

The thought of your own child being bullied can be heartbreaking. The thought that your own child may be bullying others is hard to accept. Fortunately, the world is not divided into only bullies and victims; there are powerful ways that parents can help their children to prevent bullying, or to stop it once they see it. Parents and children working together can improve the quality of children's social world, which not only reduces the risk for an individual child but also helps all children in the community lead happier lives.

Prevention

Concerned parents can take positive steps to reduce the risk of bullying. Even small changes in attitudes and behaviors can have large effects.

Check your assumptions. Many adults hold incorrect assumptions about bullying, so it is important to look openly at your own beliefs. For instance, don't assume that bullying is a normal part of growing up. While some degree of conflict within any group of people is to be expected, intentional infliction of harm on another person should not be considered an inevitable part of childhood. Nor should it be considered part of teaching children what it means to be male (using physical force) or female (gossiping and teasing); Children do not need to victimize others, or be victimized, in order to develop normally.

Watch what you teach. Children learn from you when you least expect it. If you want to convey to your children that picking on others is unacceptable, consider the messages you send if you joke about "those people," or show how much you enjoy watching reality television stars insulting one another. If you try to intimidate a store clerk to get your way, or hear a story about a cheating spouse and declare what colorful action you would have taken if you had been there, you will have a harder time convincing your child that force is an inappropriate way to deal with conflict.

Parents also need to be careful about the reactions they convey about gendered behavior. Children pick up very quickly whether parents approve of what they do. If you have a strong reaction to a certain behavior—for example, deciding that your son is acting in a way you think is too feminine—he may try to act in a stereotypical masculine

way to get your approval. And in our culture, using physical aggression to dominate others is one stereotype of masculinity.

Show what you want to see. If you want to rear children who are positive contributors to their social groups, help them see when you act in such a way. When you are helping someone, for example, explain what you are doing and why it is important. Create opportunities for them to help others as well.

Children may bully because they are not sure how to deal with conflict. Talk about how you've managed difficult situations, and what you've learned about strategies that work and don't work. If you have to negotiate—whether for professional reasons, or just with family members—talk with your children about how compromise can lead to positive outcomes. You might invite your child to give you ideas about how to solve a problem; you may be surprised at how seriously he will take the challenge.

One of the big risk factors in a community is the degree to which people form "cliques," exclude one another from groups, and form exaggerated ideas about what other people are like. You can reduce this risk factor by talking openly with your child. Talk about the ways in which people are different from one another, without judgment. Take a stand on behalf of someone else, and let your child know why you do it.

Teach about the power of bystanders. The voice of one person, expressing disapproval, can stop a bully cold. However, children find it hard to intervene to help a peer without preparation. At the moment of a bullying situation, children often imagine that they are the only ones bothered by what they see, and taking action seems overwhelmingly difficult. In reality, very small statements like "That's not funny" or "Cut it out" can make a big difference, alerting the bully

that she is not gaining the approval she expects, and showing the victim that he is not alone.

To prepare your child to speak up, allow her to rehearse. If you see bullying behavior on TV, talk about what the bystanders did, or could have done, to help. If your child comes home with a story about someone being picked on, ask what she did to help the victim; praise her if she managed to speak up, and brainstorm about what she might do next time if she didn't.

Don't wait. Talk to your child about bullying now. You may make a difference for someone else's child by what you do today. You'll also contribute to a better social environment for your own child, reducing the risk that he will come home at some point in the future to tell you he has been bullied.

Dealing with a Crisis

Prevention is important, but unfortunately not all acts of bullying can be prevented. Below are some ideas about how to handle an active bullying situation.

When your child says she is victimized. The most important thing a parent can do is to show emotional support. Listen to your child with sympathy for her distress. Don't be afraid that acknowledging her feelings will somehow talk her into making a "big deal" out of nothing. To her, it already is a big deal, and validating her feelings reduces the severity of the aftereffects of an attack.

Parents may be tempted to encourage their children to be "tough," in the hope that toughness will reduce the pain that children feel in these difficult situations. They may even want to encourage the child to escalate a physical encounter, for instance, by going back the next day looking for a fight to "stand up" for herself. This is unwise for several reasons, including that it does not reduce the pain of being victimized, it makes the victim into an aggressor who is now eligible for punishment, and it increases the belief that physical force is an acceptable way to deal with conflict.

Similarly, parents should resist the understandable urge to confront the bullying child or that child's parents. If the bullying behavior happened at school (the most common location), notify the school

authorities and allow them to facilitate any necessary meetings. Don't assume that you know what consequences the bully faced; schools may not be able to tell you because of privacy laws. Your goal is to get the behavior to stop, not to exact vengeance on the bullying child.

A child who has experienced sustained bullying over time, or a particularly vicious attack, may show signs of distress that persist, such as depression, low self-esteem, or withdrawal. The psychological effects of bullying can be serious, and if your child seems to be in prolonged distress, it is wise to consult with a mental health professional to assess the kind of assistance that would be most beneficial.

When your child is accused of bullying. If you are told that your child has bullied someone else, your first reaction might be denial. Be careful about the natural tendency to justify behavior—on your part, or on your child's. If you find yourself arguing that another child should not be upset over your child's behavior, labeling the victim (e.g., "crybaby"), or arguing that your child was driven to harming the victim because of the victim's nature, you may be defending behavior that should not be defended.

If your child has harmed someone else, she should apologize and she should face appropriate consequences according to school policies. Along with dealing with the specific incident, however, you will want to assess what drove your child to act this way. Bullying can occur for a number of reasons, including to gain peer approval, to gain material rewards, or to express psychological distress. Although your child may not be able to tell you exactly why she did what she did, discussion with other concerned adults such as school staff may help you understand the root cause. These causes are not meant to be excuses for the past behavior, but rather are a way to help your child find more positive ways to deal with her social world. Over the long term, you can work with your child to develop positive ways to deal with negative emotions and conflicts, which will be of benefit to her for the rest of her life.

The bottom line. Like many aspects of parenting, teaching children to deal with bullying has a great deal to do with examining your own assumptions, explaining and demonstrating your values, and listening carefully to your child's needs. Taking these steps will not only reduce the risk of bullying in your community but also assist your child to develop in a happy and healthy way.

The Alverno College Research Center for Women and Girls takes scholarly research out of the world of academia and into the real world where it can inspire, transform, and support initiatives that improve the lives of women and girls in Wisconsin and beyond. For the complete document *Bullying: A Prevention Toolkit*, with more extensive summaries of current research, resources for further reading, and action items for parents, teachers, and community members, please visit Alverno.edu/research.