

Bullying: How to Help the Victim

As many as 20% of schoolchildren feel afraid during the school day. Some of these children avoid lunch, recess, and the bathrooms out of fear that they will be embarrassed or picked on by bullies. These are not children who are teased occasionally or who sometimes get into fights with their peers. These are children who are picked on over and over again. They cannot defend themselves against stronger, more powerful peers. This power imbalance is the heart of bullying.

The result of growing up a victim of bullying can be very severe. Victims may suffer from anxiety, low self-esteem, and depression. Their school progress may be slowed. As they grow older, girl victims may become involved in relationships in which they are abused. Some victims attempt suicide out of desperation, believing that no one will help them.

How to Find Out If Your Child Is Being Bullied

To find out if your child is being bullied, look for these signs:

- making excuses to not go to school
- unexplained bruises
- torn clothing
- needing extra school supplies or money
- always losing belongings
- problems sleeping
- sudden loss of appetite
- quality of schoolwork suddenly goes down
- showing secretive or sullen behavior or temper outbursts
- being very hungry after school (ASK WHY: someone may be taking lunch or money)
- making a lot of trips to the school nurse, especially during lunch or recess
- rushing to the bathroom after school (ASK WHY: your child may be frightened to use the bathroom at school due to threats).

How to Help: Steps to Bully Proof Your Child

1. Teach your child self-respect.

Confident children are less likely to become victims. Help your child write positive statements about himself on cards, such as "I am a kind and caring person." Encourage your child to look at the cards several times a day. Teach your child to focus on things he is good at and things that make him feel proud. Teach your child to give himself a silent pep talk when feeling picked on.

2. Encourage friendships.

There is strength in numbers. Bullies tend to go after a child who is alone. Encourage your child to walk down the hall, into the lunchroom, or out to recess with others. Close friends can help protect one another. Your child should stay near others even if they are not close friends.

3. Teach your child the skills for making friends.

Skills for making friends include how to share, give and take, compromise, change the topic to avoid conflict, apologize when appropriate, and use a friendly approach.

4. **Build social skills.**

Social skills include things like active listening, praising, taking turns, and helping others. Problem-solve hard social situations and practice ways to respond during the dinner hour. Something that has been practiced is easier to use in a stressful situation. Social skill groups are available in many schools today and books for both parents and children can be found in local libraries and bookstores.

5. **Stress the importance of body language.**

Bullies will notice a child who looks meek. Encourage your child to stand up straight and hold his or her head high. If a bully approaches, your child shouldn't freeze. It is best to walk away and join a group of children.

6. **Do not encourage physically fighting back.**

Bullies are usually stronger and have a lot of friends. More often than not, if victims fight back, the bully will take revenge.

7. **Let the school know your safety worries.**

Talk to the principal and teachers about your concerns.

8. **Teach your child protective strategies.**

The following 6 strategies can help your child with bullies: Help, Assert yourself, Humor, Avoid, Self talk, Own it. These 6 strategies are easily remembered by children with the phrase "HA HA SO." Have your child picture an invisible shield that drops over them with the letters HA HA SO on it. They can use these protective strategies and one or more can be chosen during a bullying situation.

H Help. Get help. Find a friend or adult you can count on.

A Assert yourself. Use an "I" statement to protect yourself. Say something like, "I like being different" or "I am sorry you don't want to get to know me better before you call me that."

H Humor. Use humor. Do or say something funny or even something just plain crazy to throw the bully off balance. For example, if called a "chicken," start walking like a chicken and flapping your arms.

A Avoid. Stay away from bullies. If you see a bully and can take another path across the playground, do that.

S Self talk. Give yourself a silent pep talk, reminding yourself of positive things. For example, you might think of something like, "I may not be good at track, but I'm great in band."

O Own it. If the put-down is about clothing or something you can change, just agree with the bully. Say something like, "Yeah, I don't like this sweater either. It sure is ugly, but I wore it because my aunt made it and she is visiting this week." (Caution your child not to use this technique for something that can't be changed, such as skin color or ethnic group.) If the put-down is about something you can't or don't want to change, hold your head high, be proud of who you are, and tell the other child you like being who you are.

Bully Proofing Your School

There are programs to help schools called "Bully Proofing Your School". Programs cover early childhood, elementary, and middle school. Contact Sopris West at:

Sopris West
4093 Specialty Place
Longmont, Colorado 80504
800-547-6747

<http://www.sopriswest.com>

or

<http://www.bullyproofing.org>

(for parent information)