

What Is Bullying?

Michael's Story

Michael, age ten, is bullied at school nearly every day. Boys punch and kick him on the playground (just out of the sight of teachers). They steal his lunch money and call him names. Michael frequently complains to his parents and the school nurse about stomach pains and headaches. He often stays home from school, but for months he has said nothing about the bullying.

Nakeesha's Story

Nakeesha, age fourteen, is a new student at a middle school. Although she'd had quite a few good friends at her old school, she feels lonely among her new classmates. For reasons she doesn't understand, she is on the "outs" with several popular girls and boys in her class. They roll their eyes and laugh whenever she tries to speak up in class. They exclude her from the lunch table and tape mean notes and drawings of her on her locker. For Nakeesha, the final straw comes when a classmate takes an unflattering picture of her on his cell phone and then sends the picture to other students in their class with the heading "Ugliest girl in school!"

Behind every story about bullying there is a story of pain and fear. Bullying can affect students emotionally and often also physically. The above stories show how cruel students can be.

What is bullying? Dr. Dan Olweus of Norway, a pioneer in the field of bullying prevention, has come up with a definition of bullying:

Bullying is when someone repeatedly and on purpose says or does mean or hurtful things to another person who has a hard time defending himself or herself.

BULLYING CAN TAKE MANY FORMS INCLUDING:

- Verbal bullying such as calling names and verbal harassment
- Leaving another person out of a group
- Physical bullying such as pushing, hitting, or kicking
- Telling lies and spreading false rumors
- Taking away money or other things or damaging personal property
- Threatening or forcing another person to do things they don't want to do
- Racial bullying
- Sexual bullying
- Cyber-bullying (via cell phone or the Internet)

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WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN BULLYING AND PLAYFUL TEASING?

You may wonder if a situation your child is experiencing is bullying or if it is just playful teasing. How can you tell?

Teasing usually involves two or more friends who act together in a way that seems fun to all the people involved. Often times the teasing goes both ways. Teasing does not involve physically hurting others.

Bullying, on the other hand, usually involves two or more children who aren't friends. There is often an imbalance of power. This could be because one child is physically larger or more popular, or because several children are ganging up on a child. Bullying also usually happens more than once. (But don't wait until there have been multiple episodes to stop bullying.) If your child feels that another child's actions are not fun or playful, it is most likely bullying. Teasing can turn into bullying if it is taken too far.

HOW MUCH BULLYING IS THERE IN TODAY'S SCHOOLS?

In a U.S. study of more than 15,000 students in grades 6–10, 17 percent reported having been bullied “sometimes” or more often during the school term, and 8 percent had been bullied at least once a week. Nineteen percent of the students surveyed had bullied others “sometimes” or more often during the term, and 9 percent had bullied other students at least once a week (Nansel, 2001).

Bullying by physical means is more common among boys. Girls often use more subtle forms of bullying, such as leaving people out of groups, spreading rumors, and harming friendships. Nonetheless, nonphysical bullying—by words, in particular—is usually the most common form of bullying among both boys and girls.

WHAT ROLES DO CHILDREN PLAY IN BULLYING SITUATIONS?

A bullying situation is not something that affects only the young person who is bullied or the young people who are doing the bullying. Nearly every child or teen who is involved in or witnesses a bullying situation is affected. In his research, Dr. Dan Olweus has identified the different roles present in a bullying situation. These roles include the child who is bullied, the child or children who are doing the bullying, children who support the bullying, onlookers, and defenders or possible defenders of the child who is being bullied. The goal of a successful bullying prevention effort should be to move more children into the role of defending the child who is being bullied.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO ADDRESS BULLYING?

Every day there are children and teens who are terrified that they will be bullied yet again. Children and teens who are bullied may become depressed and develop low self-esteem. Many of them develop health problems such as stomachaches and headaches. Their schoolwork is likely to suffer. Some bullied young people may have suicidal thoughts and may even end their own lives. The effects on children and youth who are bullied can last far into the future, long after they become adults. It is an obvious human right for every young person to feel safe from bullying.

Young people who bully others have problems too, but typically of a very different nature. Many bullying children and youth tend to do other “antisocial” behaviors such as breaking rules, shoplifting, and harming property. They may start drinking alcohol and smoking at a young age, and may carry a weapon. Bullying children and youth (boys, in particular) are at a greater risk of being involved in crime and substance abuse during young adulthood. These facts make it clear that preventing bullying is important also for the sake of young people who bully others.

Bystanders who witness bullying are affected as well. They often feel afraid of the bullying and feel powerless to change the situation. They may feel guilty for not taking action or they may be drawn into the bullying themselves and feel bad about it afterward.

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HOW CAN YOU KNOW IF YOUR CHILD IS BEING BULLIED?

As a parent, you may suspect your child is being bullied, but are not quite sure. Here are some common signs that a child might be experiencing bullying:

- Comes home with torn, damaged, or missing pieces of clothing, books, or other belongings
- Has unexplained cuts, bruises, and scratches
- Has few, if any, friends with whom he or she spends time
- Seems afraid of going to school, walking to and from school, riding the school bus, or taking part in organized activities with peers (such as clubs)
- Takes a long, “illogical” route when walking to or from school
- Has lost interest in school work or suddenly begins to do poorly in school
- Appears sad, moody, teary, or depressed when he or she comes home
- Complains frequently of headaches, stomachaches, or other physical problems
- Has trouble sleeping or has frequent bad dreams
- Experiences a loss of appetite
- Appears anxious and suffers from low self-esteem

Every child deserves to be free of bullying at school and in the community. If your child is being bullied, you have a legal right to address the issue. Over the last few years, at least thirty states have adopted laws against bullying.

WHAT IS THE BEST WAY TO STOP BULLYING IF YOU SEE IT HAPPENING?

If you see bullying happening in your neighborhood or community, your intervention will help to send the message that bullying is not okay. Here are some simple steps you can take to address a bullying situation:

STEP 1: STOP THE BULLYING.

If you can safely do so, stand between the young people who are doing the bullying and the young person who is being bullied. If you cannot safely do so, you may want to seek the involvement of another adult.

STEP 2: SUPPORT THE YOUNG PERSON WHO HAS BEEN BULLIED IN A WAY THAT ALLOWS HIM OR HER TO REGAIN CONTROL OF HIS OR HER EMOTIONS AND TO “SAVE FACE.”

Be careful in showing too much attention to the young person who was bullied. Too much sympathy (when expressed in public) may be uncomfortable for the child or teen. Don't offer lots of sympathy (words or actions) on the spot—wait until later.

STEP 3: ADDRESS THE YOUNG PEOPLE WHO BULLIED BY NAMING THE BULLYING BEHAVIOR AND EXPLAIN WHY THE BEHAVIOR IS UNACCEPTABLE.

State what you saw/heard; label it bullying. Do not accuse—simply state the facts (“I saw . . .” or “I heard . . .”). Use a matter-of-fact tone to let the young people who bullied know why their behavior is not okay.

STEP 4: EMPOWER BYSTANDERS WITH APPRECIATION OR INFORMATION ABOUT HOW TO ACT IN THE FUTURE.

Praise bystanders for the actions they took to help, even if they were not effective. If they took no helpful action, use a calm, matter-of-fact tone to let them know that you noticed their inaction. If appropriate, suggest something they could do now to help the child who was bullied.

STEP 5: IF THE YOUNG PERSON WHO BULLIED IS YOUR CHILD, IMPOSE LOGICAL, NONVIOLENT CONSEQUENCES. IF HE OR SHE WAS SOMEONE ELSE'S CHILD, CONSIDER TALKING TO HIS OR HER PARENT(S), IF YOU THINK THEY WILL BE OPEN TO DISCUSSING THE ISSUE.

STEP 6: IF POSSIBLE, FOLLOW UP WITH THE BULLIED YOUNG PERSON LATER TO MAKE SURE THE BULLYING HAS STOPPED. FIND OTHER WAYS TO KEEP THIS CHILD OR TEEN SAFE.