

# Seeing Your Way Through: Bullying – A Guide for Parents



## What is bullying?

There is no legal definition of bullying but it is usually taken to mean repeated behaviour which is intended to hurt someone either physically or emotionally. Bullying does not take account of age or sex, but tends to happen more often in social settings where there are periods of low supervision and a clear 'pecking order'. There has been growing concern at the number of serious incidences of bullying and new research has provided information on how schools and parents can take practical steps to reduce the problem.

There are usually two main forms of bullying. These are **physical** and **verbal**. Physical bullying can be being slapped, hit, pushed, poked or tripped. It can also include having property stolen or damaged. Verbal bullying includes name-calling, being teased, having lies told about the child, or being threatened until the child hands over money etc. It can also include being left out of games, being ignored, or being systematically told that a person is useless, an idiot etc. Research has informed us that there is a greater incidence of these things happening because of skin colour, religion or disability.

Our children are using technology to a greater and greater extent and **cyberbullying** is something that they need to be aware of. Social networking via Facebook, twitter, instant messaging, You tube and a variety of other sites should be a way for youngsters to have fun and keep up to date with friends. However sometimes they are used to bully and upset users and it is important that children know how to set up a safe profile and that if they are bullied in this way they do not have to cope with it alone. Childline have an excellent site with lots of useful information at

<https://www.childline.org.uk/Explore/Bullying/Pages/online-bullying.aspx>

## What are the effects of bullying?

Bullying causes unhappiness, but it also induces stress and worry that can easily affect a child's performance at school. Children can feel scared, nervous and worried. No one likes to think of a child suffering from stress, but children who are long-term victims of bullying may end up with such a diagnosis. There have been incidences where children have felt so victimised that they have run away from home or taken even more drastic steps. Bullying needs to be tackled early, before the situation gets out of hand. It is a sad fact that if a child has been bullied for a long time and then is moved to another school, their low self-esteem and lack of self-confidence make them a prime targets for bullies at that school as well. So the situation needs to be tackled early, long before this stage is reached.

## Why are children bullied?

There are many reasons why children are bullied, or become bullies themselves, but it is generally accepted that children with learning difficulties and/or physical difficulties are at greater risk of being bullied, than other children. Children with these difficulties may have a low self-esteem and be quiet, shy loners, often feeling that they are unable to keep up with children of their own age and this can also single them out as targets for bullying.

## Is your child being bullied?

Children often find it difficult to talk about being bullied. Many bullies threaten children not to tell and the embarrassment of the whole school knowing can also influence their decision to keep quiet. As Valerie Besag, one of the UK's leading authorities on bullying writes, "Given that many bullied children find it difficult to approach their parents for help, the optimum situation must be that all parents are alerted to the possibility of bullying occurring, be made aware of the warning signs and be encouraged to approach the school should they suspect anything untoward. (1989)"

Sometimes sudden behaviour changes may indicate that a child is being bullied. Some of these are detailed below, but these are not definite indicators. Please bear in mind that there may be other causes:

- **Behaviour problems.** The child may become quiet and withdrawn, spending most of their time playing computer games or watching television. They may no longer wish to take part in social activities and may resent any small criticism. A request to tidy their room may result in floods of tears and "you're always picking on me, never anyone else!" Sometimes they may take their angry feelings out on their siblings or friends. They may pick fights, stop sharing or overreact to normal situations. They may be forced to steal by bullies who threaten them with violence if they don't regularly give them money, or they may desperately want to be accepted so they join a gang that won't accept them unless they steal or break the law in some other way.
- **School problems.** Children sometimes refuse to go to school or will develop tummy or headaches rather than go to school or attend particular lessons. They may be so worried about the bullying that they can't concentrate on school and homework. Their books may be damaged or lost or their money may go missing. They may offer the bully presents to leave them alone and say they lost them.
- **Night problems.** They may have nightmares and may shout out in their sleep things like "No, leave me alone". They may begin wetting the bed, possibly indicating that they are worried about something. Disturbed sleep patterns will mean the child is tired in the mornings and this makes getting them to school even more difficult.
- **Injuries.** Physical bullying may leave bruises, the child may try to explain them, but it may be useful to check if the school are aware of any incidents. Frequent bruising should always be queried.
- **Low self-esteem.** Verbal bullying can make a child worry about any aspect of his appearance. A child called 'teacher's pet' may deliberately fail at school, while another may become obsessive about washing after being called 'smelly'. Children can become dependent and act babyish. They may revert to thumb sucking, biting nails, overeating, under eating, stammering or chewing things like hair or clothes. They may become tearful, tired all the time and depressed.
- **A child who talks about not wanting to live or suicide should always be taken seriously and needs urgent help. Forcing them to go to school will only make the situation worse.**

## What can you do?

It is useful to encourage your child to chat about their day at school and to try to make a special time to talk. Ask about their friends, who they played with that day or what they did. If they don't want to talk, **do not make them**. This will only be another situation in which they feel pressurised. It can also be a mistake to come straight out and ask, "Are you being bullied?" They may become defensive and deny everything.

Sometimes, telling stories about bullying that happened when you were young shows you understand and may encourage your child to confide in you. You could ask other parents if their children have mentioned anything, but be careful, that they don't realise what is going on. Sometimes you could arrive earlier to pick them up from school and watch what happens, or you could walk past the school at a break time and look in the playground to see what is happening, making sure they do not see you.

If you are **sure** that there is a bullying problem, then there **are** measures you and your child can take:

- **Tell the school straight away.** If your child is worried about this, then you may have to ask the teacher not to say anything. Most teachers are aware of this and usually co-operate, but if you feel that the school are not taking your concerns seriously, then you may have to contact the Board of Governors for further support.
- **Be very supportive towards your child.** Do not tell them to pull themselves together, to stand up for themselves, or to hit back. Make sure they know that they can talk to you any time.
- **Encourage them to act confidently**, standing tall and erect. They will look less like an easy victim. Practicing in a mirror will help.
- **Remind them to try to stay with a friend or group of friends.** Get them to practice what they will do in certain circumstances. If they have practiced a routine plan of action, they will feel more in control.
- Name calling or teasing can be laughed off or ignored. Walking away or acting not bothered may be enough to stop the name calling, because it becomes boring without a reaction. Practice this together.
- If the child is threatened, cornered, or grabbed, they should:
  - (a) Walk away, looking straight ahead, towards a group of friends or a teacher or someone else who can help.
  - (b) If the bullies try to stop them, shout "**NO! GO AWAY!**" Then walk away quickly.
  - (c) If threatened by a gang look the weakest one in the eye and say, "**THIS ISN'T FUNNY!**" and walk away.
  - (d) Report the incident to a teacher or other adult straight away.
- Being hit, kicked or pushed is more difficult to deal with. If it is one slap or kick, then they can act as before and tell someone as soon as possible. If they are beaten up, they should protect themselves as much as possible until it stops.

- They could try to make as much noise as possible so someone could hear and get help, this can be useful as the bullies run the risk of being caught. They could fight back and escape as quickly as possible and run for help. What they decide to do will probably depend on what is happening at the time.
- Make sure they are encouraged to tell what has happened as soon as possible.
- Boost their confidence by telling them “You can do this really well“. Credit them for things they do well, for trying and acknowledge that they have fears. **Don’t** say, “Stop being silly” or “Pull yourself together“. They will get their confidence back – but in their own time.
- Threatening the bully yourself, while occasionally being successful, probably isn’t a good idea. The bully may just decide to pick on another child for a while. It can also be very embarrassing for a child if they have to have their parents sort out their problems. A child with a learning disability may have enough to cope with, without the whole school knowing that there is yet another thing they are unable to deal with themselves!
- Encourage them to take part in other activities such as drama clubs, youth clubs or sports groups. Be aware that they may have difficulties that influence the suitability of some groups. They will not want to be placed in another situation where there is a high likelihood of failure. It is better to build on something they are interested in and like, such as drama or first-aid, rather than enrol them in self-defence classes for instance.

Advise your child not to reply to any unpleasant text or Facebook messages, but to keep them to show a trusted adult. Do not answer calls from a withheld number. Make it clear that it **always** best to share the information but that it does not have to be with you. It could be a teacher, grandparent or other trusted adult or via Childline or other appropriate organisation where they don’t have to see the other person if that helps.

### **What can schools do about bullying?**

There have been many methods introduced over recent years, both in this country and others, in an effort to reduce the incidence of bullying in schools. Schools should have a clear and regularly updated anti bullying policy that is easily obtainable for parents. Any school should have an established method of dealing with bullying and will have a policy of zero tolerance.

Contact your child’s teacher. Ask them to investigate the situation and inform you and the head teacher of the results of the investigations. Make sure that you have as much information as possible and write down all the questions you want to ask. It helps if you can keep a diary of the different events with all the details written down, including any witnesses. You should also keep a record of your meetings with the school. If you have emails, texts or photographic evidence be sure to keep it safely.

Stress to the school that you want the matter taken seriously. Do not accept excuses or attempts to put the blame onto your child. If you feel it is necessary, ask for increased supervision at breaks or for a safe place that your child can go to if they feel threatened.

A first step is usually to get both sides of the story. If there have been a lot of incidences of bullying, it may be that other children have seen things and they will need encouragement to talk to the teacher about it. If your child knows the names of children who might have seen something, they should be given to the teacher to investigate further. It is usual to then bring the parents of the bully and the bullied child separately, into school to discuss the situation. Once discussions have taken place with all parents, the school should keep everybody informed of the outcome of the investigation.

Once the investigation has been carried out, the school will need to take action against the bullies and ensure that this does not happen again. Often, a first step is to make the bully apologise to their victim. This puts the blame fairly upon the bully. This may be done face to face or in a note. Your child may be asked which they would prefer. Sometimes, it may be that the school will decide on a suitable punishment for the child, such as lines, detention, being put on report, or in some cases, exclusion. You and your child should be informed what is happening.

Some schools have a "Bullying Box" where children can secretly report any bullying. This often works well and reinforces the 'telling to stop' message. It may be a good idea to ask the school if they have any books in the library on bullying. If they haven't, suggest that they could purchase some. Ask the head teacher, if the school can talk about bullying in assemblies and as part of class work. The pupils could draw pictures, write stories or perform plays for the whole of the school.

Occasionally, schools establish "bully courts". This is where a panel of children, with a teacher as adviser, hear cases of bullying. There are witnesses heard and the full story revealed. The court reaches a decision about the case and may suggest a punishment for the bully. The bully can either accept this or appeal to the head teacher for a different punishment. This can be very effective, but a school using this method needs to have a strong anti-bullying policy, where every child is made aware of bullying and how it is not tolerated at all! The charity 'Kidscape' can usually help schools establish bully courts.

### **What if your child is the bully?**

It can be very distressing to find that your child is bullying other children. It may be that you have visited the school to investigate the situation, only to be told that it is your child that is the bully.

The first thing to do is to try to stay calm. Your child will need support to be helped to realise that what they are doing is wrong. It may help if they are asked to imagine how they would feel if that was done to them. Try to encourage your child to talk about what made them begin to bully other children. Do not try to give them 'a taste of their own medicine' or to shout at them.

The school will probably hold an investigation and you have a right to be informed of everything that is happening, including the decisions on apologising to the other child and any punishment that may be enforced. It may help to consider what has made them start to bully other children. Has a lack of self-confidence made them need to be the centre of attention or are they getting bullied themselves?

### **What if the bully is a teacher?**

There are still some teachers who use threats and humiliation to control their pupils. A teacher may not like a child and continually call them lazy, stupid etc. If you feel that your child is being bullied by a teacher then it is probably best to talk to the teacher concerned, but do not accuse them of bullying. It is probably best to talk to them generally, about your child's progress. Their answers may give you an indication of their attitude. If the situation deteriorates then you will need to bring the matter to the head teacher. A good school will investigate the matter thoroughly. If the teacher has been bullying children, yours may not be the only one and more complaints may emerge. This may then encourage the governors and the education authority to take further action.

You may also consider talking to a dedicated education helpline such as IPSEA or Network 81.

*Ref: Besag Valerie (1989) Bullies and Victims in School OU Press, London and USA.*

## Useful Contacts

**Beat Bullying** <http://www.beatbullying.org/>

Units 1 - 44 Belvedere Road London SE19 2AT

You can email Beat Bullying about general queries at: [hello@beatbullying.org](mailto:hello@beatbullying.org)

You can telephone Beat Bullying on: 0208 771 3377 (9.00am to 6.00pm)

**Kidscape:** <http://www.kidscape.org.uk/>

Helpline for parents 08451 205 204 Lots of advice around bullying and abuse. You can follow them on Facebook and twitter also.

**Family Lives** <http://familylives.org.uk/how-we-can-help/confidential-helpline/>

This organisation runs a confidential help line on 0808 800 2222, and online chat service and email help service. Also on Facebook.

**IPSEA** <http://www.ipsea.org.uk/> Offer a free legally based advice service for all issues relating to special educational needs and education.

**General Advice Line: 0800 018 4016**

**Network 81** <http://www.network81.org/>

Helpline 0845 077 4055 A national network of parents working towards properly resourced inclusive education for all children with special needs.

Further information available from:

Dyspraxia Foundation, 8 West Alley, Hitchin, Herts SG5 1EG

Helpline Tel: 01462 454986

Admin Tel: 01462 455016

Fax: 01462 455052

Web: [www.dyspraxiafoundation.org.uk](http://www.dyspraxiafoundation.org.uk)

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