

Is Your Child Being Bullied?

By

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Bullying is a serious problem and it is important for parents and adults who work with children to become knowledgeable about and to have the tools to address this issue. Even though bullying has been going on since the beginning of time, research suggests it is becoming more prevalent and the patterns of abuse are becoming more vicious. What exactly is bullying? How does it differ from normal child behaviors? How can parents help their child build resilience skills to bullying and other bad behaviors?

What is bullying? “A person is being bullied when he or she is exposed repeatedly, over time to negative actions on the part of one or more other persons.” (Olweus, 1991) To be labeled “Bullying” it must be:

- Intentional
- Repetitive
- Hurtful
- An imbalance of power

These negative actions can be verbal or non-verbal, physical or non-physical, and direct or indirect in nature. Although typically viewed as a school-based event, bullying can and does occur at home, in the neighborhood, on sports teams and in youth groups. Verbal bullying is the most common form of bullying and the most often ignored and unreported. This form of bullying uses words to harm a person’s physical, moral or mental well-being and becomes a chronic source of pain and hurt for many children. Physical bullying is most often used by boys and includes hitting, pushing, kicking, pinching, restraining, punching, poking, strangling, hair pulling, excessive tickling, biting, stabbing and shooting. A newer form of bullying is **cyber bullying**. No longer can parents count on seeing the tell-tale signs of bullying (such as a bruise or black eye) because bullying has moved into the cyber world as well. Students are using Instant Messaging, e-mail, chat rooms, blogging, texting and sexting to humiliate a peer.

When does most bullying happen? Generally it happens during points of transition for kids during their day, such as on the playground, in hallways between classes, and on the school bus. Bullying is usually not observed by adults. But it is very often observed by other kids and may even be supported by peers. Witnesses hardly ever intervene.

Who are the bullies? Bullies have a strong need to dominate and subdue others and to get their own way. They may be impulsive and easily angered. They may also be defiant and aggressive toward adults, including parents and teachers. They show little empathy toward students who are victimized. If they are boys, they are usually physically stronger than boys their

own age or peer group. Contrary to popular belief most bullies had average or better than average self-esteem. They may even be among the most popular and socially connected children in the classroom.

Who are the victims of bullying? Bullies tend to pick on those who are quiet and sensitive or stand out in some way: they're taller or shorter, they wear braces, they're overweight or have a disability. Children who seek negative attention from their peers also tend to get picked on. They don't "fit in". The friends of bullies may be afraid to step in for fear of being targeted as well. Many bullied children think that adults will not help them and that telling on the bully will only bring more harm.

What are the consequences of bullying? Children who bully tend to become aggressive adults who stand a much higher chance than non-bullies of committing crimes. Victims of bullying may become depressed, withdraw from friends and family, and stop doing well in school, including not wanting to go to school at all. In extreme cases victims may attempt to end their victimization by taking their own lives or the lives of their attackers.

What can adults do? Create a safe environment for children to tell you about being bullied. For example, say, "Sometimes kids pick on other kids or say mean things to them. Does this ever happen to you?" Teach your children to express themselves clearly yet tactfully. Help your child to use "I statements", such as "I am mad about you picking on me. Stop it!" Most of the time bullies are not even told to stop. Encourage children to stay in a crowd. Bullies usually pick on kids who are alone. Notify teachers, school personnel, coaches, or youth leaders whenever an incident happens. Be prepared to be persistent until some action is taken. Connect with your child's school by attending parent teacher conferences, getting to know staff and administrators, and volunteering whenever you can.

By learning more about the issue of bullying, hopefully parents and adults can help reduce existing problems and prevent the development of future problems from happening in their children's lives. For information about a bullying prevention presentation for your school or agency, call the Hardee Extension Office at 863-773-2164. (Reference: "Let's Talk About Bullying", Diana Converse, University of Florida/Hillsborough County Extension Service)