



# Y Parenting Tips

## Bullying in Schools – what can I do?

*Bullying is all part of growing up—it's a fact of life! Kids should get used to it because they need to cope with it in readiness for later life.*

Fortunately most people recognise this statement for the myth that it is, and recognise that both the victim and the bully need help.

Most of us have been bullied at some time—and most of us probably suffered in silence, too ashamed or threatened to tell anyone. If you did, you might have been told to 'stop telling tales' or not to be a 'dobber' or 'sook'.

Both boys and girls bully. Bullying can take many forms. Including:

- Socially (ignored, excluded, or the victim of rumours)
- Verbally (called names, put down, threatened)
- Psychologically (stalked, given 'death stares')
- Physically (assaulted in various degrees, having belongings stolen or damaged).

While male bullies tend towards physical violence or verbal taunts and threats, females are often more subtle, such as deliberately excluding someone from activities or spreading rumours. Many bullies now are also using technology—such as emails and mobile phone text messages—to victimise their targets.

Bullying and harassment mostly happens out of sight of authority figures such as teachers, but often in front of other children and the bully's peers. Victims can feel a range of emotions—scared, depressed, sad, lonely, confused, anxious, sick, embarrassed, stupid, angry, tired, insecure or useless. Bullying—

especially if it's prolonged—can cause long-term harm as academic performance, peer relationships and self-esteem suffer.

Bullies come in different sizes, and from various backgrounds. They can bully one child, or many, and mainly do so because it gives them a sense of power (they often have little control over their own lives). Bullies target those they perceive are weaker because of their:

- physical appearance (different ethnicity, build, disability)
- lack of social confidence or low self-esteem
- anxiety or fear (due to circumstances at home or school)
- academic or sporting difficulties.

Bullies rarely stop bullying without intervention. They rely on their target/s and any witnesses to their behaviour remaining silent through fear.

### Is my child being bullied?

Certain telltale signs can indicate a child is being bullied—but remember they might also be a reaction to other traumatic events, such as moving house, changing schools, or the death of a family member or pet.

Be alert to:

- physical injuries (unexplained bruises and scratches etc)
- torn clothing
- reluctance to go to school (often accompanied by vague excuses to stay home, or not to get onto the school bus)
- a decline in academic performance

- moodiness, withdrawal, tension and tears after school
- talk of hating school and having no friends
- refusal to discuss what's happening at school or wanting to go a different way
- bed wetting, altered sleep patterns
- loss of appetite or overeating
- changes in relationships with others, getting into trouble more often, acting out
- packing extra in their lunchbox (a bully might be taking their food) or stealing money (to pay off the bully)
- giving away prized possessions or money
- wanting to be alone and not participating in (eg) sporting activities
- unlikely explanations for any of the above.

### What do I do if I think my child is being bullied?

Children who are being bullied need to know that it isn't their fault, and that you're taking their distress seriously. Often they have been threatened into silence and need someone to believe their story. It's important to openly discuss the bullying with your child and to:

- let them vent feelings about how it makes them feel
- be aware of the signs of bullying and take it seriously

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- gather as much information as possible—write down who has been doing the bullying and for how long, where, when and how often it happens
- talk with your child's teacher about the bullying (schools have to take bullying seriously, so if you feel you aren't being listened to or that nothing will be done, speak to the school principal or counsellor)
- if your child is being bullied on the way to and from school, make other arrangements for their travel
- to help your child build positive relationships, invite other children over to play
- resist the temptation to confront the bully yourself, as this frequently leads to retaliation or an escalation of the bullying
- discuss your own experience of being bullied—how it felt and how things eventually improved for you
- offer support and possible solutions (see strategies below)
- consider having them taught assertiveness skills or self-protection techniques
- create opportunities for them to make new friends and feel less isolated, such as inviting another child over to play.

Discuss strategies your child can use to deal with the bullies, including:

- confidently and angrily saying 'No!' and immediately walking away (remind them that it might not work the first time—or the next—but that eventually the bully will lose interest when they don't provoke the desired reaction)
- staying in sight of an adult

- using silent affirmations such as 'I'm ok' or 'they have the problem, not me' to help reinforce self-confidence
- speaking up—telling someone what is happening
- pretending not to hear hurtful comments
- agreeing with the bully, which can put them off guard
- role playing various responses to build skills
- not provoking the bully
- using humour to defuse the situation
- standing up to the bully (if they feel confident doing so)
- looking for other group activities that build up self-esteem and confidence with others.

## What if my child is the bully?

Most parents would be horrified to know that their child is a bully. Children who bully do so for different reasons—some temporarily, as a reaction to a traumatic event (eg parents separating, the birth of a new baby, or the death of a loved one). Usually these children stop once they have resolved their grief or life settles down again. Others continue to bully because they might:

- like the feeling of power
- be used to getting their own way and expect everyone to do what they say
- feel insecure, inadequate or humiliated
- have been abused themselves
- be under pressure to succeed at all costs
- not fit in with the other children
- feel no sense of accomplishment.

Just like the bully's target, bullies themselves need to develop ways to change their behaviour. If your child is bullying, you need to find out why and consider:

- anything negative that is happening at home (arguments, fighting, violence)
- the way family members communicate
- if your child is worried or frightened about something
- where they might be learning this behaviour and limiting exposure to the source (violent movies or video games, other children who bully)
- how to work with the school to encourage your child to stop bullying.

If you deal with bullying early, the less impact it will have on your child long-term.

For more assistance or advice about bullying in schools, contact your child's teacher, the principal or the school counsellor. The more informed they are the better they will be able to address the bullying and work towards eliminating it.

To learn more about bullying in general, see:

Kidscape (2001) *Stop Bullying!*  
[www.kidscape.org.au](http://www.kidscape.org.au)

Bullying No Way! *What are bullying, harassment, discrimination and violence?*  
[www.bullyingnoway.com.au/talkout/faqs/students-what.html](http://www.bullyingnoway.com.au/talkout/faqs/students-what.html)

Parent Link (1996) *Being bullied*  
[www.parentlink.atc.gov.au](http://www.parentlink.atc.gov.au)

Parenting Perspectives... ideas to help you succeed *Bullies and Victims Information for parents*  
[www.teachersandfamilies.com/open/parent/bully2/cfm](http://www.teachersandfamilies.com/open/parent/bully2/cfm)

Better Health Channel *Bullying fact sheet*  
[www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au)

Head Room *Bullying*  
[www.headroom.net.au/family/supporting\\_bullying\\_txt.html](http://www.headroom.net.au/family/supporting_bullying_txt.html)

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