

# What Can Parents Do About Bullying?

Parents can take steps to help prevent bullying and to intervene when it happens.

BY DIANA DIVECHA | NOVEMBER 6, 2019

When we parents offer our children out to the wider world, we hope that wonderful experiences and people await them. But that isn't always the case, of course. We can be dismayed to find our children involved in bullying—either as the perpetrator or on the receiving end.



As a developmental psychologist who has studied school-based bullying, I have counseled many families experiencing bullying, and I know it is not easy. We cannot completely control what difficulties our children will face in the world, but we can exert some influence over the paths they take and how they will respond to the people and events they encounter. When it comes to peer bullying, parents can help in a number of ways.

To maximize the chance they will avoid bullying situations in the first place, we can nurture children's emotional and interpersonal skills, and support their positive peer relationships. If bullying does happen, we can stand up for their protection and insist on swift action on the part of the responsible adults.

## How to reduce the risk of bullying for your child

Research suggests that parenting practices may make a difference in whether children become aggressive, bullied, and victimized—or not. Your family relationships help to build children's expectations about how relationships should feel, what helps relationships to work well, and how to constructively manage the problems that arise in relationships.

**Use an authoritative parenting style.** An authoritative style of parenting offers a high degree of warmth, love, and closeness, and at the same time provides clear limits and high expectations with the support necessary to meet those expectations. Children who are raised with authoritative parenting (compared to other styles) fare the best—with better mental health,

stronger relationship skills, and higher achievement. In contrast, children who experience harsh parenting practices fare worse, and they're more likely to become a bully or become the focus of bullying.

**Nurture a positive family climate.** The family climate is the “felt sense” of being in relationship with other family members and working together in the home environment. Does family life feel chaotic and erratic, or organized and predictable? Do adults model the kind of relationships they hope their children will have? Does everyone feel respected and have healthy personal boundaries? Are expectations appropriate to children’s stage of development, or are they too high or too low?

Everyone in a family needs a sense of power, but is that need supported in developmentally appropriate ways? Do family members express a healthy agency through rational, age-appropriate negotiations and problem solving—for example, providing preschoolers a limited set of choices, but helping teenagers think through possible consequences of their actions ahead of time—or do family members exert power by dominating and manipulating? Is consent a family value, for example, even in the giving and receiving of hugs?

Researchers have increasingly realized that siblings exert enormous influence on one other. Children who are involved in sibling bullying (in any role) are more likely to be involved in bullying outside the home—as the bully, an enabler, or the recipient of bullying.

**Teach emotional and interpersonal skills.** Research suggests that children who grow up in an emotion-rich language environment—where parents talk about feelings and how feelings are managed in themselves and others—have higher emotional intelligence, navigate peer groups better, and are more likely to stand up for people who are targeted by others. If talking about emotional life is normalized in a family, children will be more likely to bring up difficult issues so they don’t fester and become harmful.

Make learning about relationships a high priority. Parents can incorporate conversations about interpersonal relationships while reading storybooks or observing everyday interactions, even with very young children. For example, in a relationship conflict, naming the various feelings and perspectives that different people might hold is an important start to problem-solving respectful solutions. For middle school students, add conversations about online relationships (using helpful conversational scripts like these, if needed).

Encourage supportive friendships and constructive peer groups. It’s good “insurance” for children to foster peer relationships in a few different environments inside and outside of school, such as community sports leagues, out-of-school clubs, or among neighbors or extended family. It doesn’t have to be large numbers—even a single friend in different venues is protective.

When children face small difficulties, help them cultivate a mindset of resilience that draws on their unique strengths. If they are funny, can they deflect a problem using a sense of humor? If they're socially skilled, can they turn toward friends for support? If they're shy, quiet, and reserved, can they find a compatible way to explore their feelings, through reading, writing, movement, or animal companionship? Are they artistic? They could paint a poster or create art that inspires the good in others.

Sometimes children need to borrow your confidence in them to get over a rough patch, to know that you believe in their abilities when they feel unsure. They may also benefit from understanding that people can change, feelings can change, and situations won't always be as they are in this moment. Let them know that their efforts and practice matter; they can help to bring about that change.

**Cultivate relationships with school personnel and other parents.** Research suggests that children benefit when there is a strong partnership between schools and families. Being friendly and helpful to school personnel is not just a decent thing to do; it establishes a pathway of communication, along with trust and a belief in each other's good intentions, should difficulties arise. Teachers and staff will also have a little more context when interacting with your child.

It can be helpful to get to know the parents of children's classmates, as well. Even as casual acquaintances, goodwill, communication, and mutual support can be fostered. This may feel easier when children are younger, but even high school students benefit when parents know each other enough to coordinate around parties and overnights. If things get difficult, a channel for some dialogue will have been established.

## What to do when bullying happens

There are many causes of bullying, and so it may still happen despite your best efforts. Now what? Though there is not a single solution to stop every bullying situation, researchers and practitioners offer some guidelines.

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### ONLINE RESOURCES ON BULLYING

Read your state's **legislation and policies on bullying.**

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Read your state's **legislation and policies on cyberbullying.**

**Manage your own feelings first.** We often forget to do this. Stay calm, and project the assurance to your child that you will see to their protection and safety. If they are the target of, or witness to, the bullying, assure them it is not their fault.

**Gently elicit the story from your child,** gather information, and write down the details and facts. Sometimes children don't want to divulge the names

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Many states have laws that outlaw sexting, and most states outlaw revenge porn. **Find out your state laws.**

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Discover **tip sheets** for preventing and responding to cyberbullying in middle and high school educators, parents, and teens.

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Discover more tip sheets for **parents and teens.**

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of others involved for fear that adults will inadvertently escalate the bullying, so proceed delicately. Assess the severity. Can you support the child to act first without your direct involvement? This might involve problem-solving concrete strategies together. Or it may be too much for a child to manage, and you need to work behind the scenes with school personnel.

**If cyberbullying is involved, collect data and take screenshots of all offending screens,** and then help your child block the offender. Report cyberbullying to the media platform.

**Consider appealing to the parents of other children involved**—although this can be controversial and every situation is different. The first ground rule of having a conversation is that both of you need to be capable of staying constructive.

The second rule is that expressing yourself doesn't guarantee the impact you desire, so accept that sometimes just having your say is enough and actual change might have to come from a different direction. If there is bullying at school, it is likely that your child is not the only one affected. You might find support by enlisting other parents whose children are affected and appealing to the school together.

**With the school, first approach the adult in charge of the immediate environment** (e.g., the classroom teacher, the after-school teacher), but work your way up the administration if there isn't immediate action.

**Regulate your feelings when you talk with school personnel.** Emotional intelligence is the ability to regulate feelings to accomplish your goals, and your goal is to ensure the emotional and physical safety of your child.

Schools are incentivized to balance their legal liability with their concern for their students. If possible, take a collaborative, problem-solving approach that can become a win-win. Appeal to the school's stated values, or their aspirational charters on psychological well-being, or the opportunity to improve the school climate for everyone.

If the school does not take action, turn up the volume. Remind them that federal legislation gives students the legal right to learn in a safe environment and offers special protections for bullying based on race, sex, or disability. Point to your state's legislation. If physical threats are involved,

law enforcement may be of help, informally or formally.

**Know when to pull the plug.** If the bullying is severe or is ongoing and the school does not respond, remove your child from the unsafe situation.

Remember to spend some extra special time with a child who has been bullied or who has witnessed bullying. Surround them with love, affection, and support, and focus on their healing. Your care, along with your swift, constructive action, will speak volumes to them and offer a life lesson on how to face problems.

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## About the Author



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