



## Positive Parenting of Primary Schoolers

# Being Bullied

*Bullying is very common in primary school aged children. As many as one in seven children are bullied at least once a week. Most children will experience bullying at some time. Boys are more likely to be bullied, or bully others, than girls. Bullying may occur in front of other children, but is usually hidden if adults are present. Being bullied can be a traumatic experience. It can affect a child's self-esteem and their attitude to school. This tip sheet gives some suggestions on how to help your child to manage bullying and what action to take if your child is being bullied.*

### What Is Bullying?

Bullying means using one's power to hurt, intimidate or scare others for one's own gain. It ranges from minor teasing to threats and physical violence. It can take many forms:

- *Verbal*—teasing, put downs, name calling.
- *Physical*—pinching, tripping, pushing, fighting.
- *Gesture*—threatening facial expressions or gestures.
- *Extortion*—demanding money, lunches, schoolwork.
- *Exclusion*—being left out of activities.
- *Telephone*—harassment through phone calls.

Some of the worst bullying occurs when several children decide to intimidate one child.

### What Causes Bullying?

Bullying occurs most frequently in late primary school and early high school when children are undergoing physical, social and emotional changes as they enter puberty. At this time, some children experiment with intimidation and power tactics, and others are vulnerable because of changes in their appearance.

Children may bully others because they do not know any better way of solving problems, and their usual way of resolving conflict is with aggression. They may even see their own parents solve problems by fighting or becoming aggressive.

Other children may bully others to gain popularity or to fit in with a certain group. Some children feel bad about themselves and bully others to make themselves feel more powerful.



Some children are more likely to be bullied than others. These children are often more sensitive, cautious and quiet than other children. They may react to bullying in ways which accidentally reward the bully, such as by becoming upset, crying, giving in, handing over money or giving the bully their lunch. Bullies become used to getting what they want and continue to bully others.

### What Are the Effects of Bullying?

The most common reactions to bullying are embarrassment, shame, fear about not being accepted, and low self-esteem. Children who are often tormented by a bully may get anxious, feel sick, have stomach pains, have sleep problems or nightmares, wet the bed or refuse to go to the place where the bullying happens, such as school.

Parents of a child who is bullied may worry about their child. It is hard for parents to know what to do, particularly when their child does not want the school or the bully's parents to be contacted. Children may worry about being bullied more if they are seen to have told tales.

### How To Know if Your Child Is Being Bullied

Many children (at least one in five) do not tell anyone that they are being bullied. However, there are signs to look

for which may indicate that your child is being bullied.

These include:

- Shyness around other children.
- Difficulty expressing their thoughts.
- Low self-esteem or putting themselves down.
- Appearing anxious, fearful or distressed.
- Trying to avoid certain situations, such as refusing to go to school.
- A decline in academic performance.
- Isolation, such as having no one to play with in lunch breaks.
- Increased risk taking.

## **What To Do if Your Child Is Being Bullied**

Bullying should never be ignored and children should not be left to handle a bully on their own. Adults need to take action straight away. Let your child know what you plan to do. Talk to the adults in charge of where the bullying occurs. Some bullying stops as soon as the school, club or other parents become aware of the problem. The bully may be spoken to, watched more closely and helped to find other ways to solve problems.

## **How To Help Your Child Manage Bullying**

### ***Listen to Your Child***

If you know or suspect that your child is being bullied, encourage them to describe exactly what has happened. Ask whether it has happened before and if so, how often.

### ***Ask What Your Child Did***

Sometimes children have tried their own ways of dealing with the problem. Usually they try something once or twice but give up because the bullying continues. Ask your child what happened when they tried to make the bullying stop—*When they called you a sissy, what did you do? What happened then?* Children will sometimes give vague answers, such as *Nothing* or *I tried to ignore them*. Prompt your child to be more specific—*When you say you did nothing, tell me exactly what you said or did*. Acting out the situation can be useful here—*OK, imagine I'm Kim. I come up and call you a sissy and push you out of the line. What do you do?*

### ***Stay Calm***

Children who are teased or bullied need to feel they can talk to their parents about the problem. Stay calm. If you over-react and threaten to call the bully's parents or the school, your child may plead with you not to say anything. They may also stop telling you about bullying. Also, do not assume that it is all the bully's fault. Your own child may have teased or provoked the bully.

## **Summarise the Problem**

A summary draws together the facts—*So, since the beginning of term, Kim and Morgan have been teasing and bullying you at school. They are calling you names, pushing in front of you when you line up to go into class, and threatening to beat you up after school. This has made you scared about going to school and you've been feeling sick in class. So far you've tried ignoring them but that seemed to make it worse. Once you told the teacher. Is that right?*

## **Agree That There is a Problem**

Tell your child that the bullying is a problem and that you need to work out a solution together—*This is just not on. We need to work out a way of getting them to stop.*

## **Explain Possible Reasons for the Bullying**

Children are more likely to try a new way of handling the problem if they understand what is going on and why the problem continues. Most children explain the problem in terms of the bully's nature—*Oh, he's just a bully* or *She's always like that, everyone hates her* or *He's always getting into trouble*. This does not help solve the problem.

It is helpful to give children some other possible reasons for the bullying—*Let's try to think about why this happens. It sounds like Kim and Morgan don't have too many friends. When they tease you, do any of the other kids laugh and join in? Yes, I thought so. Maybe they do this to show the other kids how smart and tough they are. So, they may be doing it to get attention. Or maybe they pick on you because it works. They get what they want. Remember you said that last time they pushed in front of you they got to go first? Maybe Kim and Morgan are so used to getting a reaction when they tease you that they keep doing it. What do you think?*

## **Ask for Your Child's Opinion**

At first, many children do not know how to solve the problem. They may need help to come up with ideas. Start by asking your child a fairly general question—*So how do you want to handle this problem?* or *What else could you try if Kim and Morgan tease you again?*

Get out a piece of paper and ask your child to think of as many solutions to the problem as they can. If your child suggests something, write it down no matter how silly the idea might seem. Do not say whether you think the idea is a good one. Say something like *OK that's one option. Let's think of a few more before we decide what to do.*

## ***Offer Your Own Suggestions***

If you think of other options, write them down after your child has finished. You might suggest your child:

- Ignore the teasing by walking away as soon as it occurs.
- Make friends with other children and play with them during lunch breaks.
- Be confident and assertive with the bullies, for example: *Your teasing doesn't worry me or I'm not going to listen to you.*

## ***Choose a Solution***

Once you have about ten options, ask what your child thinks about each one. Put a tick beside the options that seem reasonable. Cross out those that seem unlikely to work. Help your child choose the best solution to try out.

## ***Practise the Solution***

Act out with your child exactly what to do the next time bullying occurs. Play the role of the bully and have your child play themselves—*Let's pretend I'm Kim and I come up to you and say 'Why don't you get lost, sissy!' What will you say? You show me what you will do.* Let your child act it out and then tell your child what you liked about what they did. Suggest things they might do differently. Keep practising until your child is able to carry out the plan.

Some children cannot carry out their plan because they lack the skills and confidence to face the bully. If this is the case, seek professional help.

## ***Put the Plan into Action***

With your child, decide when to start using the new plan. At first, ask your child each day about how their plan is going. Praise your child for coping with the bully.

## ***If Bullying Occurs at School***

If the bullying is occurring at school and does not stop, arrange a meeting with your child's teacher.

Talk about your concerns with the teacher. Find out whether the school is aware of the problem. Ask what can be done. Many schools have anti-bullying programs where children are taught that bullying is not acceptable and is not tolerated.

## ***What Schools Can Do***

Schools are well placed to detect bullying and to intervene in positive ways. A whole of school approach is required to ensure that children understand that bullying is not acceptable and they have rights and responsibilities. The school can encourage all children to identify bullying and do something about it.

Schools can also run programs to increase the skills that children may lack, such as coping strategies, assertiveness, problem solving and social skills. Teachers can also increase children's experience of success.

The best approach is a collaborative one in which the staff, students, parents and community are made aware that bullying is a concern in the school. Everyone can then work together to form a school policy for preventing, reporting—*anonymously, if necessary*—and managing bullying. The most effective management programs involve increased supervision of students, identifying coping strategies for children who are bullied and teaching bullies how to solve problems without resorting to aggression.

## ***Points To Remember***

It is not helpful to teach or tell your child to fight back, as this can often lead to more bullying. Children who are bullied may not be as strong as the bully, so their fear of losing fights can be quite real. There are better ways of managing bullies. Often the best solution to bullying involves teaching your child to cope with bullies and making changes in the situation where the bullying occurs.

### ***Key Steps***

- If bullying is occurring, take action straight away.
- Listen to your child and find out exactly what has been happening.
- Stay calm.
- Tell your child some possible reasons for the bullying.
- Ask your child's opinion on how to deal with the problem.
- Think of a number of options and choose the ones that seem reasonable and likely to work.
- Act out the solution with your child.
- Check if the chosen solution is successful.

***See the booklet 'Positive Parenting' for more information. If you have any questions or have tried these strategies and are concerned about your child's progress, contact the centre where you were given this tip sheet.***



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