

Addressing Bullying Information for Parents/Caregivers

Being bullied is a frightening experience. It is a serious problem. Your children and their peers have a right to an education in a caring, respectful, and safe learning environment free from bullying in any form. Everyone, including students, school staff, parents, and community members must work together to reduce bullying and the damage bullying does.

What is Bullying?

The term bullying is used to describe many different kinds of behaviour. Bullying can be physical (e.g., hitting, pushing, tripping), verbal (e.g., name calling, insults, put-downs), social (e.g., social isolation, rumours) or cyber (e.g., threats or insults spread through the Internet). Bullying can be direct (such as face-to-face) or indirect (such as spreading rumours). A person being bullied often feels helpless in trying to stop it. It is important to remember that bullying is repeated, hurtful behaviour by a stronger or more powerful person or group that creates distress, fear, and lowered self-worth.

Signs to Watch For

There are no clear-cut ways to determine if your child is being bullied. Bullying is difficult to prove as it often happens when adults are not around. Symptoms such as illness, avoidance of school, unexplained injuries, and damaged or missing belongings may have simple explanations or may be the result of being bullied. It is important that your child gets the help and support s/he needs, whether s/he is being bullied or is bullying others.

If your child is being bullied, s/he may go to great lengths to hide it. S/he may feel ashamed, may not want to "rattle", or may not want to appear weak. Your son or daughter may believe that telling will make things worse or that adults may be unable or unwilling to do anything to help.

If you talk daily to your child about her/his day at school and get to know his/her friends, you are more likely to be able to pick up on signs that there may be a problem. The following clues may suggest that your child is being bullied:

- unexplained physical complaints (e.g., headaches, stomach aches)
- reluctance to talk about physical injuries
- fear or reluctance to go to school or take the bus
- crying before or after school
- sudden problems with school work (e.g., drop in marks)
- torn clothes, or damaged or missing property
- lack of or loss of friends
- restless or disturbed sleep (e.g., cannot fall asleep)
- bed wetting
- sudden change in behaviour
- stealing money or requesting money for no reason
- upset after receiving a phone call or an e-mail.

What to Do If Your Child is Being Bullied

As a parent, you need to trust your instincts. If you suspect that your child is being bullied, talk about your suspicions with your child. Tell your son or daughter that you will help stop the bullying. Be patient, make time to listen, show that you care, and let your child know that s/he has done the right thing by talking about what is happening. In addition to listening to and supporting your child, there are other things you can do:

- Read about bullying to learn about ways you can help your child deal with bullying (e.g., see list of resources on page 3). Ask to borrow some of the recommended learning resources from the school library.
- Talk to your child about school and about bullying.
- Before taking action, talk to your child about what s/he can do and what you plan to do.
- Reassure your child that it is not his/her fault and that s/he has a right not to be bullied.
- Talk to your child's teacher (e.g., discuss anti-bullying in the context of English language arts, health education, and social studies – see attached chart on page 7).
- Ask to see a copy of the school's bullying prevention policy.
- Find out what the school intends to do about the bullying and work with the school staff to talk about the results of any actions taken.
- Arrange to meet with the school staff to talk about the results of any actions taken and work with the school staff to resolve the incident of bullying.
- Seek help from the school counsellor, your family doctor, or a community based support if you would like help in supporting your child.

There are some things to avoid when talking to your child about being bullied:

- Avoid making light of the bullying as it will make your child feel s/he is alone.
- Do not take over and solve the problem for your child as this can leave your child feeling even more helpless.
- Avoid telling your child to fight back as fighting will not stop the bullying.
- Do not confront the bully or parents of the bully; if possible, work with someone from the school and/or community.

What to Do If Your Child is Bullying Others

There are many reasons why some children bully others. Home, school, community, and the media contribute to bullying behaviour. Just as there are no clear cut ways to tell if your child is being bullied, there is no one way to tell if your child is bullying others. Some or all of following characteristics may be present in children who bully:

- aggressive and impulsive behaviour (e.g., hitting)
- easily provoked to aggressive behaviour (e.g., little things make him/her angry)
- likes to be powerful and dominate others
- finds it difficult to see a situation from the other person's point of view
- refuses to accept responsibility for his/her actions
- likes to use others to get what s/he wants
- lies to avoid consequences
- seldom feels guilt or remorse for hurting others
- believes the bullied child provoked the attack and deserves to be bullied
- tends to blame others for the problems s/he causes
- tends to hurt others when adults are not around.

It is important, if you suspect your son or daughter is bullying other children, to take it seriously. Do not accept excuses, do not let your son or daughter minimize the problem, and do not accept explanations such as "we were just playing". Here are some things you can do if you suspect that your child is bullying others:

- Talk to your child and make it clear that you do not tolerate bullying behaviour.
- Intervene immediately with discipline that invites an opportunity to undo the damage caused by the bullying.
- Avoid physical discipline as it sends the message that power and aggression is OK.
- Praise your child for caring and respectful behaviour.
- Talk to your child's teachers and work with them on a plan to stop the bullying behaviour (e.g., volunteer to be a support person for your child in an anti-bullying action plan in health education).
- Communicate frequently with your child's teachers about how your child is doing.
- Acknowledge and reinforce your child's efforts to follow rules at home and at school.
- Arrange to borrow some of the recommended print or video learning resources from the school or public library and read/view them with your child. (See attached list.)
- Create opportunities for your child to do something good for others.
- Nurture your child's ability to identify his/her needs and feelings and those of others.
- Teach your child how to make and keep friends.
- Encourage your child to engage in positive physical activity with others.
- Increase supervision of your child's whereabouts (e.g., watching TV, playing video games, using computers).
- Seek help from the school, your family doctor, or a community-based support if you would like help in supporting with your child.

Resources to read:

Coloroso, Barbara. (2002). *The Bully, the Bullied and the Bystander*. Harper Collins Publishers Ltd.