



*So you want to know more about...*

# Bullying

## Knuckle Sandwiches

Bullying takes many forms:

- verbal taunts
- physical violence
- threats and intimidation
- stealing & lying
- exclusion.

Repeated intimidation and verbal abuse has long-term effects for everyone involved. You probably remember the bullies from your own elementary and junior high schools. You may even know a bully at your office.

What makes some kids turn out to be bullies? Studies suggest that temperament plays a part. But there are plenty of confident, assertive children who do not behave this way. Other factors can include: physical aggression in the home; poor supervision; a lack of physical and verbal affection in the home.

Children who are bullies tend to be oppositional and defiant students. And contrary to popular belief, some studies have found little evidence that bullies victimize others because they feel badly about themselves (see [www.ed.gov/databases/ERIC\\_Digests/ed407154.html](http://www.ed.gov/databases/ERIC_Digests/ed407154.html) for details).

So why **do** bullies do it? Because it gets them what they want. Unfortunately, this pattern of behavior can persist into adulthood and continue to interfere with bullies' ability to develop and maintain positive relationships with others, a basic human need.

Children who are bullied tend to be anxious, insecure, and can suffer from low self-esteem. Children who witness bullying behavior can also be fearful and

learn negative "survival" tactics when bullying behavior goes unchecked. They may learn to capitulate when confronted, or they may learn that adults won't help, when no one intervenes.

But we **can** help. We can show all children warmth and love and help them develop **empathy**—the ability to imagine what other people are experiencing. We can also teach kids that violence is never an appropriate means to an end. We can give children scripts for speaking to bullies and for reporting the behavior. We can help victims understand that it is **not their fault**. And we can show bullies that their aggressive behavior has negative consequences for them: both in terms of their social relationships, and in terms of concrete privileges at home and school.

## What Schools Can Do

A comprehensive anti-bullying policy is the most effective way to reduce this kind of behavior in schools. Good programs include:

- Involvement of teachers, paraprofessionals, and parents;
- Staff inservices and parent workshops on the subject;
- Adequate supervision before and after school and during lunch and recess;
- A strong pro-social program and praise for such behavior;
- Consistent and immediate consequences for bullying;
- PTO involvement in policy making and programs for students.

### Further reading

- *Hooway for Wodney Wat*, by Helen Lester
- *The Bully, The Bullied, and the Bystander*, by Barbara Coloroso
- *The Recess Queen*, by Alexis O'Neill

# What's the difference?

All children act out in various ways, sometimes.

Developmentally appropriate acting out can include:

- Trying to push to the front of a line;
- Occasional (**not** often) hitting, kicking or throwing things at other children to express anger or obtain a toy;
- Occasional emotional manipulation: saying, "You can't be my friend," or excluding kids;
- Occasional name-calling;
- Snatching or grabbing toys and materials.

**When does childhood aggression cross the line?**

- When it involves older or bigger children who exclusively use physical means to get what they

want from other children;

- When children are capable of empathy (usually 3 years and up) but rarely display concern for the children they hurt;
- When it is a pattern of abuse over time;
- When the aggressive behaviors are secretive, coercive, and involve threats of retaliation.

The critical factors are the **frequency**, **intensity**, and **duration** of the behaviors. Ask your teachers to record observations of your child's interactions with others. Because children are unreliable narrators, scary incidents may get blown out of proportion in their retelling. Our **Aggression** Purple Page has more info.

## What To Do If Your Child Is Bullied

Signs of bullying can include reluctance to go to school, lack of friends, missing belongings, unexplained bumps and bruises, and marked anxiety or fearfulness. If you suspect your child is being bullied, ask him directly.

Inform the school of your suspicions. Ask the staff what steps they will take to ensure that your child is protected. If your child rides the bus to and from school, ask about supervision. Most schools have low tolerance for inappropriate bus behavior. Ask that the bully have an assigned seat behind the bus driver. You can also make arrangements for an older child to sit with your child on the bus.

If your school doesn't yet have an anti-bullying program in place, bring the issue to a PTO/PTA meeting and recruit other concerned parents to help you with your mission. Your child is *not* the only child being intimidated and other parents may not know where to turn for help.

Help your child make positive social connections. If your child has trouble identifying appropriate playmates, help him identify traits to seek in a friend. Joining a recreational sports team or taking an art class is another way for your child to have more positive interactions with children his age.

## What to Do If Your Child Is Bullying Others

Bullying is a serious problem. Although you may hope that your child will grow out of it, studies show that children who are unchecked bullies are more likely to exhibit antisocial and even criminal behavior as adults.

- Let your child know that you are aware of the behavior. Solicit reports from teachers, bus drivers, and other adults.
- Make it clear that you will not tolerate this behavior. Establish meaningful consequences. Restricted privileges should include things your child loves doing, so that he will feel the impact of losing the privileges and be motivated to earn them back.

- Increase your supervision of your child's whereabouts and activities. Be available to coach appropriate interactions with other kids.
- Talk to your child about what it feels like to be bullied. Reading fictional books about children who are bullied can help your child see the situation through another child's eyes.
- Limit time spent watching aggressive television shows and playing violent video games.
- Do not use corporal punishment, and make sure that your child isn't witnessing violence between family members at home.
- Have your child evaluated by a social worker or psychologist