

Bullying – Common Questions and Answers from Kidpower

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1. What is bullying?

The most common definition of bullying is “a repeated oppression, psychological or physical, of a less powerful person by a more powerful person or group of persons.” Bullying is different from aggression between people of equal power. However, someone can have less power than others for many reasons – being shy, being different, lacking confidence, having problems at home, or lacking physical strength.

Bullying takes many different forms including physical threats or violence; name-calling and teasing; ostracism; and social attacks on someone’s reputation. People can bully others directly, in person; indirectly, such as by gossiping or ‘badmouthing’ by voice to others; or through any form of communication technology including talking on the phone, writing, texting, emailing, and recording. Bullying behavior occurs in schools, sports, youth groups, work places, social groups, senior centers, and online activities. It can occur anywhere people gather, either in the real world or the virtual world. Bullying takes place between people of all ages and walks of life. *Young people who are being bullied are especially likely to feel trapped and alone because they usually don’t have a choice about where they live, go to school, or play.*

2. What is the difference between bullying and normal conflict between peers?

Conflict is a normal part of most relationships because people have different perspectives and priorities. While kids need adult supervision so that they learn how to deal with conflict constructively, most upsetting behavior between people is NOT bullying. People can also be hurtful to each other because of thoughtlessness, annoyance, poor boundaries, and experimenting with negative uses of their power without realizing the impact.

The good news is that the social-emotional skills that can prevent and stop most bullying and harassment are also important in building healthy relationships. Learning how to take charge of their own emotional and physical safety, how to act safely and respectfully towards others even if they feel frustrated or upset, how to set boundaries and respect the boundaries of others, and how to advocate effectively to help others empowers most people and gives them tools to better manage future conflicts and relationship issues. *The bottom line is that people have the right to be treated with respect and the responsibility to act respectfully towards others.*

3. How do I talk with the young people in my life about bullying?

Children and teens need consistent, repeated messages from their parents, teachers, principals, and other caring adults that, “We want you to be safe. Being safe means not being afraid that someone will try to harm you. Your job is to speak up if someone is saying or doing something that is harmful to you – and to get help from the adults in charge if that doesn’t work. We also expect you to behave safely and respectfully towards others. This means staying in charge of what you say and do so that you are not being harmful or scary, even if someone

really annoys or upsets you. If you have trouble at school or anywhere else, I want you to tell me.”

Build understanding by asking young people to tell you what bullying is and if, when, and how they have seen it happen. Discuss characters in books or movies who bully, witness bullying or are bullied. *Periodically ask, “Is there anything you’ve been wondering or worrying about that you haven’t told me?”*

4. What should children and teens do if someone tries to bully them?

Give young people opportunities to practice being powerful, respectful, and persistent when using these skills:

- Using their awareness to notice a problem situation and move out of reach.
- Telling someone to stop.
- Asking to join the game or conversation in a friendly, confident way.
- Leaving and finding someone else to play with.
- Interrupting busy adults and being persistent in asking for help with a safety problem.

Make sure that children know that most teachers, yard duty supervisors, and other school staff want them to be safe at school and will listen if they understand the problem.

5. What should children and teens do if they see another kid being bullied?

If young people witness bullying, their wisest choices are going to depend on the situation - *they can speak up, reach out, and/or leave to get help*. Suppose the person doing the bullying is being unkind by leaving another kid out or by calling names. Give kids practice *speaking up* while staying polite and confident with statements like: “Stop! That seems like a hurtful thing to say.” “Wait! The rule here is that everybody gets to play!” “Hi! What’s going on?” “Hey! That’s not cool!” Show how to persist respectfully if someone reacts negatively.

If kids don’t feel safe or able to speak up, their wisest choice is usually to *leave and get help*. Suppose someone is being threatening or physically unsafe by hitting, kicking, tripping, or shoving. Give kids practice in how to leave right away and interrupt a busy adult to get help. Encourage kids to *reach out* to someone who has been bullied by offering support, giving an invitation to join an activity, or sitting together.

6. What should I do if I am worried that my child is being bullied?

A child who is being bullied is likely to be struggling with loneliness, misery, and despair. Pay attention to warning signals such as your child suddenly not wanting to go to school, acting depressed, or sounding upset about relationships with friends.

Make SURE your child knows that you care and want to help, no matter how busy you are, no matter what mistakes your child might have made, no matter who might be offended, no matter WHAT. If bullying happens in front of you, intervene even if your child says that he or she doesn’t mind. If the bullying is happening in places when you are not there such as school, insist that the adults in charge take effective action. Most schools are doing a tremendous job with limited resources and truly care about their students. Your job is to advocate for your child in a way that seeks solutions rather than blame.

If the problem does not get better, consider changing schools or activities. Find positive social groups for your child to be part of. Coach your child to practice the safety skills mentioned above and to apply them to the specific problem. If your child continues to struggle, get professional help.

See [Bullying in Schools: Seven Solutions for Parents](#).

7. What if my child is doing the bullying?

First, take a breath! *Stay calm no matter how you feel inside.* You will be more successful in dealing with the problem and your child will be more likely to give you accurate information if you sound caring rather than upset or anxious. If your child tells you, thank your child for letting you know. If you've noticed something that your child has not mentioned, bring up the subject in a matter-of-fact way.

Pushing boundaries and experimenting with negative uses of their power is normal for some young people. With adult guidance, they can learn to redirect this behavior and become positive leaders. Kids who bully need to know that unkind, hurtful behavior is against the rules and to face consistent, age-appropriate consequences. Rather than lecturing, use practice as a management tool to address unsafe, disrespectful behavior.

Look for the reasons underneath the bullying behavior and practice skills that can help young people deal with these issues in a safer way. *Remember that in a stressful moment, people of any age are more likely to do what they've practiced than what they've been told.* Dealing with the disappointment of not getting what you want, having to wait your turn, feeling upset by what someone else said or did, understanding the other person's point of view, and calming down instead of exploding in anger are all skills that can be learned and practiced until they become habits.

Bullying can cause big problems and can also create a tremendous opportunity to grow. With better skills and strong support, everyone involved can learn what to do, as well as what to not do.