

Helping Children Understand Bullying (page 1 of 2)

by John Hoffman

Few things are more distressing for parents than to learn that their child is the victim of bullying. It would also be alarming to find out that your son or daughter is the one who is victimizing other children.

Bullying is not just physical abuse. It can also include

- Verbal bullying where children say or write mean things about others
- Social bullying, which includes leaving someone out on purpose, telling peers not to be friends with a particular child, spreading rumours, or intentionally embarrassing somebody in public

Verbal and social bullying can be done in the form of cyberbullying where children are harassed, called names, threatened, or have false rumours spread about them on the internet often via social media, or by texting.

Most children do not become involved in the classic bully/victim situations we often hear about. But most children do observe bullying in the schoolyard or in the community. And many children—including those from “nice” families—engage in or experience some level of bullying behaviour. It is important to address all bullying behaviour when we observe it. But the kind of bullying that we need to be most concerned about, the type that causes the most damage, is bullying that involves a persistent pattern where one child or group of children is the persistent target of other children.

How can parents help?

First, we need to tell our children that victimizing other children is never acceptable. It is even more important that children do not see their parents using bullying tactics with other people, especially with the children themselves. If children live with bullying, they are likely to become either bullies or victims who are unable to respond to being bullied.

Second, children need to understand that if they are ever the target of persistent bullying or aware of someone else being bullied, they should tell an adult—one of their parents, a teacher at school, a Cub or Brownie leader, camp counsellor, or whatever the case may be. Although some anti-bullying programs teach children strategies for standing up to bullies or intervening as bystanders to defend children being bullied or to stop bullying incidents, it’s actually very hard for children to deal with bullying without adult help.

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Persistent bullying is often hidden. Children often find it hard to admit that they are the victims of bullying. There seems to be an unwritten code among children to “not tell on people,” and to not appear to be weak or unable to handle your own problems. Children may also fear reprisals if they tell on a bully.

Handling bullying requires parents to be sensitive, connected, and knowledgeable about their children’s friends, school, and social experiences.

One of the most important anti-bullying assets you have to work with is a close parent–child relationship. This gives children a model for good relationships, increases your chances of detecting hidden bullying, and makes it more likely that your child will come to you for help when he or she has a problem.

Lastly, remember that dealing with bullying can be very difficult. If you need outside help from a teacher, school principal, mental health professional, or even the police, don’t hesitate to ask for that help.