

Safety in School: How Can You Tell if Your Child is Being Bullied?

Everyone deserves to feel safe and have fun in school. Unfortunately, many children are bullied at some point during their school days. In fact, you may know of a child who is being bullied. The good news is that you can do something to put a stop to the bullying. Read on to learn more about what you can do.

Children who are bullied often feel helpless and scared. They sometimes blame themselves for what is happening to them. Being bullied can lead to low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety. It also causes some children to do poorly in school.

Bullying has many forms. Here are some examples:

- Verbal taunts, name-calling, racial slurs, and put-downs
- Threats and intimidation
- Physical violence and attacks, including pushing, punching, hitting, or kicking
- Exclusion from the peer group
- Stealing money and possessions

Why do some kids bully?

Bullies pick on others for different reasons. Generally speaking, bullies don't feel good about themselves so they hurt others in order to make themselves feel more powerful. They want attention. Sometimes bullies are people who've been physically, emotionally, or mentally abused themselves. Bullies also can be jealous of the person on whom they're picking. A bully's power can come from physical size, strength, numbers, verbal skills, popularity, or gender.

How can you tell if your child is being bullied?

Here are some warning signs. Your child

- Feels rejected and not liked.
- Feels picked on all the time.
- Doesn't want to go to school, avoid some classes, or skips school.
- Withdraws socially.
- Changes eating or sleeping patterns.
- Takes or attempts to take "protection" to school (such as a stick, knife, or gun).
- Talks about running away or committing suicide.
- Threatens violence to self and others.
- Does poorly in school.
- Constantly loses valuables or "lunch money."
- Shows aggression with siblings.

What can you do about it?

- Let the school know if your child is being bullied.
- Find out what steps they plan on taking.
- Talk to your child's teacher, school counselor, principal, and/or coach and let them know about the problem.
- Maintain open channels of communication with the school until the bullying stops.
- Stay calm when talking with school faculty and personnel.
- Let your child know that he or she can talk to you about any type of bullying that is happening.

How can you help your child cope with and overcome bullying?

- Talk to your child and listen to what he or she has to say. Let your child know it's not his or her fault.
- Remind your child that he or she deserves to be treated with respect and kindness.
- Explain to your child that getting angry and violent won't solve the problem.
- Encourage your child to walk away and ignore the bullying.
- Encourage your child to talk to a teacher, guidance counselor, or school principal.
- Tell your child to surround himself or herself with friends.
- Encourage your child to join clubs and other after school activities.
- Tell your child to avoid being alone at school.
- Explain to your child why certain people bully others.

Do not show your son or daughter that you're upset, sad, or angry with the situation. Your child might think you're disappointed in him or her and may blame himself or herself for what's happening. Be careful not to victimize your child.

During these difficult times, it's important to give your child the love and support he or she needs. Empower the child, and give positive reinforcement so that he or she can rebuild self-esteem and confidence. If necessary, talk to your child's teachers, counselor, nurse, or coach, and ask what they can do to help. Reaching out to school faculty is the best resource. You also may want to see if your local community center or school offers free counseling services for your child.

Resources Are Available 1-800-311-4132

Additional information, self-help tools and other resources are available online at www.MagellanHealth.com/member. Or call us for more information, help and support. Counselors are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week to provide confidential assistance at no cost to you.

How to Talk with Educators at Your Child's School about Bullying: Tips for Parents of Bullied Children

Bullying among children is aggressive behavior that is intentional and involves an imbalance of power and strength. Parents are often reluctant to report to educators that their child is being bullied. Why?

- Parents may be unsure how best to help their child and may be afraid that they will make the situation worse if they report bullying.
- They may be embarrassed that their child is being bullied.
- Sometimes, children ask parents not to report bullying.
- Parents may fear being seen as overprotective.
- They may believe that it is up to their child to stop the bullying.

Children and youth often need help to stop bullying. Parents should never be afraid to call the school to report that their child is being bullied and ask for help to stop the bullying. Students should not have to tolerate bullying at school any more than adults would tolerate similar treatment at work.

The School's Responsibility

All children are entitled to courteous and respectful treatment by students and staff at school. Educators have a duty to ensure that students have a safe learning environment. Fortunately, most educators take their responsibilities to stop bullying very seriously. Several states have passed anti-bullying laws and

require public school to have an anti-bullying program in place. Ask for a copy of your school's policy or check the student handbook to see whether your school has policies that will help resolve the problem.

Working with Your Child's School to Solve the Problem

If your child tells you that he or she has been bullied or if you suspect your child is being bullied, what can you do?

- Keep a written record of all bullying incidents that your child reports to you. Record the names of the children involved, where and when the bullying occurred, and what happened.
- Immediately ask to meet with your child's classroom teacher and explain your concerns in a friendly, non-confrontational way.
- Ask the teacher about his or her observations:
 - Has he or she noticed or suspected bullying?
 - How is your child getting along with others in class?
 - Has he or she noticed that your child is being isolated, excluded from playground or other activities with students?
- Ask the teacher what he or she intends to do to investigate and help to stop the bullying.
- If you are concerned about how your child is coping with the stress of being bullied, ask to speak with your child's guidance counselor or other school-based mental health professional.
- Set up a follow-up appointment with the teacher to discuss progress.
- If there is no improvement after reporting bullying to your child's teacher, speak with the school principal.
- Keep notes from your meetings with teachers and administrators.

What can you expect staff at your child's school to do about bullying?

- School staff should investigate the bullying immediately. After investigating your concerns, they should inform you as to what they plan to do about it.
- School staff should never have a joint meeting with your child and the child who bullied them. This could be very embarrassing and intimidating for your child. They should not refer the children to mediation. Bullying is a form of victimization, not a conflict. It should not be mediated.
- Staff should meet with your child to learn about the bullying that he or she has experienced. They should develop a plan to help keep your child safe, and they should be watchful for any future bullying. Educators should assure your child that they will work hard to see that the bullying stops.
- School personnel should meet with the children who are suspected of taking part in the bullying. They should make it clear to these children that bullying is against school rules and will not be tolerated. If appropriate, they should administer consequences (such as loss of recess privileges) to the children who bullied and notify their parents.
- Educators and parents should be careful not to "blame the victim." Bullying is never the "fault" of the child who is bullied, and he or she shouldn't be made to feel responsible for being bullied. However, if your child is impulsive or lacks social skills, talk with a school counselor. It is possible that some students who are bullying your child are reacting out of annoyance. This doesn't make the bullying right, but it may help explain why your child is being bullied.

- Give the school reasonable time to investigate and hear both sides of the story. Sometimes, a child who bullies will make false allegations about a child as an additional way of bullying them. Educators should not jump to hasty conclusions and assign blame without a thorough assessment of the situation. The entire process should not take longer than a week.
- If bullying continues, write to the school's principal or administrator and include evidence from your notes to back up your complaint. Putting a complaint in writing is important so there is a record of your concern.
- Most administrators and staff are responsive to bullying concerns. However, if your school administrator is unable or unwilling to stop the bullying, write to your school superintendent for assistance.
- Be persistent. You may need to keep speaking out about the bullying that your child experiences.

When should law enforcement become involved?

- Consider involving the police if another child has physically assaulted your child or is seriously threatening him or her with bodily injury.
- If the problem persists or escalates and your school officials are unable to assist, you may want to consult an attorney.
- As the school to keep a written record of all offenses committed against your child in case law enforcement officials need the information for further complaints.

Bully Prevention

- Bullying happens in every school, but with an effective bullying prevention program, bullying can be reduced. If your child is being bullied, chances are that there are other children in the school who are having similar experiences.
- If your school does not have official anti-bullying policies or an active bullying prevention program, work with other parents and your school officials to develop one.

The Scope and Impact of Bullying

What is bullying?

Bullying is aggressive behavior that is intentional and that involves an imbalance of power or strength. Bullying can take many forms, such as hitting, kicking, threatening another, teasing, name-calling, excluding from a group, or sending mean notes or e-mails. Often, children are bullied not just once or twice but over and over (Olweus, 1993; Roland, 1989; Smith & Sharp, 1994).

Verbal bullying is the most common type of bullying experienced by both boys and girls. Boys are more likely to be physically bullied by their peers (Olweus, 1993; Nansel et al., 2001); girls are more likely to report being targets of rumor-spreading and sexual comments (Nansel et al., 2001). Girls are also more likely than boys to bully each other using social exclusion (Olweus, 2002).

How common is bullying?

Approximately 30 percent of all children and youth in grades 6 through 10 have been bullied or have bullied other children "sometimes" or more often within a semester, according to research published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (Nansel et al., 2001).

Effects of Bullying

Bullying can have serious effects on children who are bullied. These children are more likely than their peers to be depressed, lonely, and anxious; have low self-esteem; feel unwell; have more migraine headaches; and think about suicide (see Limber, 2002, for summary).

Children who Bully

Children who bully tend to have average or above average self-esteem. Other characteristics may include:

- Impulsive, hot-headed personalities;
- Lack of empathy;
- Difficulty conforming to rules; and
- Positive attitudes toward violence (Olweus, 1993).

Children who bully are more likely than their peers to

- Get into frequent fights,
- Be injured in a fight,
- Vandalize property,
- Steal property,
- Drink alcohol,
- Smoke,
- Be truant from school,
- Drop out of school, and
- Carry a weapon, (Nansel et al., 2001, 2003; Olweus, 1993).

Research has also shown that:

- Children who bully are more likely to report that they own guns for risky reasons, such as to gain respect or frighten others (Cunningham et al., 2000); and
- Boys who were identified as bullies in middle school were four times as likely as their non-bullying peers to have more than one criminal conviction by age 24 (Olweus, 1993).

What works in bullying prevention?

There are many school-based bullying prevention programs. Although they vary in size and scope, the most promising programs incorporate the following characteristics:

- A focus on creating a school-wide environment, or climate that discourages bullying,
- Surveys of students to assess the nature and extent of bullying behavior and attitudes toward bullying,
- Training to prepare staff to recognize and respond to bullying,
- Development of consistent rules against bullying,
- Review and enhancement of the school's disciplinary code related to bullying behavior,
- Classroom activities to discuss issues related to bullying,
- Integration of bullying prevention themes across the curriculum,
- Individual and group work with children who have been bullied,
- Individual work with children who have bullied their peers,
- Involvement of parents in bullying prevention and intervention activities, and
- Use of teacher or staff groups to increase staff knowledge and motivation related to bullying.

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References

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