

## Bullying: Peer Abuse in Schools

Every day in our Nation's schools, children are threatened, teased, taunted and tormented by schoolyard bullies. For some children, bullying is a fact of life that they are told to accept as a part of growing up. Those who fail to recognize and stop bullying practices as they occur actually promote violence, sending the message to children that might indeed makes right.

Bullying often leads to greater and prolonged violence. Not only does it harm its intended victims, but it also negatively affects the climate of schools and the opportunities for all students to learn and achieve in school.

### Strategies for Classroom Teachers

- ✚ Provide students with opportunities to talk about bullying and enlist their support in defining bullying as unacceptable behavior.
- ✚ Involve students in establishing classroom rules against bullying. Such rules may include a commitment from the teacher to not "look the other way" when incidents involving bullying occur.
- ✚ Develop a classroom action plan to ensure that students know what to do when they observe a bully/victim confrontation.
- ✚ Take immediate action when bullying is observed. All teachers and school staff must let children know that they care and will not allow anyone to be mistreated. By taking immediate action and dealing directly with the bully, adults support both the victim and the witnesses.
- ✚ Confront bullies in private. Challenging a bully in front of his/her peers may actually enhance his/her status and lead to further aggression.
- ✚ Notify the parents of both victims and bullies when a confrontation occurs, and seek to resolve the problem expeditiously at school.
- ✚ Refer both victims and aggressors to counseling whenever appropriate.
- ✚ Listen receptively to parents who report bullying and investigate reported circumstances so that immediate and appropriate school action may be taken.
- ✚ Avoid attempts to mediate a bullying situation. The difference in power between victims and bullies may cause victims to feel further victimized by the process or believe that they are somehow at fault.

### Strategies for Students

Students may not know what to do when they observe a classmate being bullied or experience such victimization themselves. Classroom discussions and activities may help students develop a variety of appropriate actions that they can take when they witness or experience such victimization. For instance, depending on the situation and their own level of comfort, students can:

- ✚ Seek immediate help from an adult.
- ✚ Report bullying/victimization incidents to school personnel.
- ✚ Speak up and/or offer support to the victim when they see him/her being bullied - for example, picking up the victim's books and handing them to him or her.
- ✚ Privately support those being hurt with words of kindness or condolence.
- ✚ Express disapproval of bullying behavior by not joining in the laughter, teasing or spreading of rumors or gossip

- Attempt to defuse problem situations either single-handedly or in a group - for example, by taking the bully aside and asking him/her to "cool it".

## Strategies for Parents

The best protection parents can offer their children who are involved in a bully/victim conflict is to foster their child's confidence and independence and to be willing to take action when needed. The following suggestions are offered to help parents identify appropriate responses to conflict experienced by their children at school.

- Be careful not to convey to a child who is being victimized that something is wrong with him/her or that he/she deserves such treatment. When a child is subjected to abuse from his or her peers, it is not fair to fault the child's social skills. Respect is a basic right: All children are entitled to courteous and respectful treatment. Convince your child that he or she is not at fault and that the bully's behavior is the source of the problem.
- It is appropriate to call the school if your child is involved in a conflict as either a victim or a bully. Work collaboratively with school personnel to address the problem. Keep records of incidents so that you can be specific in your discussion with school personnel about your child's experience at school.
- Offer support to your child but do not encourage dependence on you. Rescuing your child from challenges or assuming responsibility yourself when things are not going well does not teach your child independence. The more choices a child has to make, the more he or she develops independence, and independence can contribute to self-confidence.
- Do not encourage your child to be aggressive or to strike back. Chances are that it is not his or her nature to do so. Rather, teach your child to be assertive. A bully often is looking for an indication that his/her threats and intimidation are working. Tears or passive acceptance only reinforces the bully's behavior. A child who does not respond as the bully desires is not likely to be chosen as a victim. For example, children can be taught respond to aggression with humor and assertions rather than acquiescence.
- Be patient. Conflict between children more than likely will not be resolved overnight. Be prepared to spend time with your child, encouraging your child to develop new interests or strengthen existing talents and skills that will help develop and improve his/her self-esteem. Also help your child to develop new or bolster existing friendships. Friends often serve as buffers to bullying.
- If the problem persists or escalates, you may need to seek an attorney's help or contact local law enforcement officials. Bullying or acts of bullying should not be tolerated in the school or the community. Students should not have to tolerate bullying at school any more than adults would tolerate such situations at work.