

Bullying: How to Help the Victim

As many as 20% of all children attending school are afraid through much of the school day. Some of these children avoid lunch, recess, and the bathrooms out of fear that they will be humiliated or picked on by bullies. These are not children who are teased occasionally or who sometimes get into fights with their peers. These are children who are targeted over and over again. They cannot defend themselves against stronger, more powerful peers. This power imbalance is the essence of bullying.

The consequences of growing up as a victim or a bully can be very severe. Victims may suffer from anxiety, low self-esteem, and depression. Their academic progress may be slowed. As they grow older, girl victims may become involved in relationships in which they are abused. Some victims attempt suicide out of desperation, believing that no one will help them.

Research shows that a bully suffers also. Many bullies fail to keep jobs or maintain interpersonal relationships when they reach early adulthood. A high percentage are convicted of crimes by age 24.

How to Find Out If Your Child Is Being Bullied

To find out if your child is being bullied, look for these signs:

- excuses for not wanting to go to school
- unexplained bruises
- torn clothing
- need for extra school supplies or money
- continually losing belongings
- problems sleeping
- sudden loss of appetite
- sudden academic problems
- secretive or sullen behavior or temper outbursts
- big appetite after school (ASK WHY: someone may be taking lunch or money)
- excessive trips to the school nurse, especially during unstructured time (such as lunch or recess)
- rushing to the bathroom after school (ASK WHY: your child may be frightened to use the bathroom at school due to threats).

How to Help: Steps to Bully Proof Your Child

1. Teach your child self-respect.

Confident children are less likely to become victims. Teach your child how to use "self talk," which is a silent pep talk one can use when feeling picked on. The

child should select something good about him- or herself and think about that during difficult moments.

2. Encourage friendships.

There is strength in numbers. Encourage your child to walk down the hall, into the lunchroom, or out to recess with others. Bullies will quickly target a child who is alone. Your child should stay near others even if they are not close friends. Better yet, your child should make close friends and the children should protect one another.

3. Teach your child effective skills for making friends.

Skills for making friends include how to share, compromise, change the topic to avoid conflict, apologize when appropriate, and use a diplomatic approach.

4. Build social skills.

Problem-solve difficult social situations and practice diplomatic responses during the dinner hour. Something that has been practiced is easier to use when a difficult moment arises. Social skill groups are available in many schools today and books for both parents and children can be found in local libraries and bookstores.

5. Stress the importance of body language.

A submissive or victim stance may attract bullies. Your child should not have an intimidated, slouched appearance. Encourage your child to stand up straight and hold his or her head high. If a bully approaches, your child shouldn't freeze. It is best to walk away and join a group of children.

6. Do not encourage physically attacking the bully.

Bullies are usually stronger or have better social-networking skills than their victims. More often than not, attacking bullies will provoke them to take revenge.

7. Let the school know your safety worries.

Talk to the principal and teachers about your concerns.

8. Teach your child protective strategies.

The following six strategies can help your child with bullies: Help, Assert yourself, Humor, Avoid, Self talk, Own it. These six strategies are easily remembered by children with the phrase "HA HA SO." Children are encouraged to imagine an invisible shield that drops over them with the letters HA HA SO on

the shield. They can use these protective strategies and one or more can be chosen during a bullying situation.

H Help. Get help. Find a friend or adult you can count on.

A Assert yourself. Use an "I" statement to protect yourself. Say something like, "I like being different" or "I am sorry you don't want to get to know me better before you call me that."

H Humor. Use humor. Do or say something funny or even something just plain outrageous to throw the bully off balance. For example, if called a "chicken," start walking like a chicken and flapping your arms.

A Avoid. Stay away from bullies. If you notice a bully and can take another path across the playground, do that.

S Self talk. Give yourself a silent pep talk, reminding yourself of positive things. For example, you might think of something like, "I may not be good at track, but I'm proud of how I play the clarinet."

O Own it. If the put-down is about clothing or something you can change, just agree with the bully. Say something like, "Yeah, I don't like this sweater either. It sure is ugly, but I wore it because my aunt made it and she is visiting this week." (Caution your child not to use this technique for something inherent to the child, such as skin color or ethnic group.) If the put-down is about something you can't or don't want to change, hold your head high, own who you are with pride, and tell the other child you like being who you are.

Bully Proofing Your School

There is a comprehensive program for schools that addresses bully/victim problems. "Bully Proofing Your School" is available in both elementary, middle school and a new early childhood version from Sopris West at:

Sopris West
4093 Specialty Place
Longmont, Colorado 80504

800-547-6747

<http://www.sopriswest.com>

or

<http://www.bullyproofing.org>

(for parent information)

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