

# **If Your Child is Bullied: What to Do - What Not to Do**

Steve Breakstone, Michael Dreiblatt

## **Bullying:**

When a person or group uses power, whether physical, verbal, social or social, to harass or intimidate someone or a group who has less power.

Bullying happens. That's a fact. On the other hand, accepting bullying as an inevitable part of childhood should not be tolerated. Research has proven that ongoing bullying can lead to anxiety, depression, declining grades, drug use, risky sexual behavior, violence and suicide.

Although there is no quick and easy way to stop bullying, getting your child to confide in you could be the first step in ending the bullying. Following the suggestions below will help your child feel comfortable talking to you, come up with strategies to end the bullying, enhance self-esteem and build resiliency.

## **Working With Your Child**

**Let your child lead the conversation** - Children can often solve their own challenges. Talking will help alleviate unpleasant emotions and make it easier for your child to brainstorm ideas on how to solve the problem.

**Listen & be empathetic** - Be an active listener. Convey empathy by rephrasing the information your child gives you and repeating the information back to your child in your own words. This will indicate that you understand their experience and feelings. For instance:

**Child:** *"I'm really ticked off."*

**Parent:** *"It sounds like you are very upset."*

**Child:** *"Oh, it bugs me when they do that."*

**Parent:** *"That would bother me, too."*

**Listen for the '5 Ws'** -

- ◆ **Who** was doing the bullying? One person or a few? Is the bully(s) someone your child doesn't know, people they hang around with or someone in school? Who else is around when the bullying happens?
- ◆ **What** type of bullying did your child experience? Physical, verbal, relational (a.k.a., social aggression), cyber? Or a combination?
- ◆ **Where** does the bullying happen? In the neighborhood, on the school bus, in school, at the mall, online?
- ◆ **When** does it happen? Does the bullying usually happen at a certain time or is it random? Weekends? Before, after or during school? Was it a one-time incident or is it recurring?
- ◆ **Why** does your child think the bullying is happening?

Your child may be sensitive to being asked a lot of questions at one time, so plan on multiple conversations with more information being shared over the course of several talks.

**Make changes / Build skills** - Together, discuss ideas on how to safely and effectively stop the bullying. Role-play different approaches and responses with your child to stop the bullying without getting into a physical or verbal fight. Also, brainstorm ways to increase friendships and develop physical and social skills that are appreciated by other children.

**Teach emotional expression** - Being bullied can create feelings of anger, frustration, sadness, depression or vengeance. Teach your child how to relieve these feelings without being violent to themselves or others. Ideas may include talking with other adults and trusted friends, writing in a journal, creating art, doing physical activities and self-calming techniques such as deep-breathing.

**Role-play tips:**  
 With your child, role-play using assertive words, tone of voice and appropriate body language to respond to bullying. Vary the role-plays. This will help your child develop many effective responses. Remember: practice, practice, practice.

### **Working with the School**

Bullying can happen anywhere. However, school is a common place for bullying to occur. If the bullying is happening at school, work with your child on solving the issue by including your child's teacher, school counselor or advisor. Your child may be hesitant to let anyone outside the family

know about the bullying or fear that the bullying will get worse if a teacher is involved. Remind your child that continued bullying is not an option and that you will work together to maintain safety in a way that is comfortable for your child.

*When meeting with school staff, follow these suggestions:*

**Be professional** - Bullying is an emotional issue; be aware of using a tone of voice, words and body language which express a calm, professional demeanor. This will encourage a productive conversation and successful outcome. Remember, you and school staff are on the same team.

**Follow the chain of command** - Contact the teacher responsible where your child is having problems or your child's classroom teacher or advisor. Let them know what is going on with your child. Only go up the chain of command if you feel that these staff members are not effectively addressing your child's physical and emotional safety. Generally the chain of command is as follows: teacher, counselor/advisor, dean/assistant principal, principal, assistant superintendent, superintendent, school or district board of education, state board of education.

**Prepare for the meeting** - Present to the teacher relevant information about the bullying incidents and anti-bullying strategies already attempted. Be prepared with ideas on how to resolve the situation. Inform the school ahead of time to request certain staff members attend the meeting.

**Develop a safety plan** - A good safety plan addresses which staff members are responsible for supervising your child, especially in problem areas such as hallways, at recess, and on the bus, and how they should react if your child is bullied. The plan should also state how your child is expected to react if confronted by a bully. Practicing assertiveness skills and role-playing ways to respond to the bully will help build your child's confidence and increase their effectiveness in responding to the bully.

**Involve your child with the plan** - For the plan to work, your child must have 'buy-in.' Make sure your child feels good about the plan and believes the plan has a realistic chance of working. Give your child a day or two to consider the pros and cons and to become comfortable with the plan.

**Evaluate the plan** - To meet, develop and implement a safety plan may take 5-10 school days.

Remember to evaluate the plan's effectiveness in about 3-4 weeks. You know if the plan is working by answering the question, "Is my child safe?"

**Warning: The following may be signs your child is being bullied:**

- ◆ Avoiding school, certain people, or places
- ◆ Increased complaints of being ill
- ◆ Being withdrawn/passive or being overly active and aggressive
- ◆ Missing or broken property
- ◆ Frequent crying or feeling sad
- ◆ Signs of injuries
- ◆ Suddenly receiving lower grades or showing signs of learning problems
- ◆ Major changes in behavior such as sleeping, eating, time alone, treatment of siblings or complaining about school

**Steve Breakstone and Michael Dreiblatt** are the co-founders of Balance Educational Services and authors of the book How to Stop Bullying and Social Aggression – Elementary Grade Lessons and Activities to Teach Empathy, Friendship and Respect (Corwin Press, July 2008).