

Is your child being bullied or harassed?

Tips to help you communicate with your child and take action against aggressors

By Steve Breakstone and Michael Dreiblatt

Monosyllabic responses from elementary and middle school students have been plaguing parents since humans began to ask their kids: “So, how was school today, honey?” It’s hard to know when a lack of expression is due to standard adolescent angst or situations that are seriously upsetting your child and, more importantly, when your gut instinct is right on and when you’re making a mountain out of a mole hill.

How do parents differentiate between the average minimally-communicative adolescent and a child who truly has something on his or her mind? Base your conclusions on observation, communication, sensitivity and mindfulness. As you may recall from your own childhood, adolescence is full of hardships, but bullying and social aggression can be quite harmful and it’s often difficult for kids to express these issues to their parents.

If you suspect your child’s reluctance to talk is due to bullying trouble at school, it can be tricky to know when to intervene. It is important that parents avoid jumping to any conclusions, but they should trust their instincts and investigate the situation. This involves observing your child’s dialog, habits and activities. Is your child complaining about feeling isolated or alone at school? Have you noticed that your child’s pricey DVD collection is slowly disappearing? Is your child avoiding an activity that he or she once happily anticipated? These are warning signs that your child is not telling you everything and that he or she might be being bullied or harassed.

Children and adolescents often minimize or downplay bullying situations at school when talking to their parents. It’s common for children to think they will lose their parents’ respect, that the bully may retaliate, or that peers will view them as weak for telling a parent or authoritative figure. However, adult involvement is often necessary to solve the problem efficiently and peacefully.

Parents, if you believe your child is being bullied or harassed:

- **Make it a common occurrence to talk to your child** and show interest in his or her school life. It is easier to get your child to open up and talk with you if you have a history of being positively involved in their lives. However, that’s not to say that because you have been less involved in the past you shouldn’t try to become more involved in the present and future.
- **Tell your child that you suspect something is bothering them.** Ask your child what would make them feel more comfortable talking with you about the thing that is bothering them. It is helpful to ask for and listen to their opinions because this rebuilds some of the power they have lost through the bullying situation.

- **Actively listen to your child** and do so without interrupting. Allow them to talk without worrying that you will interrupt, correct or in some way make them feel as though they are being judged. If something isn't clear to you, it is OK to ask your child for more information, but remember that this is not a time for interrogation, judgment or blame.
- **Ask your child how you can be helpful.** Don't assume your child wants you to rescue them. Conversely, don't assume that they want you to sit back and do nothing. If you're not sure how to help, ask them or do some research. This will also help your child regain their power.
- **Don't promise more than you can deliver.** Children often fear retaliation by the bully and are reluctant to share what is really going on at school, especially with a parent. Sometimes children will try to get a pledge of secrecy from their parents before they will confide in them. This can create a difficult situation for both the parents and child. The parents become trapped between this promise and getting help for their child. Breaking that promise may give the child reason to be less trusting of their parents in the future. Therefore, only promise that you will try to help make the situation better and not worse. Explain that if you feel the situation is serious enough that he or she may be at risk, you will talk to other adults for help. To lessen the blow, promise to tell the child what your plans are before you decide to involve others.
- **Find out what the school policy is concerning bullying,** harassment and other acts of violence and misconduct. Work cooperatively with your child and the school to come to an appropriate resolution. If the school is not responsive, find out what the due process rules are for your school district. Work up the chain of command until there is an appropriate resolution for the bullying incident involving your child.
- **When discussing the situation with school staff, take a low-key approach.** Schedule appointments at a time when it will not draw attention to you, your child or the bullying situation. Your child will greatly appreciate this.
- **Check back with school officials** to make sure the situation has truly been resolved. Sometimes, when bullying situations are first reported, the staff is extremely diligent to correct the situation. But, as with many things, as time goes by staff may become less diligent in monitoring bullying situations and the bullying may start up again.
- **Help your child discover a variety of interests.** Encourage relationships with people who have similar interests and help your child fit in with these new groups by teaching them the social graces that will promote further acceptance.
- **Continue to show your child that you're open and accessible.** Remind them often that they are valued, loved, accepted and heard.

Bullying is a very powerful and potentially dangerous experience. There are many challenges to growing up, but being bullied is not a rite of passage and it should never be taken lightly. By taking measures to build an open and honest relationship with your child, you increase communication and trust, and teach your children about empathy, friendship, and respect, which are the essential tools to prevent and stop bullying.

Steve Breakstone and Michael Dreiblatt are the co-founders of Balance Educational Services, a company that promotes pro-social behavior and bullying solutions through interactive presentations for students, educators and parents. They are also the authors of How to Stop Bullying & Social Aggression: Elementary Grade Lessons and Activities That Teach Empathy, Friendship, and Respect, (Corwin, 2009).