

# What if Your Child *IS* the Bully?

By Marcia Kelly



The word “bullying” often conjures up an image of a schoolyard scene, with a big, intimidating student towering over a small, cowering child. That’s just one face of bullying—and of children who bully.

Another face of a bully might be...that of your child. Surprised? Many parents are. Often they have no idea that their child is harassing other children. Yet knowing the facts—and acting to change the situation—is vitally important in making the future safer for your child and all children.

Here’s why. Children who bully suffer as much as those they target. They are significantly more likely than others to lead lives marked by school failure, depression, violence, crime, and other problems, according to experts. The message is clear: Bullying is too important to ignore.

Could your child be bullying others? Would you know? Once you found out, would you know what to do? Here is some information that can help.

## What is bullying?

Bullying is different from the routine conflicts of childhood. It is intentional behavior that is meant to hurt and dominate another person. Characterized by an imbalance of power between the child who bullies and the target, bullying can be physical, verbal, emotional (social), or sexual. It includes harassment via e-mail and instant messaging.

## Who does it?

Children who bully come in a variety of packages—the waif-like second grader, the big sixth-grade boy, the child with a disability, the popular girl, the loner. They can come from any background, race, income level, family situation, gender, or religion. Research has shown that despite their differences children who

bully typically have one or more of the following traits. They may:

- be quick to blame others and unwilling to accept responsibility for their actions
- lack empathy, compassion, and understanding for others’ feelings
- be bullied themselves
- have immature social and interpersonal skills
- want to be in control
- be frustrated and anxious
- come from families where parents or siblings bully
- find themselves trying to fit in with a peer group that encourages bullying
- have parents who are unable to set limits, are inconsistent with discipline, do not provide supervision, or do not take an interest in their child’s life.

If you see these traits in your child or hear from others that your child is bullying, you may want to look into the issue. If your child is bullying, take heart. There’s a lot you can do to help correct the problem. Remember, bullying is a learned behavior—and it can be “unlearned.” By talking with your child and seeking help, you can teach your child more appropriate ways of handling feelings, peer pressure, and conflicts. Here are some ideas.

## Help your child to stop bullying

1. **Talk with your child.** Find out why he or she is bullying others. You might explore how your child is feeling about himself or herself, ask if he or she is being bullied by someone else, and invite discussion about bullying. Find out if your child’s friends are also bullying. Ask how you can help.

- 2. Confirm that your child's behavior is bullying and not the result of a disability.** Sometimes, children with disabilities bully other children. Other times, children with certain behavioral disorders or limited social skills may act in ways that are mistaken for bullying. Whether the behavior is intentional bullying or is due to a disability, it still needs to be addressed. If your child with a disability is bullying, you may want to include bullying prevention goals in his or her Individualized Education Program (IEP).
- 3. Teach empathy, respect, and compassion.** Children who bully often lack awareness of how others feel. Try to understand your child's feelings, and help your child appreciate how others feel when they are bullied. Let your child know that everyone has feelings and that feelings matter.
- 4. Make your expectations clear.** Let your child know that bullying is not okay under any circumstances and that you will not tolerate it. Take immediate action if you learn that he or she is involved in a bullying incident.
- 5. Provide clear, consistent consequences for bullying.** Be specific about what will happen if the bullying continues. Try to find meaningful consequences, such as loss of privileges or a face-to-face meeting with the child being bullied.
- 6. Teach by example.** Model nonviolent behavior and encourage cooperative, noncompetitive play. Help your child learn different ways to resolve conflict and deal with feelings such as anger, insecurity, or frustration. Teach and reward appropriate behavior.
- 7. Role play.** Help your child practice different ways of handling situations. You can take turns playing the part of the child who does the bullying and the one who is bullied. Doing so will help your child understand what it's like to be in the other person's shoes.
- 8. Provide positive feedback.** When your child handles conflict well, shows compassion for others, or finds a positive way to deal with feelings, provide praise and recognition. Positive reinforcement goes a long way toward improving behavior. It is more effective than punishment.
- 9. Be realistic.** It takes time to change behavior. Be patient as your child learns new ways of handling feelings and conflict. Keep your love and support visible.
- 10. Seek help.** Your child's doctor, teacher, school principal, school social worker, or a psychologist can help you and your child learn how to understand and deal with bullying behavior. Ask if your school offers a bullying prevention program. Bullying hurts everyone. Parents can play a significant role in stopping the behavior, and the rewards will be immeasurable for all.

*This handout is reprinted from, PACESETTER, Fall 2005.*