

# Understanding BULLYING

## **WHY** be concerned about bullying in your child's life?

After many years of research, we have learned that bullying in our schools and in our society is a much more damaging and dangerous experience for children than we ever suspected. Unfortunately, it's much more widespread and is occurring at an earlier age than ever before.

We've also learned that bullying has many serious consequences for the children who are bullied, for the bullies themselves, and for the bystanders who witness it.

## **What exactly is bullying?**

The most widely accepted definition of bullying comes from the U.S. Department of Education. It defines bullying as:

**Any intentional, repeated, hurtful acts, words, or behavior committed by one or more children against another.**

Two important words in this definition are *intentional*, meaning that the bully acted on purpose, and *repeated*, which means there has been more than one incident.

Many definitions also include the idea that an imbalance of power exists between a bully and the bully's victim. In other words, in a bullying situation, one child has a hard time defending him- or herself. Bullying isn't "conflict" and can't be solved by conflict resolution or mediation, because these strategies can send the message that both children are partly right and partly wrong. No one deserves to be bullied, and bullying behavior is never acceptable.

## **Bullying can come in several forms.**

- Physical: causing bodily harm.
- Verbal: using written or spoken words that are cruel or that put someone down.
- Emotional: hurting someone's feelings.
- Sexual: meaning sexually harassing.

## **Bullying can be:**

- **Direct**, such as hitting, teasing or threatening.
- **Indirect**, such as excluding, spreading rumors, Internet harassment, or psychological manipulation.

## **Cyber-bullying**

A form of bullying known as cyber-bullying happens in the online world. This form of bullying is growing rapidly among teenagers. Recent surveys indicate that nearly one of every three online teens have been the target of cyber-bullying. The most recent forms of cyber-bullying include:

- Taking a private email, instant message or text message and forwarding it to others or posting it where many can see it to embarrass the sender.
- Spreading hurtful rumors online about another person.
- Threatening through aggressive emails, instant messages or text messages.
- Posting embarrassing pictures of someone online without his or her permission.

## **How widespread is bullying?**

Reports and estimates vary, because it is hard to agree on exactly what constitutes bullying. However, in the United States it is estimated that:

- A child is bullied every seven minutes.
- There are more than seven million incidents of bullying reported in public schools each year.
- 30 percent of all school-age children report having been the victims of bullying.
- 30 percent of all school children in the US report having bullied someone else.
- 32 percent of children who use the Internet say they have been targets of cyber-bullying behaviors.
- 86 percent of 12-15 year olds have experienced some form of bullying.
- More than 55 percent of all 8-15 year olds think bullying is a bigger problem than drugs, racism and HIV-AIDs in their school.



## **Are there differences in the ways boys and girls bully other children?**

Yes. Researchers report that boys tend to be more physically aggressive, while girls tend to use relationships as weapons by excluding victims from social groups, spreading rumors, or using hurtful words. However, this trend may be changing. There have been several reports of increasing aggression and violence among girls, and at least seven percent of school-age girls are involved in physical fights each year.

## What are the consequences of bullying?

- Child victims of bullying are more likely to suffer from depression than other children.
- Boys and girls who are bullied have a higher risk of suicide than other children. Victims of bullies can show signs similar to those of child abuse, including traumatic stress disorder.
- In some studies, the effects of being bullied have lasted more than five years and have even been carried by victims into adulthood.

## What do we know about child bullies?

A variety of studies over the past 25 years have shown that bullying has serious consequences for the bully as well as the victims. The research shows that bullies:

- Often become antisocial adults.
- Are more likely than the general population to be involved in domestic violence and child abuse later in life.
- Are likely to have children who become bullies.

Bullying is often a sign that serious emotional trouble may lie ahead for the child who bullies. The research shows that bullies:

- Often come from homes where parents are emotionally distant or exhibit bullying behaviors themselves.
- Are more likely than other children to drink and smoke.
- Are more likely to become violent adults.
- Are more likely to commit crimes.

In this way, bullying behavior can be an early warning sign that your child needs help.

## What if I find out my child is bullying other children?

### What should I do?

- Discipline your child. To *discipline* means to teach. In this case, your child should be taught that bullying will not be tolerated. He or she should not be allowed to minimize or excuse the behavior. Bullying behavior is serious behavior, with many legal ramifications. Therefore, your child needs to be taught the serious consequences of his or her behavior.

- Make sure the child accepts responsibility for his or her behavior. Have him or her take ownership by reporting their behavior themselves. If the bullying was anonymous or committed by a group that included your child, make sure your child owns up to his or her role. Expect them to explain that they were responsible for what happened, to the victim, the school and, if necessary, the authorities.
- Insist that your child make amends. Besides accepting consequences, your child should apologize and find a way to take ownership for the damage that he or she has caused. Just apologizing, in the case of bullying, isn't enough. He or she should be required to make a plan to right the wrongs that he or she has committed.
- Get help if you need it. Bullying behavior can and often is an indication that your child is experiencing emotional turmoil that may be beyond your skills as a parent. It may be time to get help from a mental-health professional.
- Create opportunities for your child to do a good deed. One way to help your child is to teach him or her the merits and importance of giving to others. Expect your child to volunteer or to participate in helping a charity, or at the very least, to helping a family member. Expect them to help heal by giving to others rather than hurting others.
- Teach your child to be a good friend. Talk with your child about what it means to be a good friend and how to better relate to people, particularly those who are different or unique.

## What does the LAW say about bullying?

While there is no federal law that addresses bullying behavior specifically, amendments to the Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act require states, districts, and schools to design and implement bullying- and harassment-prevention policies. In addition, many states have passed laws regarding bullying in schools.

Most state laws require local school boards to implement anti-bullying, anti-harassment and anti-sexual harassment policies and procedures. They also require local school boards to adopt a student violence and prevention policy that addresses bullying. In addition, most state and community level policies reinforce a student's right to attend public schools that are safe, secure, and peaceful.

Parent and child advocates have been pushing for tougher laws and have suggested that, ideally, states should:

- Clearly define bullying, cyberbullying and harassment.



- Require strict reporting procedures when bullying incidents happen as well as centralized data collection.
- Require protection for victims, bullies and bystanders from retaliation.
- Protect school personnel who report bullying.
- Require school staff members to have regular training on bullying prevention and intervention.
- Require parental notification of bullying incidents.

#### **Where is bullying most likely to happen?**

Bullying most often occurs in places where and when adult supervision is lowest. In schools, bullying often occurs in bathrooms, playgrounds, lunchrooms and right after school, on the bus and on the school grounds. In communities it can happen anywhere where children and teens aren't supervised, including cyberspace, but it is more likely to occur at school than anywhere else.

Bullying happens just as often in rural schools as it does urban schools, affects affluent children as well as those living in poverty, and affects children of every race and ethnicity.

#### **What are some common myths and misunderstandings about bullying?**

**Myth #1:** *Bullying is a normal part of growing up. It's just "kids being kids."*

**Reality:** This is a very dangerous and sadly, widely accepted myth. Bullying can be devastating and can have lasting effects on the psychological well-being of the children

being bullied, the bystanders, and the bully him/her self. Children who are bullied are more likely to experience mental illness, have academic problems and have lower self-esteem. The act of bullying can indicate that the bully has serious emotional and behavior problems; children who bully others are more likely to commit crimes. No one deserves to be bullied and children who bully others may themselves need serious help.

**Myth #2:** *Children who get bullied are weak and should learn to fight back.*

**Reality:** While bullies often prey on quiet and withdrawn children, being bullied is not a sign of weakness. Bullies often have serious emotional and behavioral problems, and you should never encourage your child to physically engage a bully because the bully's behavior can be dangerous and unpredictable. Instead of telling your child to fight back, you should help them develop a plan to deal with the situation that includes who they can tell when they are bullied, how to minimize contact with the bully, and how to deflect intimidation without making the situation worse. When dealing with a bully, confidence helps promote safety.

**Myth #3:** *Bullies are just kids with low self-esteem. They are just trying to be in charge.*

**Reality:** When the enormity of the bullying problem first came to the attention of school officials, this myth caused a lot of problems. Educators and counselors tried to improve the self-esteem of children who were bullies. It turns out that bullies actually have higher self-esteem than their peers, and well meaning adults were actually making the problem worse. Bullies are kids with problems, but low self-esteem is usually not one of them. Often bullies are among the popular social group of students, have followers, and attract other children to them. This gives them enormous power, which they often use to intimidate their victims.

**Myth #4:** *Children have to learn how to deal with bullying on their own. If parents get involved it just makes it worse.*

**Reality:** Adults are protected by bullying and harassment laws in their workplaces. They don't have to deal with bullying all alone. The same should be true for every child. Parents should be wise and careful about how they help a child who is being bullied, but never, ever should a child have to deal with a bully without support from caring adults.

**Myth #5:** *Bullying just toughens you up.*

**Reality:** Children who experience bullying are often in the same league as all people who suffer harassment, abuse, trauma, and violence. Being a victim doesn't "toughen up" a child; instead it often causes lasting psychological injury and illness.

**Myth #6:** *If you just ignore a bully, he or she will go away.*

**Reality:** Unfortunately, the research does not bear this out. Ignoring a bully often results in increased attention from the bully, who is anxious to get a response from a victim. This appears to be especially true with cyber-bullies who often use their anonymity to stalk and hound their victims.

**Myth #7:** *We should just teach our kids that "sticks and stones can break my bones, but words shall never hurt me."*

**Reality:** Anyone who has ever been seriously bullied knows that words can not only hurt, they can cause a victim to develop low self-esteem, to become depressed and to even consider suicide or violent retaliation. Words hurt.

**Myth #8:** *With all the attention, schools and youth programs have gotten much better at dealing with bullying.*

**Reality:** While it is true that many schools have become more aware that bullying is a problem and have taken steps to reduce it, bullying still goes largely undetected by adults. One recent study indicated that adults intervene in only about four percent of bullying incidents; peers intervened in about 11 percent of the incidents, and in 85 percent of the incidents no one intervened.

**Myth #9:** *Bullying is more likely to happen in big urban schools.*

**Reality:** Bullying occurs equally in rural, suburban and urban schools, but there is some research that indicates that in large urban schools victims are more likely to find friends who can help them fend off a bullying attack. In general, bullying knows no geographic, cultural, or ethnic boundaries.

**Myth #10:** *Kids don't tell adults about bullying.*

**Reality:** If children have caring, concerned adults in their lives who actually take the time to ask them about bullying and who listen to what they say, research has shown that children want to talk about it. Sometimes bystanders feel just as bad as the victims and need to talk about what they have witnessed as much as victims do. Asking and listening are important keys to helping your child become safer around bullies.

### **How would I know if my child is being bullied?**

Among the possible signs that your child might be the victim of a bully:

- Being excluded from parties and class social gatherings and not invited to help organize parties or gatherings themselves.
- Appearing afraid of going to school or walking alone to school.

- Not bringing home friends and not spending times in classmates' homes.
- Frequently staying home with complaints of headaches, stomachaches, or other physical ailments. Nearly 160,000 U.S. children miss school each school day because they are afraid of bullies.
- Lack of a good friend to share computer, phone, and social events with.
- Coming home with missing or damaged backpack, clothing, books or other belongings.
- Losing interest in school or a sudden drop in school work.
- Staying close to adults while being fearful of playing or associating with peers.
- Frequently appearing depressed, lonely, sad, or anxious.
- Frequently being chosen last in activities and teams.
- Not being able to sleep, having bad dreams, and crying during sleep.
- Requesting or stealing extra money.
- Irritability and frequent mood shifts.

However, just because your child is showing one or more of these signs doesn't mean that he or she is being bullied. It does mean that it's time to have a talk with your child.

### **If I think my child is being bullied, what should I do?**

The first thing you should do is have a conversation with your child. Find a comfortable place where he/she feels safe and ask him/her to tell you about what is going on. Show your child that you care for him/her, that you can be trusted with his/her feelings and that you won't judge him/her harshly. Be on your child's side. Say things like:

- "Is everything OK at school? You seem kind of down about things. Do you want to talk?"
- "I'm worried about you. Is there anything you want to talk with me about?"
- "How are things going at school? Do you have friends to hang out with? People you feel comfortable with?"
- "When I was in school there were some mean kids who made things hard sometimes. Have you had to put up with any kids like that?"

One of the most important things you can do is really listen to your child. Bullies often intimidate victims into silence, and it could be very difficult for your child to talk about what is going on. Real listening means that you will:

- *Take whatever time it takes.* This could be one of the most important conversations you have with your child.
- *Turn off the television and other distractions.* Have this conversation in a safe, quiet environment.
- *Try to see the situation from your child's point of view.* Don't assume that you really know how your child feels.
- *Gather information.* After the conversation, write down what you heard. Check with your child to make sure you got it right. Try to better understand your child's world.
- *Be approachable.* Let your child know that you are available to stop everything and talk about bullying whenever he or she needs your help.
- *Be patient.* Older children and teens have a harder time talking about these subjects because it means admitting that they really do need adult help at a time when they are trying to be independent.

### **If I find out my child is being bullied, what then?**

*First and foremost, don't overreact.* Jumping into the middle of a sensitive situation involving your child without having all the facts could have consequences for both you and your child. Most of us have seen the consequences of parents who over-react and try to take on their child's problems.

*If your child has been harmed* or has been physically threatened, call the school and the police.

*Assure your child that you will help him or her find a solution.* It is extremely important that your child knows that you are going to do everything within your power to help them and to empower them to take control of the situation.

*Don't promise anything you can't deliver.* There are limits to what a parent can do. Remember that you probably can't "fix" the situation, but you can help your child develop a plan.

*Learn the facts:* Listen carefully to your child's description of what happened. Ask the following questions and **write down the answers:**

- **Who was involved?** • **What was said and done?**
- **Where did the bullying happen?** • **When did it occur?**
- **Were any adults present?** • **Were there video cameras nearby?**
- **Who were the bystanders?** • **How did your child respond?**

- **How long has this been going on?**
- **Who has been told about the bullying?**

• *Let your child help decide about whether or not to contact school officials.* In some situations, the child might be victimized worse if his parent or caregiver contacts the school. It may be better for your child to talk to a teacher or counselor that he or she trusts than for you to take the responsibility. The more the child feels in control of the situation, the more confident he or she will be.

• *Be supportive.* Besides listening to your child, know that this is going to be a very trying and very delicate time for your child. Take some extra time to help your child feel good about him- or herself. Let them know you believe in them, that you know that together you can get through this rough patch.

• *Encourage your child not to respond with violence.* This is a very real danger. Much of the violence in schools is really caused by children who are retaliating against bullies and other forms of peer pressure. In fact, among 48 incidents of recent school shootings, most of the shooters were responding to having been mercilessly bullied. This is a good time to teach your child to have strong values under pressure and to take control of his or her emotions with your help and guidance.

• *Teach your child to be assertive instead of being passive or aggressive.* The first step in dealing with a bully is to try ignoring them. Bullies often will just move on if they don't get a rise the first time. If the bully persists, however the two responses that often make bullying worse are responses that are passive (being a doormat, crying, hiding, etc.) and responses that are aggressive (fighting back, retaliation, bullying back). In between those two responses lies assertiveness. Assertiveness is giving a clear message to the bully that some behaviors won't be tolerated. It is using your voice and body language to let the bully know that bad behavior is unacceptable.

• *Watch for signs of stress.* Traumatic stress can take many forms. Some of the things to watch in your child include:

- Depression
- Severe changes in appetite
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Prolonged difficulty sleeping
- Alcohol and substance abuse
- Suicidal thoughts
- Self-destructive behavior such as cutting
- Excessive fatigue
- Sudden changes in personality

- *Consider getting outside help for your child.* Bullying can and often does put children at risk for emotional problems. It may be a good idea to have your child see a counselor, a clinical social worker, or a family therapist who can help you and your child deal with the emotional effects of being bullied. Bullying can leave emotional scars; if your child is showing signs of depression, having trouble sleeping, or showing other signs of stress, it may be time to get some help from a mental-health professional. Your school counselor can help with this.
- *Help your child develop a bullying plan.* A bullying plan is like a contract that you and your child develop together that outlines the steps you plan to take together to deal with the situation at hand. It is a good idea to begin this process before your child gets bullied, filling out together the parts of the plan that aren't specific to a particular incident. Please look at the sample "Bullying Plan" in this document. Feel free to copy and use it.

### How would I know if my child is being cyber-bullied?



If your child's computer is not located in a central place in the house, it will be very difficult to know if he or she is being cyber-bullied. Most experts recommend that children should not have computer access from their bedrooms and that their computer use should be monitored. This is also a concern with cell phones, since cyber-bullying also can occur through text and photo messaging.

In general, cyber-bullying causes many of the same emotional responses in children that were listed earlier. In addition your child may be a victim of cyber-bullying if he/she is:

- Upset after being on the computer.
- Upset after reading a text message on a cell phone.
- Clearing the screen when you come into the room.
- Secretive internet activity.
- Spending unusually long hours on the computer or cell phone.
- Avoiding conversations about the computer or Internet.
- Showing the signs of depression and/or stress mentioned above.

### If your child is being cyber-bullied:

- Have your child tell the person to stop immediately, and then cut off all contact with the bully.
- Try to block the bully from accessing your child. Many programs have "blocking" capabilities that will allow you to stop the bully from having access to your child's email and or cell phone.
- Tell your child not to respond to the bully. Don't retaliate or give the bully more fuel. Cut off contact with the bully.
- Find out who the bully is. If he or she is anonymous, contact the service provider that he or she is using and let them know about the problem. If the bully is a child, you may want to contact the child's school or parents.
- Contact school officials. If this is happening in or around school, it is the school's responsibility to assist you in stopping the bullying behavior.
- Document and print any communications from the bully. These may be of use to police and school officials later.
- If the cyber bully is anonymous and threatening your child in any way, contact the police.

### What if my child has witnessed another child being bullied?

Bystanders who witness other children being bullied and do not intervene or try to help the victim in some way are often contributors to the problem. Bullies gain power and attention from an audience. Most bullying happens away from the view of adults, so bystanders can, by acting on the victim's behalf, be very important to stopping a bully.

Explain to your child there are different ways to react to bullying.

Researchers have identified at least four roles that bystanders take:

1. **Assistants** who join in the attacks on the victims either physically, verbally, or electronically.
2. **Reinforcers** who act like an audience and although they don't attack the victim, support the bully's behavior by encouraging him or her.
3. **Outsiders** who are aware of the bullying but do nothing lend silent approval.
4. **Defenders** who try to comfort the victim, take the victim's side, report the bully, or intervene on the victim's behalf.

Let your child know there are no "innocent" bystanders, and that he/she has a choice to make when he/she sees someone getting bullied.

## How does witnessing bullying affect bystanders?

Recent research on children who witness bullying shows that it can have negative effects on bystanders. If your child has witnessed severe bullying episodes, he or she might feel:

- Pressure to participate in the bullying behavior.
- Vulnerable and fearful that they may be the next victim.
- Guilty for not having acted on the victim's behalf.
- Anxious about what to do about the bullying episode.
- Sad and helpless when thinking about the victim.

## What can I do to make my child and my child's school safer from bullying?

- Model good social skills and conflict resolution in your family and in your life. Remember that young eyes are watching you most when you are upset, feel slighted or angry.
- Advocate for safer schools. Talk to teachers and school administrators. Take a look at your school's policies about bullying and bad behavior. Are you comfortable with the current rules? Are they being enforced? Speak up! Offer to help. Serve on a parent committee.
- Work with your school parent/teacher organization to create or locate an age-appropriate anti-bullying program for your entire school. Suggest that teachers, students and parents come to an all school meeting to spur open discussion on the problem and to raise awareness.
- Ask the students. Are there places where they don't feel safe in the school and the neighborhood? Where is supervision needed at school?
- Volunteer. Offer to help your school by giving of your time to monitor a school function or hallway or to ride the bus. Not only will you be helping, you will begin to see the school from the students' perspective.
- Take time to talk to your child and your child's friends, their parents, and your neighbors. Find out what is really going on in your child's circle of friends and in your child's life.

For more information about this or other educational programs from UNH Cooperative Extension, contact your local County Extension Office or visit [www.extension.unh.edu](http://www.extension.unh.edu).

This material was researched and gathered by Malcolm L. Smith, PhD, CFLE, Family Education and Policy Specialist for UNH Cooperative Extension, 215 Pettee Hall, University of New Hampshire, Durham, NH. 03824

This is a general guide only. It does not mean you should ignore the problem. It is your responsibility to help your child feel safe and to help them learn how to deal with the situation. It is different for each child and situation. Please call your local extension office for more information.

- 1.) Should a parent contact the school immediately?  
(This is a decision you and your child should make together.)
- 2.) If not now, then at what point would school officials be contacted? (List all behaviors, words, and actions that you and your child worry about.)
- 3.) Who at school would your child feel comfortable talking to about this?  
(This could be a teacher, counselor, principal, or other school staff.)
- 4.) Who at school would you and your parent/teacher committee be talking with about this?  
(List their names.)
- 5.) What friends or siblings can your child ask for help and support from the bullies and bystanders? (List their names.)
- 6.) What actions would help resolve the problem? (List all actions, including walking and transportation routes, bus ways, and times when the bus can be avoided.)
- 7.) If your child needs help dealing with the problem, how can he/she get help? (List who he/she can contact and how he/she can contact this person.)
- 8.) How can the problem be resolved by using the phone?