

The Bully: Signs and Symptoms

A youngster who is bullying other kids may display one or more of the following behaviors at home*:

- Has a strong need to dominate and subdue others; asserts himself with power and threats to get his own way.
- Intimidates his siblings or kids in the neighborhood.
- Brags about his actual or imagined superiority over other kids.
- Is hot-tempered, easily angered, impulsive, and has low frustration tolerance. Has difficulty conforming to rules and tolerating adversities and delays. If he has the impulsive/hyperactive type of AD/HD, that could explain some of these behaviors; if so, it's important to work with his doctor and teachers to address and manage such behaviors.
- Cheating
- Oppositional, defiant, and aggressive behavior toward adults, including teachers and parents.
- Antisocial or criminal behavior (such as stealing or vandalism), often at a relatively early age. He may hang out with the "wrong crowd."
* Adapted from *Bullying at School*

What can the parents of the bully do?

Parents of bullies should understand that children who aggressively bully peers are at increased risk for engaging in antisocial or criminal behavior in the future. It is therefore important to try to help bullies change their negative attitudes and behavior toward others.

Your Attitude and Actions

- Take the problem seriously. Resist a tendency to deny the problem or to discount the seriousness of it. Avoid denial thinking such as "Boys will be boys," or "Bullying is just a natural part of growing up."
- Listen carefully and check out the facts. Do not believe everything your child tells you. Children who bully are good at manipulating adults and can be very artful at weaving a story that makes them look innocent.
- The school or the victim's parents may be documenting reports of your child's bullying behaviors. It doesn't serve your child well to deny his involvement if there is evidence to the contrary. Check out the dates and the activities and determine if there is a pattern in his bullying behavior.

- Explore the reasons for your child's negative behavior. Get professional help if necessary for your child and/or your family.

Holding the Bully Accountable

- Resist the tendency to blame yourself. Hold your child responsible for his own choices.
- Make it clear to your child that you take bullying seriously, and that you will not tolerate such behavior in the future. Make it clear that you expect all bullying activities to stop immediately.
- The issue of bullying should be monitored for some time through questioning your child and regularly contacting the school to determine if his bullying behavior has stopped.

Helping a Bully Change Behavior

- Develop a clear and simple system of family rules. Offer frequent praise and **reinforcement**. Use non-hostile, negative consequences for violations of rule-following behavior. Consistently enforce the rules. Appropriate consequences for bullying might include the loss of privileges (e.g., television or computer game time).
- Follow through with appropriate consequences for your child's misbehavior. Do not use physical punishment, as doing so will only reinforce your child's mistaken belief that it's acceptable to bully those who are weaker to get what one wants. If both you and the school are consistent in applying negative consequences for bullying, the chances he will change his behavior are considerably increased.
- Spend more time with your child and monitor his activities closely. Find out who his friends are, where they spend their leisure time, and what activities they usually engage in. Is your child in "bad company"? If so, limit his exposure to the negative peer group and provide opportunities to become involved with more pro-social peers.
- Build on your child's talents and strengths, and help him develop **less aggressive** and more empathetic reaction patterns.
- Reward your child for positive, caring actions and for peaceful problem solving.

What can — and should — parents expect the school to do?

Whether your child is a bully, victim, or bystander, you should expect the following from his school:

- School administrators, teachers, and staff should take bullying problems seriously. The school should investigate the situation and let you know what steps they're taking to help stop the bullying.

- Written school policies and rules against bullying, harassment, and intimidation should be in place — and be enforced.
- Teachers and administrators should speak to the bully and his parents. They should also tell him what the consequences will be if he doesn't stop bullying others. If the bullying continues, the school should enforce the pre-determined consequences immediately.
- Teachers and administrators should increase adult supervision in the areas of the school campus where bullying incidents are most likely to occur.
- School personnel should be well-informed about the children who are being victimized by bullies so they can monitor and provide support to the victims as needed. They should also communicate often with the victims' parents to tell them how the situation is being handled at school.

Finally, be aware that bullying prevention programs in schools are often a very effective way to stop bullying.

Factors That Contribute to the Bullying Problem

Family Factors/Child-Rearing Influences

Studies have shown that a number of child-rearing styles have been found to predict whether a child will grow up to be a bully:

- Verbally or physically abusive toward the child
- Verbally or physically abusive parents toward each other
- Failure to set limits for child's behavior
- Use of control and coercion as a method of discipline
- Inconsistent discipline
- Parents exhibiting aggressive behaviors and encouraging the child to assert him/herself in socially unacceptable ways
- Lack of attention and warmth toward the child
- Child feels unloved
- Poor supervision at home
- Overly punitive parents
- Failure of the child to bond with parents
- Victimization by a sibling or other child
- Violence witnessed in the home

Individual Factors

- Temperament – personality styles and interpersonal behaviors
- Physical strength with boys (Not all strong boys are bullies.)
- Difficulties adapting to new situations
- Irregular eating and sleeping habits
- Negative moods, strong moods
- Unpredictable behavior

What Can Parents do if Their Child is Aggressive or Bullies Others?

- Take bullying behaviors seriously.
- Talk to your child and his/her teachers and administrators. (Remember that bullies tend to minimize or deny any wrongdoing.)
- Clarify that this behavior will not be tolerated and discuss the negative impact bullying has on victims. ("It was all in fun" is not acceptable.)
- Give an effective, non-violent consequence, which is proportionate with the behavior. (No corporal punishment).
- Develop and increase empathy skills.
- Encourage appropriate expression of anger.
- Supervise your child's activities, whereabouts, and with whom he or she is associating.
- Maintain open communication with the school in modifying your child's aggressive behavior and monitor your child's progress.
- Praise your child for his/her efforts toward nonviolent and responsible behavior as well as for following family and school rules.
- Make changes in the family and child's viewing of violent shows and video games to help reduce aggressive behavior.
- Prevent your child from seeing violence between family members. (Modeling aggressive behavior at home can contribute to violence by the child against others.)
- Seek help from school psychologist, counselor, social worker, or services in the community for additional support in working with your child.