



by Karen Stephens

# Bullying Among Peers: Managing Bullying Behavior and Helping Kids Stand Up for Their Rights

Children bullying others, trying to exert inappropriate power or harm over someone, isn't any parent's dream for their child. But, it happens — among boys and girls.

Children usually don't engage in or experience purposeful bullying until about two years of age. Toddlers under two are at odds sometimes, but it's usually because they want the same person, space, or toy; not because they hold a particular grudge against a peer.

Bullying can crop up among two to five year olds. Two year olds may push, spit, pull hair, or bite — usually due to frustration, limited language skill, or unmet basic needs, such as hunger or fatigue.

Three to five year olds may begin to take personal dislikes to particular peers, though at this stage those feelings are fleeting. Gradually bullying strategies become more intentional.

Preschoolers' bullying behaviors include urges to hit, push, tease, disrupt other's play, hoard toys, reject others from play, or name-call with hurtful language. Preschoolers also may try to get other peers to form "us against him" alliances.

School-agers' bullying can be cruel and prolonged. Their bullying may include: teasing, threatening, beating up, cursing, using stereotypical ethnic, racial, or gender slurs, and shunning or excluding from "cliques." At this age, spreading untrue rumors or sending hateful e-mails can also begin. School-agers bully most often when adults aren't nearby, such as in playgrounds, lunchrooms, or school bathrooms.

During the school-age years, bullying takes on what Barbara Coloroso describes as "contempt" rather than simple anger or conflict. In her book, *The Bully, the Bullied, and the Bystander*, she describes contempt as, "a powerful feeling of dislike toward somebody considered to be worthless, inferior, and undeserving of respect." That sounds terribly scary for school-agers to be up against.

## Symptoms of Children Bullying Others

Below are *possible* indicators that a child bullies. If several or most of these cues rings familiar to you, it's time to make a plan and carry it out. Find ways to keep bullying from becoming an ingrained pattern of a child's personality and behavior.

### Child frequently:

- tries to dominate others' play, choices, and personal preferences
- uses bossy, mean-spirited, or teasing language to get his/her way
- targets younger, physically smaller children or disabled children with chides or teasing
- has few friends, but does belong to a definite clique
- tries to isolate and alienate others from his/her clique
- blames other people for his/her problems
- has trouble getting along with peers or siblings
- seeks out and enjoys media that features violent imagery or language
- has teacher reports of anti-social behavior, lowered school grades, or poor concentration

Insist that your child to accept responsibility for bullying behavior.

- has poor self esteem, but tries to cover it up with bravado
- witnesses domestic or neighborhood aggression and violence.

### **If a Child Bullies — Nip Bullying Behaviors in the Bud**

Bullying isn't just hard for a victim; the conditions that cause bullying are hard, too. It's just harder to see a bully's internal struggles, such as a sense of inadequacy, because they cover it with a superior attitude. Bullying can be a child's cry for help. Frequently family disputes or neighborhood violence contributes to bullying. And sometimes children just pass along the bullying they receive from older siblings. Whatever the root cause, if you observe or are told your child bullies, there are steps for limiting the behavior. The following are some suggestions.

***Protect your child from violent imagery and experiences.*** Don't encourage aggression. If domestic violence takes place in your home, stop it and get professional help from police and counselors. Don't view violent television shows or movies. Limit violent imagery in toys, music, computer games, and electronic devices as well.

***Build self esteem and sense of self-worth.*** Focus on your child's strengths and reinforce them. Affirm that your child is special to you, but others' rights are important, too.

***Nurture positive social skills.*** From the preschool years on, encourage peer play and interactions so friendships develop. Give children chances to practice sharing, negotiating, cooperating, working through conflict, and solving problems respectfully.

***Avoid labeling your child as a bully.*** Do address specific behaviors he/she uses to bully, manipulate, and dominate. Remind your child to control aggressive impulses. Talk about bullying behavior being a choice; your child can choose to bully or not.

***Express your confidence that your child can choose not to bully.*** When your child uses positive social skills, consistently express your admiration for the self-control it takes to resist bullying.

***Respect your child's personal rights and encourage him to respect others'.*** Don't use physical, belittling, or humiliating discipline. If you want your child to be safe around others, practice it first at home. Use positive discipline. State that bullying is inappropriate and won't be tolerated. After setting limits, consistently enforce respectful, reasonable consequences when bullying occurs. Set the standard for respectful behavior and expect it to be met. Don't tolerate your child teasing, hitting, or name-calling someone.

***Expect children to use respectful language during conflict.*** Help children learn alternative ways to solve differences rather than allowing mean-spirited arguments.

***Insist that your child to accept responsibility for bullying behavior.*** If your child harms someone, explore ways to make amends. If an item is broken, expect your child to arrange for repair.

***Nurture your child's capacity for empathy and compassion for others.*** Help your child take others' perspective and feelings into account. Acknowledge whenever children show tenderness or kindness. Children are less likely to bully if they understand the emotional pain they cause. Sometimes reading a book and discussing it can help children explore how others feel when bullied. At this column's end are books, listed by age groups, which can be used for discussion.

***Teach your child to speak out for others' rights if they witness bullying.*** Children often bully for attention or to get approval. If witnesses just stand by, or worse — cheer on bullying, they become part of the problem. When others are bullied, teach your child to tell an adult right away.

***Cooperate with child care or teaching staff to help your child avoid bullying.*** Observe your child in those settings to understand interactions better. Ask professional staff for tips on responding; they have valuable insights.

***Seek counseling for your child if bullying patterns continue despite your best efforts.*** If not avoided, bullying behaviors can mushroom into worse situations as children grow. It's better to provide children with

professional support early. If unchecked, bullying often leads to other delinquent or criminal acts. Counseling can help guide your child down a brighter, more constructive path.

### **If Your Child Is a Target of Bullying**

Before you can resolve bullying, you have to know about it. But children don't always tell us when they are bullied. Sometimes they're too embarrassed or afraid of being a "tattle-tale." That requires parents to become "detectives," puzzling out small clues that ultimately reveal the real problem. Listed below are *possible* indicators of a bullied child. If several or most of these cues applies to your child, it's time to directly ask if they have bully troubles.

#### **Child:**

- has frequent stress-related complaints such as headache, stomach ache, sleep problems, or loss of appetite
- doesn't want to go to child care or school and pretends to be ill to avoid child care or school
- is unusually withdrawn and distracted, especially just before or just after child care or school
- is uncharacteristically sad, anxious, or nervous
- resists riding in the carpool or school bus
- dislikes the playground, bathroom, or lunchroom at child care or school
- has lowered school grades or poor concentration
- has few friends
- has poor or reduced self esteem.

### **Bullying Prevention Tips**

Assertive, confident children with good self-esteem and self-respect repel bullying situations. Helping children acquire those characteristics helps kids protect themselves. Build self-confidence and social competence during early childhood and provide consistent support throughout childhood. The following are some ways to achieve that:

***Be a good role model.*** Don't allow yourself to be bullied by a partner, spouse, neighbor, or boss.

***Respect children's personal rights and encourage siblings to do the same.*** Use positive discipline to build children's self-respect. Don't tolerate siblings or cousins who tease, hit, or name-call each other.

***Help your child acquire assertive, confident body language.*** Those who bully often back down to resistance. Even preschoolers can learn to keep eye contact with peers during conflict. Show school-agers how to walk confidently holding their back and shoulders upright. Maintaining calm composure by *not* running away or crying also takes power away from a bully.

***Coach your child in assertive communication skills.*** Teaching a child to trade verbal insults or punches when bullied doesn't solve a problem. It's better to coach children — preschool age and older — on how to state their personal rights clearly, firmly, and respectfully.

During the preschool years, rather than solving conflict for children, adults can suggest ways children can stand up for themselves. For instance, instead of letting a child have a block grabbed away, an adult can support the child's rights by firmly and kindly stepping in to say, "You don't have to let her take your block. Look at her and tell her you don't like it. Ask for it back."

The adult's physical — and moral — presence usually motivates the aggressor to give back the block (albeit grudgingly). When the problem is resolved, thank both children for their cooperation.

School-agers also benefit from coaching. But unlike preschoolers, their coaching is done away from the conflict situation. Help school-agers "rehearse" ways to respond if bullied. For instance they can walk to a group of friends. Or they can simply walk away from bullying. Supply them with phrases like: "Stop it. I don't like that." "I don't want to talk to you now. Leave me alone." "Move away from me." "I don't like it when you push me; go away." "Those are my things, you can't have them." "I'm using this, you can have it next."

***Help your child understand the difference between "tattling" and asking an adult for help.*** Make sure your child knows that if his/her feelings or body is hurt, he/she should tell you or another adult right away. No child should feel guilty for reaching out for help.

**Teach children to speak out against bullying.** When others are bullied, teach your child to tell an adult right away, just as they would want someone to do for them.

### **If a Child Alerts You to Bullying**

It's never easy for your child to tell you about troubles, but bullying is an especially touchy subject. Avoid making light of an incident. Suggesting a problem "will pass" on its own isn't very reassuring to a child.

Also avoid making a child think the bullying is their fault. Don't make a demeaning accusation inferring your child asked to be bullied, such as: "If you weren't such a big sissy, they wouldn't bother with you."

Some parents become enraged over bullying and over-react. That increases a child's stress, so try to remain calm. Thank your child for telling you about the problem. Listen to and empathize with their feelings. Reassure them you will help stop the situation. Then clearly determine what is happening, when, and where. Help children sort out ways to solve the problem. For instance, at preschool they can choose to play in a learning center away from the child offending them. School-agers can choose to sit by the driver at the front of the bus if bullied to and from school.

Tell your child care's or school's staff about the problem. Let them know how you are handling the situation and ask for their help and cooperation. Until the situation is solved, keep following bullying prevention tips. Maintain frequent communication to support your child. Update your child's teachers of progress — or lack of it. Keep working to ensure your child's safety.

Children don't learn overnight how to control bullying or how to stand up against it. It's a gradual lesson. Your child is lucky to have you guide them in the process. To learn more about bullying, I recommend the parenting book, *The Bully, the Bullied, and the Bystander: From Preschool to High School — How Parents and Teachers Can Help Break the Cycle of Violence* by Barbara Coloroso (New York: Harper/Resource, imprint of Harper/Collins, 2003).

### **Preschool to Kindergarten Books for Discussion**

*Bully* by Judith Caseley (New York: HarperCollins/Greenwillow, 2001)

*How to Lose Your Friends* by Nancy Carlson (New York: Viking, 1994)

*Tootsie Barker Bites* by Barbara Bottner (New York: Putnam, 1992)

*Chrysanthemum* by Kevin Henkes (New York: HarperCollins/Greenwillow, 1991)

*The Lazy Bear* by Brian Wildsmith (London, England: Oxford University Press, 1987)

*Goggles!* by Ezra Jack Keats (New York: Viking, 1969)

### **Elementary School-Age Books for Discussion**

*The Recess Queen* by Alexis O'Neill (New York: Scholastic, 2002)

*Jake Drake: Bully Buster* by Andrew Clements (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001)

*Nobody Knew What To Do: A Story about Bullying* by Becky Ray McCain (Morton Grove, IL: Albert Whitman, 2001.)

*Thank You* by Patricia Polacco. (New York, NY: Philomel, 1998)

*The King of the Playground* by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor. New York, NY: Aladdin, 1994.

*Bully on the Bus* by Carl Bosch. (Seattle, WA: Parenting Press, Inc. 1988)

**About the Author** — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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