

Cyber Bullying User Manual

What is known about bullying and how it relates to parents and caregivers?

Because of the influence that parents and caregivers have on the attitudes and behaviors of their children, and their concern and responsibility for their well-being, parents play critical roles in preventing and addressing bullying. Although parents have a good understanding of what bullying is and the negative effects it can have on children (Sawyer, Mishna, Pepler, & Wiener, 2011), they typically believe that their children are less involved in bullying (as victims and as perpetrators of bullying) than their children report (Holt, Kaufman Kantor, & Finkelhor, 2009; Stockdale, Hangaduambo, Duys, Larson, & Sarvela, 2002).

One reason that parents may be unaware of their children's involvement in bullying is that kids often do not tell their parents about their experiences. In a study of U.S. students in grades 3-12, fewer than half (49% of bullied girls and 38% of bullied boys) said they had told a parent about their experience (Limber, Olweus, & Wang, 2012). The likelihood of reporting bullying experiences to parents decreases with age (Limber et al., 2012).

Parents' and Caregivers' Unique Role in Addressing Bullying

How can parents and caregivers help to prevent bullying?

Parents and caregivers can help prevent bullying and respond to it effectively by using these research-based best practices:

Begin early. Aggressive behavior in young children is very common (Hanish, Kochenderfer-Ladd, Fabes, Martin, & Denning, 2004), but if these behaviors are not addressed, they can lead to bullying and other problems with peers. Parents can work to stop these

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behaviors before they become habitual by encouraging cooperative behaviors such as helping, sharing, and problem-solving.

- **Show warmth and be engaged.** Having parents who are disengaged (e.g., parents who spend little time with their children or do not regularly supervise their activities) increases the likelihood that a child will bully others; while having warm, involved parents reduces this likelihood (Espelage, Bosworth, & Simon, 2000; Olweus, 1993).

- **Learn about bullying** and dispel myths about its nature, prevalence, effects, and best practices in prevention. The StopBullying.gov infographic might be a helpful tool in grasping key information and sharing it with others.

- **Talk about bullying.** Talking with kids about bullying helps them understand what it is, why it is harmful, and how to respond. Discuss and practice what they can do when they encounter bullying. Give tips for dealing with bullying that they may experience, such as saying “stop” directly and confidently, walking away, and getting help from adults. Talk about how they can help others who are being bullied, by speaking up, showing kindness, and telling an adult.

- **Model how to treat others with kindness and respect.** Children learn by example and will reflect the attitudes and behaviors of their parents/caregivers. Problems in the family environment may increase the likelihood of bullying. For example, exposure to family conflict, parental use of drugs and alcohol, domestic violence, and child abuse is related to a greater likelihood of bullying others and also being bullied by peers (Baldry, 2003; Holt, Finkelhor, & Kaufman Kantor, 2007; Shields & Cicchetti, 2001).

- **Develop clear rules and expectations about how children should treat others.** Enforce these rules with natural and appropriate consequences that emphasize teaching appropriate behavior, not punishment. Children whose parents use parenting styles that are authoritative (that permit independence but also set limits and are responsive to their child’s needs) are less likely to be involved in bullying (Bowes, Arseneault, Maughan, Taylor, Casi, & Moffitt, 2009; Olweus, 1993). On the other hand, parents who are overly permissive and those who use overly harsh discipline are more likely to have children who bully.

- **Encourage children to speak up if they are bullied or witness others being bullied.** Identify one or two trusted adults at school to whom your child can report bullying that they experience, see, or suspect. Encourage them to report bullying to you; take these reports seriously.

- **Encourage kids to do what they love.** Special activities, interests, and hobbies can boost confidence, help kids make friends with peers outside of school, and protect them from bullying behavior.

Learn about bullying prevention policies and practices at your child's school and in leagues, clubs, and activities in the community. Offer to support their efforts. Become familiar with steps to address bullying within your school or community organizations.

Know the difference between bullying and harassment and what steps to take if you suspect or know that your child has been harassed. Although bullying and harassment sometimes overlap, not all bullying is harassment and not all harassment is bullying. Under federal civil rights laws, harassment is unwelcome conduct based on a protected class (race, national origin, color, sex, age, disability, religion) that is severe, pervasive, or persistent and creates a hostile environment.

Challenges & Opportunities for Parents and Caregivers

Parents and caregivers may face a number of challenges and opportunities in addressing bullying with their children and/or in their community.

Children and youth are often reluctant to disclose bullying. Therefore, parents and caregivers should be watchful for possible warning signs that their child may be bullied, either in-person or online.

Ongoing and sustained efforts matter. Because of changing dynamics of a child's peer relations, parents should plan to have ongoing conversations with their children about bullying. Check in often, listen to their concerns, know their friends, ask about school, and aim to understand their concerns.

Children and youth are not necessarily safe from bullying within the home. They may engage in or be exposed to cyberbullying through computers, cell phones, or other mobile devices. Establish clear rules for interacting online and through cell phones, educate children about appropriate technology use, and monitor your child's activities (Kowalski, Limber, & Agatston, 2012).

Partnering with schools and other community groups. Although most school personnel and adults in youth-serving organizations welcome parental involvement in their bullying prevention efforts, some personnel may not know how to best address bullying or partner with parents.

How Parents and Caregivers Can Engage and Include Others in Community Bullying Prevention Strategies

Because of their integral role in children's lives and the personal impact bullying can have on their families, parents and caregivers can be persuasive voices in advocating for prevention and response efforts that include the entire community by:

Supporting comprehensive bullying prevention efforts in schools. Research indicates that school-wide approaches to preventing bullying are most effective (Ttofi & Farrington,

2011), and these efforts need active involvement from parents. If a child's school is not addressing bullying in a comprehensive way, parents can meet with administrators and school board members to explore the benefits of doing so. Parents and caregivers can offer to lend their help planning a constructive approach, and work to galvanize other parents around this effort. For example, parents and caregivers can help inform the creation of policies with clear guidelines for students and schools about appropriate student behavior. Harsh, inflexible discipline strategies for bullying, such as zero tolerance policies, should be avoided. Such policies have been found to harm student-adult relationships, dampen school climate, and contribute to poor student achievement (APA Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). Instead, graduated sanctions should be used for rule violations, which are appropriate for the developmental level of the child and the nature and severity of the bullying. If a school district does have a comprehensive approach to bullying prevention, parents and caregivers can help with its implementation.

- **Engaging others and supporting community-wide efforts to prevent bullying.** Since bullying does not stop at the doors of the school, community-wide attention to bullying is important. Parents and caregivers can work with other families and stakeholders in the community to promote community-wide efforts to address bullying. The voices and experiences of parents and youth — particularly those who have had first-hand experiences with bullying — can be compelling. Parents and caregivers can also support their children in taking leadership roles in school and community-based efforts to prevent and reduce bullying.

Ideas for Next Steps

Learn more about bullying prevention through StopBullying.gov and the resources listed below. Review the research presented in the modules and how it is best communicated to parents, caregivers, families, and other motivated community stakeholders.

Talk regularly with children about bullying, their peer relationships, and school environment.

Review any existing data within your child's school or community regarding bullying. Consult the Community Action Toolkit and perform a landscape assessment that will help you identify relevant information, as well as ways to address the broader needs of the community.

Plan a bullying prevention event that will inform a broader network of parents, school leaders, youth, or other members of the community to help dispel common myths and misdirections. This will also shed light on the importance of a holistic, community-based effort.