

Bullying in schools - what parents can do

In the second of three articles, BSA education officer Cherry Hughes describes the warning signs of bullying and how to deal with the problem.

It is important to remember that many children will go through both primary and secondary school without meeting any malicious teasing or bullying. Parents of children who stammer should not worry unnecessarily that their child may meet this. However, it would be naive to believe that our children will never face this, as stammering can attract the attention of bullies looking for someone to pick on who appears different.

Signs that might indicate your child is being bullied

- a general reluctance to go to school or a sudden desire to go to school by a different route
- any unexplained bruises or other injury
- frequently losing property or asking for extra money
- general moodiness or behavioural changes

Mobile phones and the internet

If your child has a mobile phone, a new development in the practices of the bullies is to send threatening text messages or leave an unpleasant message on the answer phone. Sometimes a child who is being bullied has received threatening e-mails, or as in one case, been the subject of a concerted unpleasant campaign by other children through e-mails and/or in unmonitored chat rooms. Parents clearly need to monitor their child's use of the new technology of communication.

If a parent believes that their child is being bullied then it can be helpful to observe the child's behavioural changes carefully and check for less worrying causes in so far as that can be done. Sometimes a break-up with a close friend, failure to be picked for a team (or similar) might be at the root of the problem and in those cases time usually heals, as we all have to learn to cope with setbacks. If no obvious cause is found, the possibility of issues at school, perhaps bullying, must be gently raised at an appropriate time in a quiet chat. It is usually other children inside or outside the school who are responsible for behaviour of this sort but occasionally it may be an adult, perhaps a teacher, assistant or someone connected with leisure pursuits. Whoever it is and whatever their status or standing they should not be doing it, and parents must be prepared to confront it.

Action for parents

Step one

When you talk with your child, show by your demeanour and body language that you feel supportive. This is not always as easy to do as it sounds because some adults may really believe that it is part of growing up to be able to 'see off' the bullies. The best advice is that a child should always 'tell' on the bullies: if it is difficult to do this directly through fear of reprisals, a note in a bully box in the school, or a note from parents to the form tutor should answer the need for discretion. Remember that all state schools are obliged by the government to have policies and procedures on

tackling bullying and you can ask for copies of these before you make an approach to the school, if that is reassuring.

Step two

Write down all the information that you get in the chats with your child; incidents, dates and times, names of people involved and of those who may have witnessed it. Add to your list any changes in behaviour or attitude that you have noticed that you now feel is connected with the bullying. If you have concerns about your child's health consult your GP and seek his opinion so that a medical report could be supplied if necessary.

Initially, an early meeting with the class teacher, form tutor or the Head of Year when your information is presented and discussed might be sufficient to have the matter dealt with and the culprits identified and punished. Provided there is feedback to your child and he meets regularly with the designated teacher to report on progress, the whole matter may be resolved successfully. However, it is when nothing seems to have improved and the bullies continue their persecution that parents must resort to a more formal approach to the school.

Step three

Compile detailed notes as previously to include any discussion with your GP or other professional, such as the speech and language therapist. Make it clear what effects you and these professionals believe that the bullying is having, and if appropriate, ask them to write a short report. Then write a formal letter to the Head requesting a formal meeting as soon as possible and copy the letter to the Chairman of Governors and, if you feel the matter is very serious, to the Director of Education. Attach your notes and any professional reports explaining to the Head what the school has done so far and how it is failing to stop the bullying. Request a copy of the school's policy on bullying and the records of your child's progress in the school so these can be referred to at the meeting. If you think that some support at this meeting would be helpful invite a relative/friend, or contact the parent partnership officer in the authority to enquire if they have an advocacy service.

When you meet with the Head make sure that each of your concerns is discussed and a suitable course of action proposed. Make a note of these and at the end of the meeting ask if you may read them out to ensure there is agreement. Follow up the meeting with a letter to the Head listing those agreed actions and asking that they are implemented and any difficulties reported back to you.

If the bullying still continues you may feel your child is at risk by attending school. Ask the GP to provide a sick note as the child is unable to go to school because of stress caused by the bullying. It is unwise to keep your child at home otherwise, as you have a legal duty to send him to school and your failure to do so could cloud the issue. Now you really have no alternative but to involve a solicitor and possibly the police, so that court proceedings may result. This rarely does happen as most cases are settled out of court.

The first case that reached court was in October 2000 and the victim was awarded £1,500 against the local authority that had failed in its duty of care.

This latter scenario is thankfully rare and most cases in the state sector are resolved satisfactorily before such formality is needed. The government requires state schools to have procedures in place but in the private sector there is no such compulsion and school practice will be more idiosyncratic. Parents considering private education should enquire about the school policy on bullying and seek formal reassurance that policies and procedures are in place.

In the [next article](#) I will discuss some methods that schools use to deal with bullying.

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