscious decision on your kid's part? Have a frank discussion about feelings hurt, friendships lost and alternatives to aggressive actions or statements. Perhaps your child is hanging around others who harass at the drop of a hat, or who poke fun and taunt kids who seem vulnerable. If so, then Junior needs a change of scenery and shouldn't be allowed to hang with those buddies, or your daughter needs to move to a crowd more compassionate. Sure the kids will give you flak about "picking their friends", but if they want to hang out with others then the group they choose needs to be more appropriate. If they refuse, then they can just spend time with the folks! Trust me, that won't last long, and new friendships will be made. Also, consider having your harassment-prone youngster becoming involved with a Youth Group, Scouts or volunteer work. Helping others is a great way to raise the bar of compassion and to have the kid better understand other's feelings and perspectives.

And, if you notice that your child is involved in online harassment, remove the internet immediately from his or her access with the exception of research activities that are supervised by an adult. Moving the computer to a more public place in the home will make it difficult for the child to gain access and to continue the cyber bullying.

Victims

Now let's take a look at who these guys are shoving around. Habitual victims (those who seem to be constantly picked on) make up about 18% of the school-aged population. Many of us have been pushed around or verbally berated by another kid while growing up, but there's a select group of kids who seem to be victimized year after year. Victims tend to be smaller, weaker and shyer than their peers. Kids with handicaps (physical, verbal or learning), children who look different (are overweight, have a physical disability or who even are just consistently out-of-fashion) are picked on significantly more often than those who don't stand out.

Victims, especially those who endure teasing or taunts over an extended period of time, tend to develop low self-esteem as well as depression. Statistically victims are the least attractive, socially inappropriate kids and generally are not aggressive in return. However, impulsive victims can overreact, feeding the bully's behavior by giving him just what he wants—attention. This can be seen by the bully as further provocation, and may actually heighten the taunts and teasing especially if the victim reacts in a highly emotional manner.

A significant part of the bullying-victim dynamic is based upon the personality and behavioral style of the child who is being picked upon. Part of this dynamic may be based in the victim's avoidance of "fighting back" and the bully's interpretation of this as passive weakness. Bullies tend to pick upon children who appear to be vulnerable and without a support group to come to their aid.

Possible warning signs that your child is being bullied include coming home from play or school with torn clothing or belongings, taking a long, illogical route when walking to or from school, appearing anxious about school and complaining of headaches or other physical ailments and having few, if any friends, with whom he or she spends time. If you suspect that your child is being harassed, employ some direct questions ("Are there any kids at school who tease you in a mean way?") or indirectly by saying, "Who do you sit with at lunch or on the bus? Who are your special friends this year?").

What you can do if your child is being bullied:

Some children naturally know how to effectively deal with the intimidating nature of a bully. Some get back in the bully's face ("Don't ever push me again!" said in a stern voice), or have an unusually perceptive way of turning the tense situation into a humorous event. Playing along with the bully's teasing while making the taunt seem ridiculous, laughing at oneself and moving the situation on to another topic or giving the perfect "zinger" back at the offender can often throw the bully off-track and into retreat mode. These ingenious kids tend to be naturally charismatic, quick-witted and have a knack for working with people.

However, if your child is not verbally quick on his feet and may stumble when teased or criticized it may be time for some coaching on your part. Role-play some strong, firm comebacks that he can utilize ("Stop picking on me. I don't like it and you may not push me again!" This said in a firm voice may convince the bully that your son is not an easy target).

Also, discuss with your child what physical actions he can take—if tripped, shoved or pushed should he push back a bit to show that he's not going to passively take the abuse? Should he try to call upon some of the other kids playing in the neighborhood or at school to offer safety in numbers—putting the bully on notice that your child has friends who will stand by him in his time of need?

Would knowledge of and expertise in self-defense give him the confidence to better stand his ground? Expertise in the martial arts is an excellent resource for most children, girls as well as boys. Students are taught to handle themselves in a defensive manner, rather than to automatically take the offense. A child who feels competent in thwarting an attack (either by sidestepping a blow or by quickly taking physical control of the situation and then walking away) sends a message to that and future bullies to stay clear. I'm not suggesting that you teach your kid to automatically deal with teasing and harassment by using aggression himself. It's more a matter of giving the perception that he will not run away, back down, or tolerate the bully's abuse. I receive scores of emails from adults

who note that in their own childhood they were bullied and the best solution was to fight back. Let your child know, though, that fighting back carries the risk of detention, suspension or expulsion from school and that legal consequences may also result. Fighting back is a fine line, and may be perceived as appropriate if it was provoked and clearly defensive in nature, or it may be deemed aggressive and the child punished by school administration or the police. Therefore, whenever possible, I would suggest standing firm, distracting with humor, or calling upon the aid of friends as tactics to stop a skirmish and persuade the bully to take his attentions elsewhere.

If your child is a victim of *cyber harassment*, limit the internet to discourage this as an avenue others can use to hurt your child. Discuss with her why she thinks the cyber bullying is occurring and what the perpetrator's motivations may be. Even though she's tempted to fight back via words, let her know that retaliation just gets her in deeper and encourages the threats, rumors and nastiness. Consider alerting the harasser's parents, school or even law enforcement if the situation is out of hand.

Teach your child how to best avoid situations where bullying is likely to happen. They may want to avoid areas of the school where there are not many students or teachers, not be alone in the bathroom or locker room, sit near the front of the bus, not take expensive things or extra money to school, sit with a group of friends at lunch and consider a different route through hallways or walk with friends to classes or home from the bus.

As a Parent

Children frequently don't tell their parents that they are being bullied as they are embarrassed, ashamed or afraid of being viewed as a "tattler". These kids often don't want to go to school or play in the neighborhood in unsupervised situations. If you find that your child is a victim, be supportive and gather information. Don't blame the child who is being bullied, assuming that he or she provoked the harassment. Listen carefully to what your child tells you and learn as much as you can about the tactics being used. Note that you are glad that the child had the courage to tell you about it, check your own emotions and come up with a game plan. This may entail keeping written records of bullying incidents that your child reports to you and then meeting with the school administration. Discourage the administration from calling a joint meeting with your child and the bully—often this is embarrassing and intimidating. The school staff should meet individually with you and your child and develop a plan to help keep him or her safe and comfortable.

A bully in the neighborhood, school yard or classroom should never be tolerated by the adults in charge. It's your responsibility as a parent to approach the offending youngster's parents if it is a neighborhood problem or the administration if it occurs at school. Many school administrators have adopted a low tolerance policy when it comes to either physical or verbal intimidation, and will move quickly to resolve the issue. This may mean speaking with the offending youth, giving a consequence (detention or suspension if repeated), or even a change of schools may be in order for the bullying child. Often administration will offer to change your child's classes to get him or her away from the

taunting, especially if you insist upon it. I've also known children who have changed schools in order to get a fresh start—a radical move, but necessary in some cases.

If the bullying is occurring in your neighborhood, most likely the perpetrator has picked on other kids in addition to yours, and his parents may now be responsive to your concerns, especially if they realize that the aggression could lead to physical or emotional harm. *Parents are ultimately responsible for their child's behavior, and assault is illegal, at any age. Contacting local law enforcement may be necessary if the bullying becomes dangerous in any fashion.* The bully's folks can restrict their child's access to free play in the neighborhood or give him negative consequences when others' complain about his aggression. If they are not receptive to your concerns (which is often the case), you may be able to offer some creative solutions to how, where and when your child can safely play with the other kids, be it at their homes, in your yard, or under adult supervision. Hopefully the bully will, if lonely enough, begin to respond to the ostracism and treat others more civilly.

Bystanders

A bystander is anyone who sees bullying or harassment occurring. This may be a parent, school official, or peer. Teach your children that helping a victim may be one of the best ways to stop harassment in their neighborhood or school. Help can take the form of comforting the victim, becoming that person's friend, or backing up their story if they report it to officials. *Telling is not tattling*, and adults can often be informed in a confidential manner. Study after study reveals that when bystanders take a stand, peer aggression retreats.

The Bottom Line:

- **Don't allow bullying in your own home.** Let's take a look at what you can do to encourage your child to not engage in bullying behavior himself. Bullies tend to come from homes where physical aggression is used by parents to punish their children, folks have a negative attitude toward their kids or they tolerate aggressive behavior between members of the family. So, try using negative consequences for inappropriate kid behavior that are not aggressive or physical in nature (such as time-out or loss of privilege), set limits on how much physical or verbal aggression you'll let the kids engage in (if any, at all), and adopt a supportive, positive attitude toward your children.
- **Teach bully-coping skills.** Encourage your child when confronted by teasing or bullying to throw the aggressor off-track by making a funny comment. For example, tell your daughter that if the perpetrator continues to tease her about her braces to respond with something like "Oh, so you're the new braces monitor, I didn't realize that!" Or, have your son manipulate the bully when being teased about his failed attempts at shooting hoops by saying "Thanks for noticing—I appreciate your interest!" The point is that your child needs to learn to maintain his or her own self-control in these uncomfortable situations and by doing so actually controls the bully-victim relationship. You should role-play various

- responses with your kids until they get good at it, and the process can actually be fun!
- **Consider the martial arts.** This is a great tool for both boys and girls, and leads to confidence in the face of harassment. Remind the child that fighting back may stop the bully, but it can lead to a larger physical confrontation that ends with physical harm. Not only may the kids get hurt, but legal or school consequences can occur. It's a fine line, one that your child will ultimately determine.
 - **Encourage social competence.** Some victimized children may have deficits in social cognition or social competence. If this is your kid try to engage the child at an early age in play groups or play dates, as well as considering preschool activities. As your child matures continue to encourage group activities so that she learns how to enter into a new group of friends and to effectively work a crowd. Some kids need a boost in terms of learning socially appropriate behaviors, how to read and to understand group actions and to start conversations even in an awkward moment. Inclusion in group situations can go a long way in helping your child to feel more comfortable with others.
 - **Help your child to fit in.** Children who are socially aware tend not to be picked upon as much by others. Sure, this is superficial and it shouldn't be that way, but until we succeed at changing how kids view popularity and become more humane with each other I recommend that you expose your children to what's important to kids their age—be it sports, music, movies or fashion. However, if it looks like your kid is not interested in typical gender or age-related activities help him or her to seek out other avenues of interest. Odds are that she'll find a buddy on her softball team or he'll make a friend through Cub Scouts. In addition, you can help initiate and cement friendships by talking with the teachers and finding out which classmates may be good matches for your child. Try to have your child focus on these appropriate kids and encourage her to set up a sleepover, trip to the mall or movies. Often, kids just need a jump-start to a relationship and then it takes on a life of its own. Remember, there's safety in numbers, and your child developing even one good buddy may be all that's needed.
 - **Become aware of the threat of cyber harassment.** If there's any indication that your child is engaged in bullying via the internet, pull the plug. If your son or daughter is being taunted, teased or threatened online print out the material and decide whether you should notify law enforcement, the perpetrator's parents or the school. If you catch on to this form of bullying quickly, limiting your child's use of the internet to school research projects only and ceasing instant messages and email may do the trick.
 - **Be assertive about bullying at school.** If your kid is being bullied at school, contact the administration about the problem. When students do not tolerate bullying (kids report aggressive behavior to school authorities, interrupt bullying behavior or defend victims) the rates of victimization and bullying decline. It's possible that the school administration has been giving "implicit tolerance" to bullying on the belief that students must learn to deal with bullies themselves, or that coping with victimization is a normal part of growing up. It doesn't have to be, though. It's becoming apparent that when teachers, school administrators and the students themselves do not tolerate bullying behavior that the incidence of this

abuse decreases significantly. So, don't be afraid to talk to school personnel about the issue—it could save your child a lot of grief and misery.

- **Teach your child to be a good bystander.** Kids who are sensitive to victims can offer comfort and back up the victim's story when the incident is reported.
- **Putting it together.** Kids who have buddies, know how to be a good friend themselves, are compassionate with others and are taught not to tolerate teasing and bullying tend not to become bullies or victims themselves. Encourage your child to pick friends wisely—perhaps by looking for less popular, but genuinely nice kids who will be true companions even when the going gets tough.