

Bullying

Whether as direct as a punch or as subtle as a smirk, bullying is a serious problem in American schools, where one in seven children is either a bully or has been victimized by one. Bullying can leave permanent physical and emotional injuries.

Parents should be aware of these facts about bullying:

Know what bullying looks like. Most bullying is verbal, not physical, like mocking, name-calling, and spreading hurtful rumors.

Bullies enjoy bullying. Don't feel sorry for children who bully because they are "sad on the inside." New research shows that they enjoy the power of bullying and making other people suffer. Far from regretting their acts, they often rationalize them by saying the victims provoked them in some way.

Children "go along to get along." Victims of bullies are often avoided and rarely defended by their classmates because they don't want to chance becoming the bully's next victim.

Victims keep mum. Children who are bullied usually suffer in silence because they feel that nothing can be done to help them. Some become isolated and depressed, and may even resort to violence themselves or others. Schools are aware of bullying and are always looking for ways to reduce or eliminate it. There are ways for parents to help as well.

Teach your child to:

Be assertive. Every child should be taught how to respond to malicious comments. Ask your child's teacher or principal for suggestions in teaching assertiveness skills to your children.

Be a friend in need. Stress to your children the importance of looking out for their friends and supporting students who are being bullied. Encourage them to notify a responsible adult when they know of a child who is being seriously bullied, either physically or verbally.

Ignore bullies' provocations. Bullies thrive on the results they get by hurting others emotionally or physically. Help your children to understand that they can deprive bullies of satisfaction by not openly reacting to their taunts and insults.

Never be a bully. Make sure that your children are not bullies. If you observe your child being cruel to others, explain to him or her why their actions were wrong. If the behavior continues, it may be necessary to seek counseling.

Have strong self-esteem. Children who feel good about themselves—and show it—are not as likely to become victims of bullies, who prefer easier targets. Build their self-esteem by giving them genuine praise and unconditional love.

Finally, let your children know that you are always available to discuss problems such as bullying with them. Ask if they or their friends are experiencing it at school. Talk to them about how to cope with bullying and the dangers of letting bullies "get away with it." And don't hesitate to alert the school as well.

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