

Bullying of children

What are the facts about childhood bullying?

Research indicates that bullying of children is common and widespread wherever children are grouped together. It is increasing, and is prevalent in every school with long-lasting consequences. It is interesting that 50% of targeted children told no one about it. Bullying takes many forms and is defined as ongoing deliberate physical, verbal and emotional aggression by one or more people against others.

What are the forms of childhood bullying?

Bullying is more than physical aggression as it can involve intimidation by words or behaviour. An increasing trend is for bullies to use modern technology such as SMS or email. It is designed to hurt, threaten or frighten the child by actions such as teasing, name-calling, ridicule, threatening, excluding or marginalisation.

What are the effects of bullying?

Bullying not only affects the child being bullied but also the audience witnessing the anti-social behaviour. Even the bully, if unchecked and not counselled, will possibly develop social problems and have communication problems in their teen and adult years. There is evidence that child bullies and those bullied as children have the potential to become bullies in adulthood.

What are the signs to indicate bullying?

One or more of the following indicators will be present in the child:

- school phobia: sham sickness and other excuses to stay at home
- being tense, tearful and miserable after school
- reluctance to talk about happenings at school
- poor appetite
- functional symptoms (e.g. habit cough)
- repeated abdominal pains or headache
- unexplained bruises, injuries, torn clothing, damaged books
- lack of a close friend; not bringing children home
- crying during sleep
- restless sleep with bad dreams
- appearing unhappy or depressed
- unusual changes in behaviour and manner
- unexpected irritability and moods; temper outbursts
- poor or deteriorating school performance
- school truancy.

Why are children bullied?

The perpetrators tend to pick on anyone around them but seem to target those who seem vulnerable and easy to hurt. This includes those children who:

- are regarded as ‘nerds’ or ‘bookworms’
- are regarded as the ‘teacher’s pet’
- struggle with schoolwork in general
- are different, whether in appearance or because they have a disability
- are poor at sport
- are loners
- lack social skills
- are ‘nervy’ or anxious types
- are smaller or weaker
- are from a very different social or cultural group.

How to tackle the problem: advice for parents

Things that parents can do include the following.

- Avoid negative comments such as calling the child ‘soft’, ‘a sook’, etc.
- Emphasise positives in the child—build their confidence.
- Listen to the child and be empathetic to their feelings and concerns.
- Help the child to work out ways of avoiding the bullies and situations.
- Encourage the child to ignore verbal teasing.
- Avoid being over-protective or taking everything into your own hands.
- Counsel that the bullying is not the child’s fault.
- Encourage distractions such as seeking different compatible friends or groups and different activities during and after school.
- Supervise the child’s use of the electronic media and mobile phones.
Make a list of the facts and approach the school authorities (preferably with a friend or another affected parent) in a very businesslike manner. Be prepared to name names and the circumstances—places, times and methods. Be persistent until the problem is adequately attended to.

Contact tips for help

The following are possible people or agencies where you can get help:

- your general practitioner
- your child’s school
- Kids Help Line, www.kidshelp.com.au
- Parentline, phone 132 289
- a community youth worker.