

## BULLYING: INFORMATION AND RESOURCES FOR PARENTS

Teasing, bullying and name-calling are all common behaviors in childhood. A study in 1999 found roughly 20% of children in elementary and middle school – 5 million children – reported being a victim of teasing or bullying. In response to the shootings at Columbine High School in Colorado and other schools, the US Department of Education conducted a study in 2002 and found that more than two thirds of the shooters had been victims of chronic bullying. While not all bullying and teasing incidents lead to violence, children who are targets of such behaviors frequently experience significant health and emotional problems, which often last a lifetime. Children as young as 5 years have experienced school avoidance and failure, social problems and a whole host of somatic complaints including stomach aches, headaches and chest pains. Problems older children encounter as a result of bullying and teasing include substance abuse (smoking, alcohol, illegal drug use), depression, gang involvement, and poor academic performance.

### Parent’s Role in Prevention

The key to changing the way children interact is for all of the adults in their lives –parents, teachers, coaches, counselors, and others – to work together to change the social climate so that bullying is no longer acceptable. Conversations about respecting others start early, in Kindergarten. Teaching your child good communication and social skills at home will go a long way toward his or her success in school. Similarly, the way a child is disciplined at home will lay the foundation for his or her interaction with other children at school. It is important for parents to set limits for a child’s behavior at home and not allow aggression, ridicule or teasing toward siblings or other family members. Be aware of your behavior toward your child, and what type of environment you foster among siblings. Parents are important role models. The parent who disciplines their child with yelling or hitting is teaching their child to react in that manner with other people. The parent who uses hurtful teasing such as put-downs, name-calling or ridicule with their child or condones it among siblings, sets the tone for that child to respond similarly with their peers. If children are witness to their parents handling disputes with a physical response, or using exclusion or manipulation among friends or family members, or bad-mouthing individuals or groups of people, it will be difficult, if nearly impossible, to hold them to a higher standard.

Teasing seems to be far more acceptable today than in years past. Watch some of the popular sitcoms on television and listen to the put-downs between adults, between family members, and especially among adolescent children. Through watching, children learn that the way to be funny is to be insulting; the way to dominate others is by verbally attacking them. Parents should not ignore their child’s behavior when they observe them being mean, but rather intervene, condemn their behavior and express their disappointment rather than anger.

### Signs My Child Is Being Bullied

While most parents try their best to keep the lines of communication open with their children, it is difficult to learn about everything that is going on in a child’s life. Chances are if your child is being bullied, he or she may be reluctant to tell you about it for fear you may try to intervene. The following warning signs may indicate that your child is being bullied:

- Acts reluctant to go to school
- Complains of feeling sick (head, stomach most common)
- Shows a sudden drop in grades
- Comes home hungry (because lunch has been stolen or destroyed)
- Frequently arrives home with clothing or possessions destroyed or missing
- Experiences nightmares, bedwetting, difficulty sleeping
- Acts afraid of meeting new people, trying new things or exploring new places
- Refuses to leave the house
- Waits to get home to use the bathroom (may have accidents at school)
- Acts nervous when another child approaches
- Shows increased irritability, anger or resentment with no obvious cause
- Talks about feeling lonely
- Has difficulty making friends
- Acts reluctant to defend himself when teased or criticized by others
- Shows a dramatic change in style of dressing
- Has physical marks or bruises (may be inflicted by self or others)

### How Can I Help My Child If He is Being Bullied

When your child complains of being teased or bullied, it is important to try your best to understand the experience from your child’s point of view. Listen, listen, listen! Do not minimize or rationalize the situation, as that is a sure way to shut your child down and guarantee he or she will not come back to talk to you the next time it occurs. Do not overreact, as a parent’s overreaction often results in the child overreacting. Ask your child to describe the teasing, including where it is happening, and who is the teaser. Validate their feelings and convey support, with some gentle reassurance that you know it is painful but that they can handle it. Help your child understand that he or she is not to blame in any way and that the bully is the one with the problem. Stress to them that they cannot control what other children may say, but that they *can* learn to control *their own reactions* to the teasing, and that in doing so, they may reduce the incidence of teasing they experience.

Parents can teach their children some of the strategies listed below, to empower them and reduce their feelings of helplessness (see Freedman, 1999 for additional information). As children use these skills and realize they are effective strategies, their sense of competence and coping skills are strengthened.

- **Self-talk.** Encourage children to think about what they can say to themselves when they are in a teasing situation. A child could say to himself, “Even though I don’t like this teasing, I can handle it.” A child should ask himself, “Is this tease true?” Often it is not. Another important question is, “Whose opinion is more important...the teaser’s or mine?”
- **Ignore.** Displays of anger or tears often invite more teasing; therefore, it is often effective for children to ignore the teaser. Children should try to pretend the teaser is invisible and act as if nothing has happened. If possible, walking away from the teaser is encouraged. Parents can role-play ignoring with their children. It should be noted that ignoring might not be effective in prolonged teasing situations.
- **Visualization.** Many young children respond well to visualizing words “bouncing off” of them. It provides them with the image of not having to accept or believe what is said. Showing how Nerf balls bounce off a person, or to have the child pretend he has a shield around him that helps the teases and bad words bounce off can create the image.
- **Reframing.** Reframing is changing one’s perception about the negative comment; it is turning the teasing into a compliment. For example, a child may tease another about her glasses, “Four eyes, four eyes.” The child being teased could nicely respond, “Thanks for noticing my glasses!” The teaser is usually confused, especially when there is not a reaction of anger or frustration.
- **Agree with the facts.** Agreeing with the facts can be one of the easiest ways to handle an insult or tease. The teaser says, “You have so many freckles.” The teased child responds, “Yes, I have a lot of freckles.”
- **“So?”** The response of “so?” to the teaser conveys an indifference that the tease doesn’t matter. Children find this response simple yet quite effective. This strategy is humorously addressed in Bill Cosby’s book *The Meanest Thing to Say*.
- **Use humor.** Humor shows that little importance is placed on the put-downs or mean remarks. Laughing can often turn a hurtful situation into a funny one.
- **Ask for help.** At times, it is necessary for a child to seek adult assistance or intervention if the teaser is persistent.

The best thing that parents can do to help their child socially is to support their friendships. Welcome their friends to your home, and allow your children to spend time with their peers. Get to know their classmates. Socialize with other families. It is not important that a child be popular. All he or she really needs is one or two good friends. Friendship gives a child what he needs socially to help pull him through the tough times.

### How Can I Help My Child If He Is the Bully

If your child is the teaser or bully, you should take the problem seriously. Children who are aggressive and bullying when they are young are at high risk for social problems later on in life. First off, it is important to find out why they bully. Reasons can vary as to why children act this way, but may include the following:

- They may be part of a group that engages in this behavior, often targeting one or several children.
- They may be unaware of the impact of their actions and the harm that their behavior can cause.
- They may be insensitive to those who are different from them in some significant way.
- They may be experiencing bullying from someone else (parents, siblings, other children) and then passing it on to another child.
- They may be insecure or feel inadequate about something in themselves and then feel compelled to make fun of others as a way of dealing with their own insecurities.
- Their teasing may reflect a persistent pattern of aggressive and controlling behavior.

Parents need to discuss these issues with their child in a nonthreatening manner to learn as much as they can about their child’s motivation for bullying. While occasional bouts of teasing are normal, children who regularly do this to others may experience serious difficulties. Over time, these patterns become ingrained and habitual. Reports from other adults, or your child’s peers, painful as they can be to hear, are a valuable source of information. Teachers can assist by monitoring your child and providing feedback, and redirecting bullying behavior.

Getting a handle on a child’s bullying behavior is not an easy task, and is one that requires a significant amount of time and commitment from parents, teachers, and sometimes, mental health professionals. The following are a few guidelines for how parents can reduce bullying behavior:

- **Supervise your child’s behavior more closely.** Increasing participation in supervised, organized activities such as sports or scouting ensures that an adult will be present to monitor interactions among children. Parents should plan to stay in the vicinity as much as possible when their child is playing with others.
- **Sensitize your child to the feelings of others.** Make sure your child understands that you won’t tolerate behavior that hurts other people. Such intolerance should begin at home, with you. Don’t be shy to point out when your child has hurt your feelings, or those of another family member.
- **Use negative consequences in response to bullying behavior.** A good consequence is removal of time with others. It is a natural reaction of others to a bully, and experienced by the bully as aversive, as most bullies do not want to be alone.
- **Teach communication and negotiation skills.** Bullies are often in the habit of coercing people to do what they want, for lack of a better way. Teach and offer opportunities for practice of communicating their desires and negotiating effectively.
- **Notice and reward appropriate behavior.** Parents and teachers should focus on positive changes, and reward such behaviors with praise, attention and special outings or privileges. Such reinforcements can motivate a child to engage in increased nonbullying behaviors.
- **Don’t be afraid to seek help.** Like many childhood issues, early intervention is the key to prevention. Many mental health professionals offer individual and group counseling to help parents and children address various issues related to bullying behavior, improve communication, and increase a child’s social skills.

### Resources For Parents

Cosby, Bill. (1997). *The meanest thing to say*. New York: Scholastic.

Faber, Adele, and Elaine Mazlish (1998). *Siblings Without Rivalry: How to Help Your Children Live Together So You Can Live Too*. New York: Avon Books.

Freedman, Judy S. (1999). Easing the teasing: How parents can help their kids cope. *Early Childhood*, pp. 1, 4.

Sheras, Peter. (2002). *Your Child: Bully or Victim?* New York: Fireside Press.

#### On-Line Support

[www.bullying.org](http://www.bullying.org)

Information on bullying and services for victims and aggressors.

[www.bullyfree.org](http://www.bullyfree.org)

Information and tips about bullying for parents and children.

[www.bullystoppers.com](http://www.bullystoppers.com)

Help for students being bullied at school. Loads of tips and advice for students and parents.

[www.healthyplace.com](http://www.healthyplace.com)

The nation’s largest mental health website.

[www.kidshelp.org](http://www.kidshelp.org)

Provides referrals to anti-bullying groups and resources in your area.

**Lori Rappaport, Ph.D.** is a Licensed Clinical Psychologist specializing in child and family issues.

Dr. Rappaport has over 30 years of experience working with children and families experiencing general life issues, chronic, and life threatening illness.

Dr. Rappaport has a private practice in Del Mar, CA.

(858) 481-2188.

[www.lorirappaportphd.com](http://www.lorirappaportphd.com)