

What Parents Ask: Dealing with Bullies

By Susan Sears Smith, M.A., Early Childhood Educator

Question: This is the second school my 4-year-old child has attended where another child is bullying him. I think it's important that children work out their issues between themselves, but is there a point where an adult should step in?

Answer: Usually adults want children to develop skills to solve their own problems with other children. However it's always the adult's responsibility, when he or she witnesses it, to stop aggression or violence between children. The reason is that hurtful behavior usually escalates and becomes even more painful unless it is stopped right away. Bullying (usually done where adults can not see it) is an aggressive behavior that causes pain and escalates quickly. One way adults can help is to teach children how to deal with it. The method is not obvious at first.

To understand how to respond to bullies, let's learn more about them. According to specialists, there are three types of bullying: physical (hitting, pushing, kicking, etc.), verbal (harmful teasing, insults, put-downs, etc.) and emotional (ignoring, excluding, threatening, humiliating, etc.). All of these behaviors hurt children and are unacceptable.

Why do some children hurt others this way? The bully may not know how to have friendlier interactions with other children or may not know how to ask for what he needs. A bully may also have problems being bullied himself and he feels powerless about it. He may want to act out this frustration (which he does not know how to deal with directly) by bothering another child. This hurt child gets angry at the bully and vents his own feelings at the same time.

Another reason that bullies act out is because they may enjoy the attention they get when they act this way. Some adults give more attention to negative rather than positive behaviors, so the child may be used to it. Children who cry after taunts from a bully are giving the bully negative attention.

What are the consequences for the bully? If this child does not learn the skills he needs, he will continue to have social problems all his life. In addition, if the bully gets what he needs through aggression, others will see that this approach works, and they will try it as well.

How Bullies Operate

Usually the bully looks around for the vulnerable child such as one who lacks the skills to stand up for himself. On the playground, the vulnerable child will often be standing alone, head or eyes cast down, perhaps younger, smaller, or perceived as weaker than the bully. The child will also be standing away from a supervising adult.

The bully will approach the child alone or with a friend or two to begin the aggression. Usually the bullying starts as teasing, but not always. It could be a wayward ball toss

between the bully and friend, with the ball accidentally hitting the vulnerable child somewhere that hurts. It could also be exclusion, ignoring or making threatening comments.

Emotional Impact on the Victim

Bullies make the child they attack feel miserable. Here is what one child said, "When I feel bullied, my tummy ties itself up in knots. It's hard to sleep at night, I feel alone with no one to talk to, and I don't feel like eating anything at all. I feel hurt, I feel frightened, and I feel small." (*I Feel Bullied*, Jen Green).

How Your Child Can Effectively Stop Bullying

If someone is bullying your child, he or she can get the bully to stop. According to the book, *Stick up for Yourself*, (Kaufman, Raphael, and Espeland), here are some tips a parent can give to a child:

- Stand up straight, look the bully in the eye, and say in a calm, firm voice, "Stop it! I don't like that!" (Make sure you role-play this with your child so that she shows consistency in words, tone and body language).
- Stay calm and walk away. Walk towards other children or adults who will support you. Bullies generally don't want to be outnumbered.
- Tell a teacher or parent. There is nothing to be ashamed of. Bullies are usually sneaky and an adult may not have seen what happened.
- Tell a friend who will stand by you.

The authors also include some tips of **what not to do** and why:

- Don't cry if you can help it because the bully will feel she has power over you.
- Don't try to get even. Bullies will get meaner and sneakier and try to hurt more.
- Don't fight because bullies pick on weaker children and you will probably get hurt.
- Don't make threats. Bullies respond with more intense bullying.
- Don't ignore the bullying. Bullies will keep up the bullying until they get a response.
- Don't stay away from school. This makes bullies feel even more powerful.

One more tip: **Teach children how to strike a balance between pleasing others and pleasing themselves.** Be aware of the mixed signals embedded in guidelines frequently given to children: "You need to be nice to others" or "Don't be selfish." Sometimes putting one's own interests first is more important than catering to the needs of others.

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