

BULLYING: THE SILENT STRUGGLE

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Though previously seen as a “natural” part of schoolyard struggles, a recent wave of high-profile, extreme cases of bullying have brought its damaging effects on a child’s self-esteem and social development to light. Whether your children are leaders or followers, confident or socially awkward, they no doubt witness, lead or experience bullying first hand. By being more informed and aware, you’ll be able to spot and support a bullied child, and learn to deal with children that show aggressive, bullying behavior.

Ask the Right Questions

Talking to your children goes beyond asking, “How was your day?” This rarely gives you a true picture of your child’s social life. Instead, *the Canadian Medical Association Journal* suggest that you ask your child specific questions such as:

Who do you usually play with at recess? Do you play alone or with other children?

- At school are you ever teased?
- What things do other kids tease you about?
- How long have they been teasing you?
- Did you tell the teacher when it happened?
- Are other children being teased?

Signs of Bullying

Even if your child doesn’t admit to being bullied, many signs may point to bullying. These include:

- Avoiding or refusing to go to school
- Missing money, personal items or torn clothing
- Constant but vague complaints of sickness
- Changes in eating habits, sleep patterns, school work/grades and grooming habits
- Mood swings
- Difficulty making friends
- Lower interest in daily activities like outdoor play.

Stay in the know by keeping the lines of communication open. Encourage your child to speak up if he/she or another kid is being bullied and explain that reporting the problem is not tattling. Most importantly, remember to listen carefully and talk openly with your child about daily successes, failures and everything in between.

What To Do If Your Child Is Being Bullied

1. **Don't lose your cool!** One of the worst ways to respond is to let your anger bubble over. Do your part to end the cycle of aggression by being calm and reasonable.
2. **Don't brush off the claim.** Assure your child that telling you was a smart choice. Be understanding and explain that you'll work with the teacher to make sure that the bullying doesn't happen again.
3. Gather as much details as you can about the incident from your child before jumping to any conclusions.
4. **Get in touch with your child's teacher, principal** and/or guidance counselor and alert them to the situation.
5. **Consider contacting the bully's parents.** Calmly explain the situation. Keep in mind that they might feel defensive at first, especially since they may not know about the situation. They're more likely to appreciate your concern if you are polite and non-threatening.
6. **Role-play responses,** especially if your child is verbally bullied. Act out situations and demonstrate responses such as ignoring the bully or questioning why the bully is saying nasty things – that might throw the bully for a loop and stop the aggressiveness.
7. **Champion the introduction of bullying awareness and prevention programs** in your child's school. Organize a parents group and approach the school board with your ideas. A good place to start is the *Canadian Safe School Network* at www.cssn.org/.

My Baby A Bully?

A suggestion that your child is a bully are likely to make you feel defensive. Take a deep breath, step back and ask the accusing parent or teacher to describe the details of the incident clearly and objectively. Listen to what he/she has to say and honestly consider the situation.

For years psychologists and psychiatrists blamed the tendency to bully on low self-esteem. A leading research, however, found the opposite to be true; bullies often have an exaggerated feeling of self-worth.

Keeping this in mind, there are several things you can do if your child is demonstrating bullying behavior:

- Without accusing or blaming; calmly ask you child to explain what happened without getting bogged down in the whys.
- Explain that bullying is unacceptable behavior.
- Praise you child when they deserve it. Give your child positive feedback when they've improved or accomplished something worthy of it. Aggressive kids are often rewarded with attention for the wrong reasons.
- If the bullying continues, or if you're worried about deep-rooted issues, consider consulting counseling.

Through discovering that your child is bullying might not be pleasant, deal with it before it gets out of hand. A swift and honest response on your part will go a long way to getting your child back on social track.