

**Q & A—How can my child cope best with bullying?
Ruth A. Peters, Ph.D.**

Question: We've recently moved into a new neighborhood. My soon-to-be-sixth grade son has made a few buddies, but there is also a bully living close by who seems to have targeted him by frequently teasing and taunting my boy.

In addition to the fact that he's come home with his feelings hurt he has also had the occasional bleeding elbow or knee from being pushed too hard in a game or his bike rammed from behind.

My husband and I have always preached to him the nonviolent response of walking away from a fight, but I'm beginning to think that he may have to stand up for himself toward this neighborhood tyrant. What's the best thing for him to do?

Answer: The majority of studies about childhood bullying have generally focused upon the perpetrator, with the most common interpretation being that the bully is compensating for a weakness in his own self-concept, attempting to feel better by asserting control over another, perhaps weaker, child. Other research suggests that some bullies can be popular kids, those who tend to deal with situations in a physically or verbally taunting manner, and many of these youngsters are even admired for their power and control over others, especially in the grade school years.

A significant part of the bullying-victim dynamic, though, is based upon the personality and behavioral style of the child who is being picked upon. Part of this dynamic may be based in the victim's avoidance of "fighting back" and the bully's interpretation of this as passive weakness. Bullies tend to pick upon children who may be viewed as different in some fashion (physical differences, speaking with a dissimilar accent, non-athletic, shy or quiet). However, recent studies indicate that *any* child can be the victim of a bully if that youngster appears to be vulnerable and without a support group to come to his aid.

So, what's the best way for your son to handle the oppressor? Some children naturally know how to effectively deal with the intimidating nature of a bully. Some get back in the bully's face ("Don't ever push me again!" said in a stern voice), or have an unusually perceptive way of turning the tense situation into a humorous event. Playing along with the bully's teasing while making the taunt seem ridiculous, laughing at oneself and moving the situation on to another topic or giving the perfect "zinger" back at the offender can often throw the bully off-track and into retreat mode. These ingenious kids tend to be naturally charismatic, quick-witted and have a knack for working with people.

However, if your child is not verbally quick on his feet and may stumble when teased or criticized it may be time for some coaching on your part. Role-play some strong, firm comebacks that he can utilize ("Stop picking on me. I don't like it and you may not push me again!" This said in a firm voice may convince the bully that your son is not an easy target). Also, discuss with your child what physical actions he can take—if tripped,

shoved or pushed should he push back a bit to show that he's not going to passively take the abuse? Would knowledge of and expertise in self-defense give him the confidence to better stand his ground and to not retreat so quickly? Should he try to call upon some of the other kids playing in the neighborhood to offer safety in numbers—putting the bully on notice that your son has friends who will stand by him in his time of need?

I'm not suggesting that you teach your son to deal with teasing and harassment by automatically using aggression himself. It's more a matter of *giving the perception* that he will not run away, back down, or tolerate the bully's abuse. Standing firm, distracting with humor, or calling upon the aid of friends are tactics that are often sufficient to stop a skirmish and to persuade the bully to take his attentions elsewhere.

Finally, a bully in the neighborhood, school yard or classroom should *never be tolerated* by the adults in charge. It's your responsibility as a parent to approach the offending youngster's parents if it is a neighborhood problem, or the administration if it occurs at school. Administrators have adopted a zero (or close to it!) policy when it comes to either physical or verbal intimidation, and will move quickly to resolve the issue. This may mean speaking with the offending youth, giving a consequence (detention or suspension if repeated), or even a change of schools may be in order for the bullying child.

In your neighborhood, most likely this youngster has picked on other children in addition to your son, and his parents may now be responsive to your concerns, especially if they realize that the aggression has led to physical harm. They are ultimately responsible for their child's behavior, and assault is illegal, at any age. They can restrict their child's access to free play in the neighborhood or give him negative consequences when others' complain about his aggression. If they are not receptive to your concerns, you may be able to offer some creative solutions to how, where and when you son can safely play with the other kids, be it at their homes, in your yard, or under adult supervision. Hopefully the bully will, if lonely enough, begin to respond to the ostracism and treat others more civilly, perhaps being invited again into the play circle.

Dr. Peters' Bottom Line: If your child is able to either laugh off a tease or to stand up for himself verbally, it is less likely he will be bullied. A good way to promote this type of confidence is if he feels he can defend himself physically, is ready with some tried-and-true verbal comebacks, and is willing to call upon his friends for back-up.