

Help Your Child Recognize the Signs of Bullying

Children may not always realize that they are being bullied. They might think it is bullying only if they are being physically hurt; they might believe the other child is joking; or they may not understand the subtle social norms and cues. Children can benefit from a definition of the differences between friendly behavior and bullying behavior.

The basic rule, *which is not a legal or comprehensive definition*: Let children know bullying is when someone is targeted by words or actions that are repeated, aggressive and unwanted. Those targeted are hurt or harmed either physically or emotionally and have a hard time stopping what is happening to them.

Parents can prepare themselves to talk with their children by considering how they are going to respond to their child's questions and emotions. They can also decide what information they would like to give their child about bullying.

Parents should be ready to:

- **Listen.** It is the child's story; let him or her tell it. They may be in emotional pain about the way they are being treated.
- **Believe.** The knowledge that a child is being bullied can raise many emotions. To be an effective advocate, parents need to react in a way that encourages the child to trust.
- **Be supportive.** Tell the child it is not his fault and that he does not deserve to be bullied. Empower the child by telling her how terrific she is. Avoid judgmental comments about the child or the child who bullies. The child may already be feeling isolated. Hearing negative statements from parents may only further isolate him or her.
- **Be patient.** Children may not be ready to open up right away. Talking about the bullying can be difficult because children may fear retaliation from the bully or think that, even if they tell an adult, nothing will change. The child might be feeling insecure, withdrawn, frightened, or ashamed.
- **Provide information.** Parents should educate their child about bullying by providing information at a level that the child can understand.
- **Explore options for intervention strategies.** Parents can discuss options with their child to deal with bullying behavior.

Questions to ask your child about bullying

Open-ended questions will help the child talk about his or her situation. Begin with questions that address the child's environment. For example, "How was your bus ride today?" or "Have you ever seen anyone being mean to someone else on the bus?" Then move on to questions that directly affect the child such as, "Are you ever scared to get on the bus?" or "Has anyone ever been mean to you on the bus?"

If the child is talking about the situation, parents can help their child recognize bullying behavior by asking more questions such as:

- Did the child hurt you on purpose?

- Was it done more than once?
- Did it make you feel bad or angry? How do you feel about the behavior?
- Did the child know you were being hurt?
- Is the other child more powerful (i.e. bigger, scarier) than you in some way?

For the child who is reluctant to talk about the situation, questions may include:

- How was gym class today?
- Who did you sit by at lunch?
- You seem to be feeling sick a lot and want to stay home. Please tell me about that.
- Are kids making fun of you?
- Are there a lot of cliques at school? What do you think about them?
- Has anyone ever touched you in a way that did not feel right?

Reactions to avoid

When children choose to tell their parents about bullying, parents might have one of three responses.

1. Tell their child to stand up to the bully
2. Tell their child to ignore and avoid the bully
3. Take matters into their own hands

While these reactions express **genuine caring, concern, and good intentions** – and often reflect what parents were told by their own parents or other adults – they are likely to be ineffective. Parents may feel better for having taken action, but these reactions can have harmful consequences. Here’s why these responses will likely be unsuccessful:

1. Tell your child to stand up to the bully – This can imply that it is your child’s responsibility to handle the situation. While there is a ring of truth to this statement (being assertive is often a good response) sending your child back into the situation without further information will probably cause more harm. A more effective response is to brainstorm options with your child about what you can do as a team to respond to the situation.
2. Tell your child to ignore the bully – This is easier said than done. Your child has probably tried ignoring the situation, which is a typical response for children. If that method had been effective, however, there wouldn’t be a need for the child to seek your help. It is difficult to ignore someone who is sitting behind you on the bus or next to you in class.
3. In addition, if the student who is bullying realizes that their target is purposefully “ignoring” them, it can actually ignite further bullying, since that response provides the sense of power and control the student seeks.
4. Take matters into your own hands – A normal gut response from parents is to try to fix the situation and remove their child from harm. For example, a parent might call the parents of the student who is bullying, or directly confront the bully. Remember, when children tell a parent about bullying, they are looking for the parent to guide them to a solution that makes them feel empowered. Involve them in the process of determining next steps. Typically, calling the other parent or directly confronting the bullying student is ineffective. It is best to work through the school and implement steps to respond.

It is important to help your child know that they are not alone

- **You are not alone.** Many children feel that they are the only ones who are bullied and that no one cares. Let them know that there are people who do care.
- **It is not up to you to stop the bullying.** It is never the responsibility of the child to change what is happening to them.

- **Bullying happens to a lot of kids but that NEVER makes it right.** Let your child know that bullying happens in small schools, large schools, rural schools, and city schools. It can happen in preschool, high school, and every school in between. It happens in Australia, Argentina, and all around the globe. Certain people will say that some kids deserve to be bullied because of the way the child looks or acts, but this is simply not true.
- **No one deserves to be bullied.** Everyone deserves respect. All students have the right to be treated with dignity and respect, no matter what.
- **We all need to work together.** Everyone is responsible for addressing bullying. The community, schools, parents, and students all play a role.

PACER resources

Student Action Plan

[PACER.org/publications/bullypdf/BP-25.pdf](https://www.pacer.org/publications/bullypdf/BP-25.pdf)

Are you an educator working with a student being bullied, a parent looking for ways to help your child change their behavior, or a student who wants to take action against bullying but you aren't sure what to do? As a student, bullying is something that impacts you, your peers, and your school – whether you're the target of bullying, a witness, or the person who bullies. Bullying can end, but that won't happen unless students, parents, and educators work together and take action.

The first step is to create a plan that works for you and your situation. This student action plan is an opportunity for you – either on your own or with parents and teachers – to develop a strategy to change what's happening to you or someone else. It's your chance to make a difference.

Advice Gone Wrong

[PACERteensagainstabullying.org/tab/experiencing-bullying/advice-gone-wrong](https://www.pacerteensagainstabullying.org/tab/experiencing-bullying/advice-gone-wrong)

An interactive teen perspective (written by teens for adults) on unhelpful advice from parents and educators.

Reasons Teens Don't Tell

[PACERteensagainstabullying.org/tab/experiencing-bullying/reasons-teens-dont-tell](https://www.pacerteensagainstabullying.org/tab/experiencing-bullying/reasons-teens-dont-tell)

An interactive look, from a teen perspective, at some of the reasons students don't talk about bullying. Meet Pete. He is a dude with a lot going on inside, and he has zeroed in on some of the reasons that students don't tell an adult about bullying.

We Need To Talk – Video

[PACERteensagainstabullying.org/advocacy-for-self/tell-an-adult](https://www.pacerteensagainstabullying.org/advocacy-for-self/tell-an-adult)

Teens have their turn talking about what is helpful and what they want parents to know.