

Teaching children not to be -- or be victims of -- bullies

Parents and teachers are sometimes reluctant to intervene in conflicts between young children. They don't want to see children harm or ridicule one another, but they want to encourage children to learn how to work out problems for themselves. In such cases, adults have a responsibility to stop violence or aggression in the classroom or at home -- both for children who demonstrate harmful behavior and for all other children. We can teach children not to take part in -- or become victims of -- bullying.

Children who demonstrate aggression, or "bully" other children may be unable to initiate friendly interactions, express their feelings, or ask for what they need. If these children do not improve their social skills, they will continue to have problems relating to peers throughout their lives. In addition, if other children see that aggressors get what they want through bullying, they are more likely to accept or imitate this undesirable behavior.

Young children who are unable to stand up for themselves are easy targets for aggressive playmates. These children inadvertently reward bullies by giving in to them, and risk further victimization. Adults do not help by speaking for victims and solving their problems for them. Children must learn that they have the right to say "No," not only when they are threatened, but in a wide range of everyday situations.

The key to promoting positive interactions among young children is teaching them to assert themselves effectively. Children who express their feelings and needs while respecting those of others will be neither victims nor aggressors. Adults must show children that they have the right to make choices -- in which toys they play with, or (within boundaries) what they wear and what they eat. The more children trust and value their own feelings, the more likely they will be to resist peer pressure, to respect warm and caring adults, and to be successful in achieving their personal goals.

How to teach children assertiveness skills

- Demonstrate assertive behavior (e.g., saying "No" to another child's unacceptable demands) and contrast aggressive or submissive responses through demonstrations. Let children role-play with puppets or dolls.
- Intervene when interactions seem headed for trouble and suggest ways for children to compromise, or to express their feelings in a productive way.
- Teach children to seek help when confronted by the abuse of power (physical abuse, sexual abuse, or other) by other children or adults.
- Remind children to ignore routine teasing by turning their heads or walking away. Not all provocative behavior must be acknowledged.

- Teach children to ask for things directly and respond directly to each other. Friendly suggestions are taken more readily than bossy demands. Teach children to ask nicely, and to respond appropriately to polite requests.
- After a conflict between children, ask those involved to replay the scene. Show children how to resolve problems firmly and fairly.
- Show children how to tell bullies to stop hurtful acts and to stand up for themselves when they are being treated unfairly.
- Encourage children not to give up objects or territory to bullies (e.g., say, "I'm using this toy now"). Preventing bullies from getting what they want will discourage aggressive behavior.
- Identify acts of aggression, bossiness, or discrimination for children and teach them not to accept them (e.g., say, "Girls are allowed to play that, too").
- Show children the rewards of personal achievement through standing up for themselves, rather than depending on the approval of others solely.

Additional Resources:

NAEYC. 1986. *Helping children learn self-control*. Washington, DC: NAEYC. #572/50¢.

Slaby, R., W.C. Roedell, D. Arezzo, & K. Hendrix. 1995. *Early violence prevention: Tools for teachers of young children*. Washington, DC: NAEYC. #325/\$7.

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