



Australian Government

Australian Institute of Family Studies

Child Family Community Australia

# Helping your child stop bullying

## A guide for parents

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# Helping your child stop bullying

It's hard for any parent to believe that their child is bullying another child, but sometimes it happens. You might be feeling shocked, worried, fearful or defensive—these are all normal reactions.

Bullying can be stopped—and parents can make a big difference.

Bullying is a serious concern in ALL schools. For some children, being bullied by their peers can result in a severe reaction to the abuse, including poor self-esteem, depression, anxiety about going to school and even suicidal thoughts.

Bullying is not normal behaviour or just part of growing up—so take it seriously!

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## What is bullying?

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**Bullying is deliberately hurting another person who can't defend themselves, generally making them feel bad. It can continue over time.**

- It can include fighting, threatening, name-calling, teasing, or leaving someone out of a group or activity.
- Bullying can be face-to-face, or it can happen by using the Internet, a mobile phone or similar device (e.g., sending hurtful SMS, emails or posts, images or videos).
- Bullies may act individually or in a group.
- Some children might not begin a bullying incident, but might join in later or encourage the bullying behaviour. This is still bullying.
- Bullying is often hidden from adults.
- Importantly, bullying **is not** "rough play", personal conflicts or arguments, disagreements, dislikes, or random acts of aggression or nastiness.



### Bullying is too important to ignore

Left unchecked, bullying behaviour can continue to hurt your child's social and academic life.

According to experts, young people who bully others are more likely to:

- do poorly in school
- turn to violence as a way to deal with problems
- damage property or steal
- abuse drugs or alcohol
- get in trouble with the law

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## What are the signs?

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It is likely that **a teacher, parent, or another child will tell you** if your child is bullying others.

Your child may be:

- Using verbal or physical aggression to deal with conflict
- Talking about “getting even” with others
- Blaming others for their behaviour or being unwilling to accept responsibility for their actions
- Coming home with items or money that don’t belong to them
- Hanging around with other children who appear aggressive
- Having a hard time expressing feelings and understanding others’ feelings
- Unable to play cooperative games (is an arrogant winner and a sore loser)
- Reacting to questioning with anger or avoidance
- Playing inappropriately with much younger children
- Putting down other children in conversations
- Impulsive
- Fighting often with brothers and sisters

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## What parents can do

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Parents need to take strong and immediate action to prevent bullying behaviour getting out of hand. If you find your child has been involved in some type of bullying, here are three important things you can do:

1. **Manage your reactions and get the facts**
2. **Talk with your child**
3. **Work to resolve the situation**



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## Step 1. Manage your reactions and get the facts

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### Focus on staying calm. Breathe deeply and listen

- While it can be difficult, try to listen to what others are saying about your child.
- Thank the parent or teacher for informing you and acknowledge how difficult it was for them to make the call.
- Tell the teacher or parent that you take this very seriously, and that you will do everything you can to get this behaviour to stop.

### Take time to process the information.

- Write down as much detail as you can. Take contact details. Follow up if you need to get further understanding, or to discuss what you are doing to address the problem.
- Take time for yourself to process how it makes you feel, so that when you talk with your child, you are calm. Try talking it over first with a trusted friend or going for a walk.



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## Step 2. Talk with your child

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- **Try to remain calm and in control.** Tell your child that you got a call, and that you need to know what happened. If you remain calm and approachable, you may hear a lot more. **Avoid** using strong-arm tactics, as this reaction often models bullying itself.
- **Explain** that whatever happened, you are going to help your child get through this. Ask your child:
  - Do you know what they are talking about?
  - What happened?
  - Is any of this true?
- If they can only tell you what the other child did, tell them that you want to hear that, but first you want to hear what *they* did.
  - Can you help me to see why the other kid sees it their way?
  - How would you feel if he or she did that to you?
- **Find out if there is a pattern** to the bullying.
  - How long has the bullying been going on?
  - Does your child target several children or always the same one?
  - What triggers bullying in your child? Is it always at lunchtime?
- **Let your child know firmly that bullying is unacceptable, and that it must stop.**
  - ✓ Let your child know that this is serious and that you are going to help make sure it doesn't continue.
  - ✗ Don't lecture—a simple statement will get your point across better. "I need you to know that bullying is unacceptable, and it must stop."

**Talking it over can also be helpful to find out if your child is upset, jealous, unhappy, or perhaps has been bullied themselves.**

## Step 3. Work to resolve the situation

- **Take it seriously.** Don't minimise your child's behaviour by excusing it as "just once"—it won't go away. Even if you're not worried about long-lasting effects on your child, another child is being hurt.
- **Support the school policy.** Find out about their approach to bullying. If the bullying happened outside of school (e.g., cyberbullying) let the school know and get them on board.
- Talk to the teacher, year level coordinator or school welfare coordinator. Ask them for advice on what you can do from home to help work through the problem. Say that you want to stay in touch and hear how your child is doing. **Call back regularly.**
- **Try to understand what led up to this.** Think about the possible reasons why your child may be behaving this way.

### Ask a teacher or a school counsellor if your child is facing any problems at school

- Is your child feeling sad, angry, lonely, or insecure?
- Are they under stress because of schoolwork or exam pressure?
- Is your child struggling with a particular subject or are they having difficulty making friends?
- Is there previous teasing, or group dynamics?

### Reflect on what is happening at home—do a family check

- Are they worried about a problem at home such as a pet dying, parents fighting or separating?
- Is someone at home bullying your child (a parent, family member, or another adult)?
- Are they jealous of a brother or sister or other children?
- Are you able to set limits and be consistent with discipline?
- Do you provide adequate supervision and take an interest in your child's life?

### Bullying and the law

In some cases, bullying can cross the line into illegal behaviour, including bullying that takes place on the phone or the computer. Parents can be held responsible for phone or computer bullying, which can include facing legal action or losing their phone or Internet accounts.



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## Things you can do with your child

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- Help your child to identify exactly what he or she did and to be **accountable** and **responsive** by saying sorry and finding a way forward.
- Make clear simple, specific rules. Offer encouragement when rules are followed.
- Set age-appropriate consequences, such as no television or loss of privileges. Be ready to follow through.
- Give your child some goals and reward good behaviour. "If you behave then you will be allowed more pocket money or a treat of some kind."
- Increase supervision. Keep an eye on your child's activities, whereabouts and friends, including their Internet and mobile phone use (these are fast becoming one of the key tools in bullying behaviour). Talk to the school about options for extra playground or class supervision.
- Engage in your child's digital world (do you know all of the different social media apps your child might be using?). Encourage alternative activities (non-violent games/TV) and friends, if needed.
- Show interest and concern. Help your child understand his/her feelings.
- Make time to spend with your child each day—read with your child or tell family stories.
- Praise and notice their achievements, especially small ones.
- Display things your child has made and recognitions they receive from the school or the community. "It's great to see you working so hard!"
- If your child is active and boisterous—get them moving in a positive way, for example walking the dog, or setting the table. Talk to their teacher about useful ways to divert excess energy at school, for example getting equipment ready, putting out chairs, etc.
- Focus on teaching pro-social ways to deal with conflict and ways to avoid situations.
  - **Walking away is often the best option to create the distance needed to cool down. Other ways can include deep breathing or going to a "time-out room" to cool off.**
  - **Teach face-saving ways to fend off hassles from others, for example "I'm not going there", "Whatever you say", "yeah, yeah ..."**



## Things you can do as a family

- ✓ Create a calm atmosphere at home. Avoid stress and reduce conflict among family members.
- ✓ Encourage kind or neutral words with family and others.
- ✓ Monitor name-calling and any physical fights between siblings.
- ✓ Notice and acknowledge when your children are behaving well.
- ✓ Talk regularly about what's acceptable and what's not.
- ✓ Have many more positive than negative statements in daily interactions. Work toward cooperative ways to resolve issues.
- ✓ Model healthy ways of dealing with conflict and tension.
- ✓ Use discussion and guidance rather than coercion and control strategies.
- ✓ Watch how you talk to your children and how you react to your own strong emotions. Violence or aggression—physical or verbal—is not a good coping tool.
- ✓ Attend school and extracurricular activities.

## Things to avoid

- ✗ Don't look for someone to blame. "She didn't learn that at home. It must be the school's fault!"
- ✗ Don't justify the behaviour by saying, "Well, this happened to my child so he was just acting in response." Remember the saying, "two wrongs don't make a right".
- ✗ Don't say, "I know my child and she would never do that!" You don't necessarily know "who" she is on the playground or at a slumber party.
- ✗ Don't make direct contact with the alleged victim's parents—this may only inflame the situation.
- ✗ Don't make positive comments about bullying (e.g., avoid congratulating them for "standing up for themselves")—as this will encourage them to keep doing it.

## Get help

If you are worried that things are getting worse or your child doesn't seem to think before acting, it's a good idea to seek professional advice.

Persistent bullying behaviour can take time to change—getting professional support can make a difference.



## Acknowledgements

Thank you to Dr Michael Carr-Gregg (adolescent psychologist and author) for valuable feedback on an earlier version of this paper.



## Key things to remember

While it is a normal reaction to feel shocked, worried, fearful or even to deny or defend the bullying—try to listen to what others are saying about your child.

**Stay calm** Avoid blame and focus on potential solutions.

**Talk with your child** Let them know firmly that bullying is unacceptable, and that it must stop

**Ask why** Try to find out if there is something troubling your child either at school or at home

**Get on board** Take it seriously. Support the school policy

**Set clear, but reasonable rules** Reward good behaviour and follow through with consequences

**Monitor your child** Supervise your child and give them immediate feedback on their progress

**Create a respectful home** Encourage respectful and kind actions between family members

**Spend time with your child** Nurture your relationship and model positive ways of dealing with conflict

**Make a commitment** Support your child's efforts to improve

**Get help** If things don't improve, it's a good idea to seek professional advice

**Children can't learn without making mistakes. It's how we help them deal with those mistakes that matter.**

## Help lines and other support

**Parent Helpline:** 1300 364 100

**Youth Healthline:** 1300 13 17 19

**Kids Helpline:** 1800 55 1800

*Find a psychologist service*

**Search for a psychologist in your area:**  
**1800 333 497 or online** <[www.psychology.org.au/findapsychologist](http://www.psychology.org.au/findapsychologist)>

- A comprehensive evaluation of your child can identify if there are underlying, unknown issues such as anxiety, depression, learning problems, or impulsivity, and can be extremely useful for working out what kinds of help your child might need.
- Counselling can explore ways in which your child thinks, feels and reacts, and can help your child to stop bullying.
- If your child is experiencing parental separation or death, they may need professional counselling.

## More information?

Other bullying resources are available at:  
<[www.aifs.gov.au/cfca/focuson/bullying.html](http://www.aifs.gov.au/cfca/focuson/bullying.html)>



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