

Bullying:

What you can do about it

**A guide for parents and teachers
of primary level students**

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Developed under agreement with the Minister of Education,
Province of Alberta, Canada.

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Printed in Canada

ISBN: 1-897324-09-X

Bullying— A guide for teachers and parents

What is it and what can you do about it?

A child is in tears. Another student has been following him around, calling him names and threatening him. The aggressor and assorted friends have started bumping into the boy in the hallways. Sometimes he is “accidentally” pushed into a locker; sometimes he is pushed into other students. The victim, and “victim” is the correct term, has tried finding excuses to talk to his teacher about the incidents. He has hidden in the library and gone as far as feigning illness as a coping strategy, but nothing has worked. This student spends so much time anticipating the aggressor’s next move that no mental energy is left for academic work. He told a recess supervisor who then told the person bullying to leave him alone—an action that only escalated the level and frequency of bullying. Tattling made it worse and he has learned he’s on his own. Just thinking about school leaves a sour and heavy feeling in the pit of his stomach.

Just kid stuff, eh? He’s got to learn to deal with adversity, right?

Wrong! Although bullying has always been with us, the reported severity and number of instances of bullying have increased. In addition, we now know how psychologically damaging bullying can be. Some children are experiencing bullying behaviour at a very young age, and the children who are bullying are good at disguising their behaviour as merely misinterpreted actions. Bullying is not only a school problem. It can happen anywhere that children come together—at home, at school or in the community.

Two things distinguish bullying from play:

1. Negative intent

What differentiates bullying from everyday conflict is that the aggressor acts in ways to cause repeated and deliberate hurt, either physical, social or psychological.

2. Power differences

In bullying situations, there is an imbalance of power that may be related to physical stature, peer position or personality traits. Some children are more timid and passive than others, and thus, easier to bully. One thing is clear in such situations—one child acts as the aggressor and the other child, the victim, does not have the skills needed to cope with this aggression.

Why should I take bullying seriously?

Potential outcomes of bullying

Victims

1. Learning problems

Extensive or significant stress caused by bullying can destroy brain neurons that are needed for long-term memory storage and retrieval. In turn, damaged neurons negatively affect learning.

A child must feel safe in order to learn. A person cannot reason, apply logic or understand complex concepts when feeling threatened. Brain researchers have found that fear can have a negative influence on an individual's ability to pay attention, which in turn affects that person's ability to learn.

2. Life issues

- Children who are bullied experience increased absence from school, which in turn negatively affects academic performance.
- Children who are bullied are at risk for high levels of depression and diminished self-esteem.
- Children who are bullied run an increased probability that their children will be victims of bullying behaviour.
- Children who are bullied run a greater risk of engaging in bullying behaviours.

Bullies

1. Learning problems

People who bully are more likely to drop out of school. Some children who bully are popular in the early grades but become less well liked by their peers as they grow older because they haven't learned positive ways to relate to others.

2. Life issues

Research indicates that the futures of people who engage in bullying are likely to be characterized by weak, fragmented relationships and dead-end jobs.

People who bully are more likely to have children who will also bully.

3. Justice issues

People who bully are four times more likely to be involved in criminal offences as young adults or adults.

Check it out

The following behaviours may indicate that a child is being bullied.

- The child is often absent from school or skips school.
- The child often “loses” belongings or money.
- The child uncharacteristically has difficulty attending school and completing school work.
- The child avoids talking about school or appears unhappy at school.
- The child has unexplained bruising and disheveled clothing.

What are the characteristics of someone who bullies?

The following characteristics may be evident.

A bully

- ☞ likes to be boss all the time;
- ☞ is impatient;
- ☞ doesn't seem to care that he or she has hurt someone;
- ☞ thinks, "I should always get what I want";
- ☞ uses anger and threats to get others to do what he or she wants;
- ☞ is following behaviour modeled in his or her family or by a significant other;
- ☞ has low or high self-esteem.

Please note: Not all bullies demonstrate every characteristic noted here. These characteristics are provided as indicators for consideration if bullying behaviour is noted.

What are the characteristics of someone who is a victim of bullying?

There is no specific type of person who falls victim to a bully. However, there are two typical victim temperaments:

1. Passive victim

The passive victim will not try to stop someone from bullying. The passive victim does not fight back. He or she looks weak.

2. Aggressive victim

The aggressive victim will likely provoke bullying because of his or her teasing or bothersome behaviour.

The aggressive victim will attract people who bully but won't be able to stop them from bullying.

What can I do as a teacher?

Tips for teachers

1. Find out how much bullying is happening in your class or school. You can use anonymous surveys with younger children, class discussions and private meetings after school or at recess to obtain this information. Key information could include the following:
 - Student's gender and grade level
 - Areas at or around school where the student feels "safe," "somewhat safe" and "unsafe"
 - Adult responses when help is requested ("helpful," "somewhat helpful" and "not helpful")
 - Type and frequency of bullying behaviour experienced and/or observed
 - The age and grade level of students who bully
 - ✓ Make discreet inquiries, on an individual level, of students who are reported to bully and the frequency of the alleged incidents.
 - ✓ Consider setting up a buddy system in your class if some students are being bullied or may be at risk of being bullied.
2. Teach your students anti-bullying strategies like those presented in *Toward a Safe and Caring Curriculum—ATA Resources for Integration: ECS to Grade 6*.
3. Establish anti-bullying codes of conduct with your students and carry these codes forward to the larger school community. The single most effective deterrent is adult intervention. In short, bullying behaviours continue unless adults step in. Make the commitment to follow up any complaints of bullying with parents as well as students.
4. Teach students the difference between bullying and normal conflicts, and the difference between tattletales and reports of bullying. When children tattle they are trying to get another child into trouble; when children report bullying they are trying to help themselves or other children be safe.
5. Develop effective responses to bullying situations by using role plays or puppets to demonstrate typical bullying situations that students have observed or experienced in the school or community, and to distinguish between bullying and normal conflict. However, do not let a student

play the role of a bully. Some children enjoy the feelings of power they experience when they play the role of the bully, which could lead them to trying out the role on the playground.

6. Brainstorm with your students about effective ways to get the message across, such as “Stop bugging me.” Discuss or role play actions that make things worse, such as name-calling, teasing or threatening.
7. Model appropriate behaviour and suggest ways to resolve conflicts in a peaceful manner.
8. Tell parents about your school’s bullying prevention programs and the discipline system used in your classroom and school. Provide parents with strategies to use if their child is involved in a bullying incident. Working with parents helps to create and maintain a safe school atmosphere.

To protect the people involved in bullying incidents, take care to ensure that privacy and confidentiality are respected. It may be wise to identify a contact person at the school for parents when bullying is an issue. Speak to the parents of victims and the parents of those bullying separately. Stick to what was said and/or done and use clear and simple language. For example, “Harold has pushed Christine into a locker outside our class on three occasions in the last week and has threatened to punch her on two occasions over the same time period,” is language that explains behaviour accurately and factually.

Do not get drawn into debating motivation or whether bullying incidents were provoked or defensible. Remind the parents of the school’s goal to maintain a safe and caring environment. Review the expectations for student behaviour and the consequences for bullying behaviour. Aggression doesn’t solve problems—it creates them. Teach alternatives and provide strategies for home use that reinforce school practices.

Explain to parents of victims how school personnel will respond to ensure safety and assist in stopping incidents involving bullying. Be prepared with strategies you can use to ensure safety and enhance development of coping strategies. Explain to parents the consequences of bullying within the school. Establish frequent initial communication, in the form of telephone calls or notes, from the teacher to the parents of a bullying victim. If the victim needs to develop assertiveness skills, the teacher could also indicate when the child used assertive behaviours.

What can I do as a parent?

Tips for Parents

1. Look for clues in your home and community that may identify your child as a victim, an aggressor or a witness to bullying incidents.
2. Stay calm—whether your child has been identified as a victim or an aggressor.
3. Ask your child’s teacher what the school is doing to address bullying and what this means for your child.
4. Take action to help your child stop the bullying.

Victims may

- be afraid to go to school;
- change their route to school or ask you to drive them to school;
- complain about being sick in the mornings;
- skip school;
- suddenly get poor grades;
- “lose” belongings or arrive home with damaged belongings;
- “lose” treat money;
- have unexplained bruises or cuts;
- withdraw socially or isolate themselves;
- want to stay with the teacher at recess;
- have nightmares;
- begin to bully others.

Aggressors may

- use verbal or physical aggression or threats to get their way;
- play with other aggressive children;
- have a hard time expressing feelings other than anger;
- have difficulty playing co-operatively;
- get mad when they lose a game;
- react to questioning with anger or avoid the question;
- have difficulty getting along with peers;
- play inappropriately with younger children;
- put down others in conversation.

My child has witnessed bullying. What do I do?

1. Silence encourages bullying

Praise your child for having the courage to tell you about the bullying incident. Encourage your child to tell a responsible adult about what happened. Explain why reporting the incident is important and offer to help your child with this situation. Explain the difference between tattling, which is intended to get another person in trouble, and reporting, which is intended to prevent another child from being hurt.

2. Set a caring example

A warm, calm manner and nonjudgmental responses will set the stage for a discussion about caring. Modeling caring behaviour will serve your child well in the future. Talk to your child about how the victim must feel. Ask your child how it would feel to be bullied. Share your feelings and experiences too.

3. Encourage support

Take this opportunity to talk about the importance of others getting involved. Point out that if enough children stand up against it, or report it, bullying will stop. Discuss safety issues and provide your child with examples as to when a situation is dangerous enough to involve an adult immediately.

4. Practise skills

Practise ways to support someone who is the victim of bullying behaviour.

5. Co-operate with your child's school

Ask how your child could help the situation and what actions are most appropriate to take.

6. Show your good side

Model appropriate behaviour and encourage your child to seek peaceful resolutions to conflict.

My child is a victim of bullying. What do I do?

1. Try to stay calm

Focus on how you can best help your child rather than on any anger you may feel. This will help your child deal with the situation rationally and not feel helpless.

2. Offer comfort

Let your child know you will do all you can to see he or she is safe. Tell your child it's not his or her fault.

3. Work with your child's school

If the bullying is taking place at school, contact the teacher immediately to ensure that the situation is monitored.

Ask for advice about contacting the bullying child's parents.

Ask what the school will do about the situation.

Ask to see the school's policy on bullying.

4. Make safety arrangements for your child

5. Help your child

Assist your child in developing skills and the confidence to use those skills to stay safe. The school, community library or local family services office will be able to help you find the resources you need.

6. Practise effective responses with your child

Recognize and praise the use of appropriate responses when they are used.

7. Affirm your child's courage

Praise your child for telling you that she or he is a victim of bullying and for learning how to deal with bullying behaviour.

8. Communicate with your child and build self-confidence

Let your child express his or her feelings. Let your child know that you believe in his or her ability to work through the problem.

Periodically check with the school to ensure that the problem is resolved.

My child is bullying others.

What do I do?

1. Try to stay calm

Focus on how you can best help your child learn more appropriate behaviours. Model positive control of your anger because this is the best way to teach your child control.

2. Be firm

Set limits and give clear messages that you love him or her but that all bullying must stop.

Give your child appropriate and nonviolent consequences for bullying behaviour.

3. Offer your child help

Let your child know that you will work together to find better ways to solve problems.

4. Find out what's going on

Talk about how bullying affects victims.

Ask your child why he or she is bullying and help your child to find different ways to interact with others.

Check with the teacher about the incident(s) and get as much specific information as possible.

Find out the circumstances under which your child displayed bullying characteristics.

Be careful not to excuse your child's aggressive behaviour. Work to gain an understanding of the skills your child needs to learn to solve problems effectively. You can obtain resources from the school, community library or local family services office.

5. Provide a balanced view

Make sure to spend time affirming the qualities and behaviours you appreciate in your child.

Take care not to become focused solely on what isn't working. It is of paramount importance to affirm and encourage positive behaviours and constructive problem-solving skills.

6. Encourage your child to talk about feelings

Teach your child ways to express feelings that will help build empathy and problem-solving skills.

7. Practise alternatives

Work out different ways to solve problems that do not involve verbal or physical aggression.

Discuss ways to handle situations that have been problems in the past.
Make a plan.

Practise new responses.

8. Seek reconciliation with the other party

Help your child find a way to make it up to the victim(s).

Consider what the victim would want to have happen.

9. Co-operate with the school

Keep in touch with teachers to find out how your child is doing. Ask for help if you need it.

10. Monitor television and video games

Keep an eye on what television programs and video games your child is watching and playing. Media violence has been proven to increase aggression in children.

11. Reflect on your parenting

Examine your parenting strategies, especially strategies used to discipline. Discipline that is either too strict or too lenient can cause serious problems for children.

Remember that you are a powerful role model. Model appropriate behaviour and encourage peaceful resolution to conflicts. Provide concrete solutions related to common conflicts in the home. For example,

- *State the behaviour that is unacceptable*
“It is not right to hit another person because he won’t give you his toy.”
- *Set limits*
“It’s okay to feel disappointed when you don’t get your way—it is *not* okay to hit or hurt another person.”
- *Teach alternatives*
“It’s okay to tell your brother you’re mad because he won’t share his toy. What are two things you can do to solve the problem so that no one’s body or feelings get hurt?”

Resources

Books and Booklets

K. Zarzour. 1994. *Battling the School-Yard Bully: How to Raise an Assertive Child in an Aggressive World*. New York; Today's Parent Book, Harper Perennial.

Alberta Teachers' Association. 2000. *Safe and Caring Schools: Havens for the Mind*.

Books for children

Berenstain, S. and J. 1993. *The Berenstain Bears and the Bully*. New York: Random House.

Berenstain, S. and J. 1987. *The Berenstain Bears and the In-Crowd*. New York: Random House.

Bosch, C. 1988. *Bully on the Bus*. Seattle, Washington: Parenting Press.

Kaufman, G., and L. Raphael. 1990. *Stick Up for Yourself!: Every Kid's Guide to Personal Power and Positive Self-Esteem*. Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing.

Curriculum resources

Alberta Teachers' Association, 1998. Topic 3 Managing Anger and Preventing Bullying, *Toward a Safe and Caring Curriculum—ATA Resources for Integration: Kindergarten to Grade 6*. Edmonton.

Video

King, R. and R. Squire, in association with Toronto Board of Education. *Bullying at School: Strategies for Prevention*. King Squire Films Ltd., Toronto.

Web sites

Alberta Education: ednet.edc.gov.ab.ca/safeschools

The Society for SACSC: www.sacsc.ca.

Tri-faculty Research: www.education.ualberta.ca/educ/research/tri-fac/

www.uncg.edu/edu/ericcass/bullying

www.naeyc.org

www.aap.org/family/parents/resist.htm

Some books and Internet sites may contain sensitive information on abuse. Always preview resources for your children.

