

For Parents: What to Do if Your Child is a Bully



It's a call no parent wants to get: Your child bullied another child at school. But it happens a lot. About 1 in 5 children and teens ages 12 to 18 report that they were bullied over the past year.

You don't want to think about your kid deliberately hurting others. But bullying isn't just a problem for the victim. Bullies themselves are more likely to have mental health issues like depression or anxiety. They also may find it harder to control their emotions. This might make it hard for them to succeed later in childhood and adulthood, both at school and in their relationships.

Here's what you can do as a parent to stop the bullying.

Why kids bully

There are many reasons why children and teens bully. These are some of the most common ones:

- They want attention. If parents are going through a divorce, illness, financial issues, or other stressful situations, their child may feel neglected. This could be their way to get noticed.
- Your child wants to fit in with other kids who pick on a classmate.
- They are getting bullied at home.
- They have low self-esteem. When they bully, they feel a sense of power.
- They've been bullied themselves.
- They don't know how to handle their emotions or social situations.

Signs your child is a bully

Anyone can be a bully. But here are some signs that your child may be one or is at risk of becoming one:

- They don't see violence as bad.
- They're aggressive toward you or other adults.
- They often test limits and break rules.
- They're good at talking their way out of bad situations.
- They're impulsive.
- They get easily frustrated.
- They don't show sympathy to other kids who get bullied.

These signs don't always mean your child will become a bully. But if you get reports that they are bullying others, address it right away. Kids who bully are more likely to become involved in drugs and alcohol, get poor grades, and even move on to crimes like stealing and vandalizing.

What parents can do

If your child is a bully, take it seriously. Tell them that bullying isn't OK, and there will be consequences if they don't stop. Here are some ways to help them:

Talk with them. You need to figure out why they are bullying others. Here are some questions to help get to the bottom of it:

- What was going on when you did this?
- What were you thinking and feeling at the time?
- How do you feel about it now?
- How do you think the kid you bullied felt?
- What other ways could you have handled this?
- Have you done this before?
- If you were the one who was bullied, what would make you feel better?

The goal here is to help your child learn from this and work through why they bullied, so that next time they find better ways to deal with the situation.

Teach them to respect others. Your child or teen needs to know it's never OK to make fun of other kids, even if they are different. That includes a person's race, religion, how they look, if they have a disability, and if they have a lower economic status. One way to encourage tolerance is to have them join a community group where they can meet other kids from different backgrounds.

Check out their friend group. Who do they hang out with at school and outside of school? If these kids are also bullies or get in trouble, they may not be a good fit for your child. Try getting your child involved in after-school activities, like sports, community service, or theater. This can help them form friendships with other kids who may be better influences.

Watch them at home. Bullying is often learned in a household. If a sibling is mean to them or gets physical with them, they may lash out at others at school. Take a hard look at your own behavior, too. Do you yell at them frequently? Are you very critical? If you act aggressively, they will follow your example.

Work with the school. They can help you put together an action plan to stop the bullying. It's especially important to do this if your child has a condition that may make them more likely to act out, like ADHD. If your child knows the school is watching them closely, they're also more likely to behave.

Make consequences—and enforce them. Your child or teen needs to know that you won't tolerate bullying. If they harass other kids on social media, for instance, stop phone or computer privileges for a set period. If they're mean to another child at school, they can't go to their planned sleepover for the weekend. Just don't take something away for too long. If a child thinks they're not getting a privilege back, they may lose motivation to try to act better.

Have them fix mistakes. It can mean different things in different situations. If they sent a cruel text to another kid, maybe they can apologize in person. Or if they exclude others, have them invite the children to your house to make amends.

When to get outside help

Sometimes you can't handle bullying on your own. Here are some signs that you should get your child evaluated by a mental health professional:

- They're going through something stressful at home, like a recent death or divorce.
- Your child has always had trouble controlling anger.
- Your child also has a condition, such as ADHD, depression, or anxiety.

It can be hard to get your child to stop bullying. But it won't end on its own. If you stop it now, you'll help them get on a better path.

If your child is talking about hurting themselves or others, get help immediately. Talk with their healthcare provider. Call or text the [988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline](https://www.988lifeline.org/). An online chat choice is also available. Lifeline is free and available 24/7. Remove firearms, medicines, or other items, or keep them in locked storage.

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