

Is Your Child a Bully?

Parents are usually prepared for the seemingly inevitable day when their child comes home to tell them he or she has been bullied at school. But what do you do if your child *is* the bully? By identifying your child's bullying behavior and the sources of it, you can help correct it. And remember, just because your child can act like a bully doesn't make him or her "bad," he or she just needs to learn new behaviors.

What is bullying behavior? As hard as it may be to think of your child this way, bullying is a form of violence, whether physical or verbal. Bullying is about power, and one child getting power at the expense of hurting, humiliating, or belittling another. A bully will obviously have more control in the conflict than his or her target. Name calling isn't very nice, but it also isn't bullying if the children involved are of an equal status. Fights between equals tend to take place out in the open, whereas bullying is usually done out of sight of teachers and parents.

Different kinds of bullies: Bullies come from different backgrounds and are motivated by different things. Bullies often have overblown self confidence or an inflated sense of self worth that is expressed through aggression. Some bullies, however, struggle with clinical depression. These are a few examples of what might be making a child exhibiting bullying behavior tick:

- **Dominating bullies** have a need to control and feel they need power to have their needs met. They may come from a family where rules are very rigid and may be emulating their parents' control.
- **Anxious bullies** are ruled by fear. They tend to have low self-esteem and take part in bullying rather than initiating it. They may have friends that are encouraging the bullying behavior or feel they need to support another bully to protect themselves from being bullied.
- **Bully victims** have been bullied and try to make up for it by bullying others.

How do I know if my child is a bully? Not every child with a predilection for bossiness or a tendency to fight with his or her siblings is a bully. But before you get a phone call from the teacher or another parent, keep an eye out for signs that your child may be bullying others:

- Exhibit aggressive behavior (even as a young child)
- Believe aggression is an acceptable way to resolve conflicts
- Show aggression as part of a general rule-breaking stance
- Abuse others physically or verbally
- Have a need to dominate others
- Manipulate the relationships of to be mean
- Get into fights and blame others for starting them
- Be quick to interpret accidents and other neutral events as deliberate acts of hostility
- Feel no anxiety or loneliness
- Have two or three friends who are also aggressive

- Hang out with increasingly younger children
- Generally believe they are well liked by other children

Why is my child bullying others? In order to change your child's behavior, you need to understand the root of it. While it could be a matter of your child having problems at school, he or she could be acting out because of something happening at home:

- Difficulties between parents, such as separation, divorce, or remarriage
- Adjusting to a new family situation, such as a new sibling, moving to a new community, or the death of a family member or pet
- Spending less time with a parent who may be working long hours
- A family member moving far away
- Less face-to-face time with family and friends because of an emphasis on technology
- Influence of violent television shows, movies, or video games
- Finding less time to be a kid

Your child's behavior also brings up the uncomfortable question of what behavior they see at home. You may need to examine your own behavior to see what examples you're setting for your child:

- Do you actively discuss with your child what's happening in his or her life and offer positive feedback?
- Do you spend unstructured time with your child (no TV or movies) when he or she would have a chance to tell you about him or herself?
- Do you model empathetic behavior?
- Do others consider you confrontational or aggressive?
- Do you encourage your child to stand up for him or herself by hitting back or being aggressive?
- How do you react when someone talks about your child's behavior?
- Do you feel the school should deal with bullying without involving you?
- In what ways are the discipline techniques you use effective or ineffective?

What can I do? It is important that you hold your child accountable for his or her behavior; make sure aggressive behaviors are identified as such. Children who bully should face consequences, but should still be treated with respect. Don't refer to your child a "bully," the label might make him or her more inclined to play the part if he or she thinks it's expected. Here are some active steps you can take to get your child back on the right track:

- Teach your child to deal with frustration and anger in non-aggressive ways. Playing board games with the family is a good opportunity to learn acceptable behaviors.
- Think about your interaction with your child. Listen actively and ask questions about what's happening in his or her life. Try to focus on your child in a positive way more often and be encouraging when he or she has shown positive behavior towards another child.

- Help your child to understand empathy. Ask questions about how he or she thinks a character on TV might feel in a given situation. Model an awareness of how others may be feeling and your reactions to their emotions.
- Teach your child conflict resolution skills. Talking about problems will reduce aggressive behavior, and drive home that your child will be held accountable for his or her actions.
- Pay attention to your own behavior and family interactions; you may need to make some changes to set a better example for your child to follow.

- Teach your child the difference between being assertive and being aggressive: it's okay to stand up for yourself but it isn't okay to use threats or violence.
- Look into mentoring programs. Your child may benefit from positive attention and foster some of his or her interests. The activity should be interactive so the child and mentor have time to talk and learn about each other.
- Consult with teachers, principals, or guidance counselors. Discuss appropriate consequences for bullying that takes place during school and possible activities to help break the cycle (i.e. tutoring younger children for a rewarding experience; writing a contract about acceptable future behavior for child, parents, teachers, and principal to sign; writing a report on why bullying is wrong).

If all else fails, don't be afraid to get outside help.