

## **Understanding Bullying and What You Can Do**

### **What is bullying?**

Bullying may be understood as any deliberate, hurtful behavior, and typically is repeated.

There is an imbalance of power, whether it be physically or psychologically.

It can be physical, verbal, or indirect behaviors such as intentionally isolating, ignoring, or rumor spreading

### **What's the big deal with teasing anyway?**

Teasing hurts because it carries with it a message that we are unacceptable by those we most want to accept us – our peers. To feel devalued strikes at the very heart of an individual. Young people are especially likely to believe the criticism they hear.

### **What does that mean to a parent or teacher?**

Fortunately, young people will also tend to believe positive encouragement, which calls us as adults to fortify them with our positive perceptions of them. As Judy Freedman says in *Easing the Teasing*, “Kids learn to see themselves as others see them.” When we discover that a young person has been teased by peers, we must notice the immediate need to counter those messages with positive ones. We must assure them that they are important, lovable and that no one has the right to treat them disrespectfully.

### **Be especially concerned about teasing if a young person has a poor self-image.**

Clues that a young person has a poor self-image, according to Judy Freedman are:

- Not being able to pat herself on the back
- Having difficulty accepting and believing compliments
- Being tentative and afraid to take healthy risks
- Having trouble making decisions

I also highly recommend books on self-esteem by Nathaniel Branden, which are available at any major bookstore. Dorothy Corkille-Briggs has written a fabulous book titled, *Your Child's Self-Esteem*

### **What might a young person be teased about?**

Teasing can be about anything and everything. Basically, anything that sticks out can make one a target. Ultimately, no one is safe from criticism. What we can do as adults is notice that if a young person is overweight, has another physical feature such as crooked teeth or is very tall or short, or has a distinctive personality trait, he may be teased for that by his peers. If we are aware of what a young person may likely be teased about we can tactfully approach the issue and make sure he does not start to believe that any teasing means he is less of a person.

### **Some effects of bullying include:**

- Being depressed, lonely, anxious
- Having low self-esteem, which can impact academics, confidence, and a willingness to try new things
- Fearing going to school
- Feeling sick
- Thinking about suicide

### **Possible warning signs that your son or daughter is being bullied:**

- Has unexplained cuts, bruises and scratches
- Has few, if any friends, with whom he or she spends time
- Seems afraid of going to school, walking to and from school, riding the school bus, or taking part in organized activities with peers such as clubs
- Has lost interest in school work or suddenly begins to do poorly in school
- Complains frequently of headaches, stomach aches, or other physical ailments
- Appears anxious and/or suffers from low self-esteem

### **Do children always tell their parents?**

If your child tells you about being bullied, it has taken a lot of courage to do so. Your child needs your help to stop the bullying. Children frequently do not tell their parents because they are embarrassed, ashamed, frightened of the children who are bullying them, or afraid of being seen as a “tattler.”

### **How do we open up communication?**

We also know that young people feel a pressure to *not* tell adults what they experience. It is natural, therefore, that we must cover this issue in order to encourage a young person to report hurtful behavior. Discuss the difference between tattling and telling/reporting. Tattling is not useful because it is only to get someone in trouble and has nothing to do with someone being hurt. Telling/reporting, on the other hand, deals with preventing or discontinuing harmful behavior *and* helping a young person learn better ways of interacting with others. In other words, the issue is not so much to “get someone in trouble” for being mean, but to allow for intervention that helps students learn how to form relationships or at least act in respectful ways—which are essential to success.

Discuss where a young person can go if he or she knows of harassing and hurtful behavior. Having the names and pictures of those people in his or her mind increases the likelihood of utilizing that resource.

### **What do I do if I *suspect* my son or daughter is being bullied?**

Talk with your child and talk with staff at school to learn more.

Approach staff at school with the attitude that we are all on the same team.

Ask your son or daughter questions such as,

“Are there any kids at school who tease in a mean way?”

“Are there any kids at school who tease you in a mean way?”

“Are there any kids at school who you really don't like? Why don't you like them? Do they ever pick on you?”

When talking with staff, ask questions such as,

“Have you noticed or have you ever suspected that my child is bullied by other students?”

“With whom does he/she spend his free time?”

### **What do I do if I'm *certain* my son or daughter is being bullied?**

Check your emotions. A parent's protective instincts stir strong emotions. Although it is difficult, a parent is wise to step back and consider the next steps carefully.

Do not encourage physical retaliation as a solution. Hitting another student is not likely to end the problem, and it could get your child suspended or expelled, which will only lead to other problems. There are better ways to reach a solution.

Sympathize with your child. Tell him/her that intentionally hurtful behavior is wrong and that you are glad he/she had the courage to tell you about it.

Don't accuse him/her of doing something that provoked the bullying

Never tell your child to ignore the bullying. What the child may “hear” is that you are going to ignore it also. If the child were able to ignore it, he or she likely would not have told you about it.

Contact your child's teacher and/or principal.

Keep your emotions in check. Give factual information about your child's experience such as, who, what, when, where and how.

Do not contact the parents of the student who bullied your child. This is usually a parent's first response, but sometimes it makes matters worse.

School officials should contact the parents of the child or children who did the bullying.

Parents are often reluctant to report bullying to school officials, but bullying probably won't stop without the help of adults at your child's school.

Expect the bullying to stop. If the bullying persists, contact school authorities again.

Help to develop your child's talents and positive attributes.

Encourage your child to get involved in positive after school activities such as, athletics, band, choir, drama, etc.

Encourage your child to be friendly and treat others with respect.

Encourage your child to notice their positive attributes and feel good about themselves.

Assure your child that reporting bullying behavior (when someone is being hurt) is not the same as tattling.

Make sure your child has a safe and loving home environment where he/she can take shelter both physically and emotionally. There are a number of great books to help you keep lines of communication open with your children.

\*Above suggestions were adapted from material at, [www.nonamecalling.org](http://www.nonamecalling.org)

### **How can I talk with my child if he or she bullies someone else?**

Help your child tell you exactly what he or she did, without excuses or blaming others. Remember that even if the other student involved did something, your child made a choice to do what he did. Encourage her to talk about how that behavior affected the other person. Help him find the goal he was trying to reach through hurting the other person. Did he want attention, power, fun, or to be left alone? Help her find other ways to reach that goal without hurting others. Also, if your child has been punished at school, it will probably not be necessary to punish again at home (unless the behavior was severe). Encourage your child to choose a better behavior next time.

### **What if my child is in an abusive friendship with someone who hurts him or her?**

Both girls and boys sometimes get into friendships with someone who is a friend one day and mean the next; who talks behind their backs; and who makes them feel that this mean behavior is somehow their fault. The best way for young people to protect themselves from this hurt is to move on to other friendships, knowing that a real friend doesn't hurt you. Trudy Ludwig's wonderful book *My Secret Bully* is a great help in talking about this issue with young people.

### **How can I encourage my child to speak up about bullying that he or she sees?**

Encourage your children to join with others in telling students to stop when they are saying mean, hurtful things; to tell adults when they see bullying; and to reach out in friendship to isolated or lonely students. Praise your children when they do these things. Remind them that they have the power to help.

\*Above content was selected from [www.stopbullyingnow.com](http://www.stopbullyingnow.com), which is the website of Stan Davis, another authority on the subject with great material. I recommend his book, *Schools Where Everyone Belongs* to all educators.

Also highly recommended reading:

*Raising Cain – Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys*, Dan Kindlon

*Easing the Teasing*, Judy Freedman

*Your Child's Self-Esteem*, Dorothy Corkille-Briggs

*The Six Pillars of Self-Esteem*, Nathaniel Branden

*Letters to Kegan – 30 Truths for Life's Journey*, Aaron Boe