

Child and Teen Bullying: How to Help When Your Kid is Bullied

(by Debbie Pincus, MS LMHC, from empoweringparents.com)

Further suggested reading:

Website: [Get Help Now](http://stopbullying.gov) (from stopbullying.gov)

Article: [How to Teach Children to Deal with Bullying](http://thegospelcoalition.org) (from thegospelcoalition.org)

Article: [Is Your Child Being Bullied? 9 Steps You Can Take as a Parent](http://empoweringparents.com) (from empoweringparents.com)

In spite of all of the debate and awareness around the issue, one out of every four children in our country is still being bullied by other kids at school. What can we do as parents to help our children when they find themselves the target of another kid's cruelty or physical aggression? Debbie Pincus, creator of the Calm Parent AM & PM, gives tips on how you can address the situation effectively (and without over-personalizing it) as a parent.

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Bullying is really just another form of abuse: it's about kids using power to control other kids, sometimes with the intention to cause harm. Being bullied is hurtful and humiliating. It's not an accident or joke—it's a repetitive action that happens to a designated person or group over a period of time. Social networking and cell phones allow kids to be bullied twenty four hours a day, seven days a week, and their humiliation is often widespread and long-lasting. The difference between the bullying that happened during our childhoods and what's going on now? Today's kids can't get away from it.

Related content: [Girl Bullying: What to Do When Your Daughter Is the Victim of "Mean Girls"](http://empoweringparents.com)

Is Your Child Being Bullied? Know the Signs

Most kids aren't going to come home and tell you that they're being bullied—in fact, many won't say anything. Your child might feel ashamed or worried that they are to blame somehow, and they become experts at keeping it all inside. What are the signs you need to know as a parent?

- Reluctance to go to school or to get on the computer.
- Your child's mood changes after looking at their cell phone or going on Facebook.
- Your child may not want to get on the school bus; begs you for rides to school every day.
- Is frequently sick, with headaches and sleeping problems—and often wants to stay home from school.
- You might notice damaged or missing belongings, or that your child keeps losing money or other valuable items.
- Unexplained injuries or bruises.
- Your child doesn't seem to be eating his lunch—he comes home unusually hungry, or his lunch comes back home with him.
- He might be moody, anxious, depressed, or withdrawn.

While exhibiting one or more of these signs might not necessarily mean that your child is being bullied (or cyberbullied), these are important things to pay attention to if you suspect something is going on.

What Should Parents Do?

What can—or should—you do if your child is being bullied? Whether your child tells you outright that he's being bullied at school or you simply suspect it, you need to listen to what he has to say around this subject, take him seriously, and empathize calmly. Support him by assuring him that what's happening is wrong, and let him know he has a legitimate right and a responsibility to put a stop to any kind of harmful behavior that goes on—and that you will get him some help with the problem.

When you find out your child is being bullied, you naturally feel anxious, upset and angry. Your first reaction is not always going to be the most effective way to handle the situation, though, because it's probably coming from emotion and not from a calm, objective place—which is where you want to be when you talk with your child. Here are some good

rules of thumb for parents to follow when dealing with this difficult situation:

Don't over-personalize it: One of the most difficult things to do when your child is being bullied is to stay in your box and avoid over-personalizing what's happening. After all, when our kids are hurting, we often feel the pain as well. Many of us remember being bullied as children ourselves, and so our child's situation drags up feelings of pain, shame and humiliation. But make no mistake, if you're not listening calmly and objectively to your child, you're probably not going to be helpful. You don't want to over-personalize and overreact. Instead, you want to listen well and help them problem solve to find ways to deal with the situation at hand. When you overreact, you're going to overstep your bounds—it's unavoidable.

Don't swoop in immediately and take over: You might feel angry and anxious and want to rush in and fix everything, but that's not going to help your child most in the long-run. If you do this, she will feel powerless not only from the bully but also from you, because she sees you worried, falling apart or charging in. It's really important to calm down so you can listen and make a plan together. Ask, "How can I be most helpful to you?" Don't forget to strategize with your child—this is where the life lesson will come in, because this will enable her to learn how to deal with this situation in the future. (For more ideas on how to strategize with your child and for different conversations you can have with them about how to handle bullying, read [My Child is Being Bullied—What Should I Do?](#))

Don't minimize: Keep in mind that you don't want to *underreact* either, by minimizing the problem or telling your child he's being "too sensitive." This is not a time to leave your kid alone. He needs someone more powerful than the bullies to advocate for him and help him handle the situation.

Don't blame: If your child is being bullied, don't blame her for what's happening. Don't ask, "Well, what are you doing to make the kids pick on you? You must be doing something." There is often no reason for a child to be picked on, other than that they are in the line of sight of another child who wants to taunt or hurt them. There is no justification for bullying. Blaming your child will only make them shut down—or worse, blame themselves for what's happening. Instead, let your child know that it's not

them— anyone can be a target. It's often just a case of wrong place, wrong time, and any kind of difference or vulnerability can do it. The best way to help your child not be a target is to help them practice not reacting from fear or anger. (More on this later.)

Have open conversations: Talk with your child about your own experiences. Really empathize with them and their situation by being authentic with them. It's okay to say, "I feel so sad when I hear what you're going through. I'm here to help you." Do your best to have the kind of relationship where you keep the lines of communication open. Encourage them to talk to other adults in their lives who they might be close to, as well—sometimes an aunt, friend or teacher can give advice and say things that you might not be able to say because you're too close to the problem.

Strategize with Your Child

You can help your child by having problem-solving conversations around bullying, and coming up with strategies together. Here are a few you might suggest to your child:

Teach your child not to react out of fear: Often, kids feel shocked and paralyzed when someone calls them a cruel name or hurts them. If they stand there and take it, get upset and lose control, or start crying, the other kids will have what they want—a reaction. Let your child know that reacting out of fear or anger is going to set them up for more of the same: either way, it's just going to fuel the fire. I think the simplest way to change the dynamic is to make the bully feel uncomfortable with their own behavior. As a general rule, kids should try to avoid hitting or fighting back verbally or physically—this often will only cause the bullying to escalate. Tell your child to say something that's short, simple, and neutral but that doesn't necessarily egg on the other person more, and then leave the scene.

Have some slogans ready—and then walk away: One simple phrase like "Cut it out" or "Stop" or "I've had enough" or "Not funny" can be very effective when your child is being bullied. Encourage them to find a way to say something that feels right to *them*. They don't need to insult the other person back or get reactive to it. Above all, they don't want to get into a

fight with the other child because that's just going to feed it. Walking away—and not engaging with the child who is bullying them—is one of the best ways to defuse this situation.

Ignore the bully: As hard as it is for kids in this situation, tell your child to try to ignore bullying by either pretending they don't hear or by keeping a straight face and not reacting to the taunts. It's often very effective for kids to act as if they are uninterested in the insults and to simply refrain from responding to them. You can practice with your child at home, too, by role playing the situations they face at school. Help them practice not showing anger or fear.

Use the buddy system: Tell your child that there is strength in numbers; when your child is with a friend, it makes it harder to be isolated or targeted by bullies.

Talk to an adult: Encourage your child to go to his school guidance counselor, a teacher, or a school administrator when she is being bullied. It is the duty of school officials to hold anyone who is bullying another student accountable. Explain the difference between “tattling” and “telling.” Tattling is done for the purpose of getting somebody else in trouble, and telling is done because something is going on that's not okay and an adult needs to know. Telling is done to protect oneself and to protect others.

When it's Time to Step in

If things have escalated to a point where you need to step in and take more official action, tell your child you're going to help him and work with him so the situation doesn't become worse. Remind him that it is his right to feel safe at school. Decide on the best way to do that together without overreacting or jumping in too quickly. Listen to your child carefully, hear the whole story, ask him how he sees it, and ask what would be most helpful to him. Kids need to know that someone more powerful than the bully is on their side and can put a stop to the bullying—and often, that someone is you.