

fostering tolerance: ways parents and kids can stand up to bullying

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As a parent I often worry, as I know many parents do, how I will keep my child safe from all the “bad stuff” out there. All one has to do anymore is turn on the news to hear yet another heartbreaking story of a child being bullied by their peers, with sometimes tragic consequences. Many parents come to me for advice as to how to help their kids navigate the often rocky road of peer relationships. More and more children report being bullied, not only at school, but on the playground, the bus, and after school on sports teams and other extracurricular activities. So what exactly is bullying and what can parents and kids do about it?

Normal conflict vs. bullying

Conflict between children is normal and developmentally appropriate. Children need to engage in conflict in order to build much-needed skills to face and manage adversity throughout their lives. So what is the difference between a normal conflict and bullying?

NORMAL CONFLICT	BULLYING
Equal power	Imbalance of power
Happens occasionally	Happens repeatedly
Not purposeful	Purposeful
Equal emotional investment	Strong emotional reaction of victim
Not power seeking	Seeking power and control
Remorse	No remorse—blames victim or negates purpose
Effort to solve problem	No effort to solve the problem or make amends (the bully doesn't recognize the problem)

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What is bullying?

Bullying is a repeated behavior, either physical or verbal, that occurs over time in a relationship where there is an imbalance of strength or power. This imbalance is either a real or perceived power between the bully and the victim. When many of us think of this power, we may conjure up images of the big kid picking on the little kid. However, power can come in other forms, such as popularity, socioeconomic status, and ability level. The victim does not intentionally provoke bullying. It can be expressed directly *towards* the victim, such as name-calling and physical aggression. Bullying can also be expressed indirectly *about* the victim, such as social exclusion, rumor spreading and cyber bullying.

Roles in bullying

Bullying does not just occur in one-on-one situations. Bullying can involve more than one bully, more than one victim, and multiple bystanders. Children who are bullies tend to have more positive attitudes towards using aggression than their peers. They may have difficulty following or conforming to rules. They may also be popular with their peers and teachers, and have friendships with other kids who bully. Bullies often show little empathy for others.

Children who are victims may be quiet, cautious or sensitive. They may feel insecure and have low self-esteem. They may have little confidence in social situations. They may also find it easier to associate with adults than with their peers.

What can kids and parents do?

Common feelings victims may experience include:

- “This is my fault. I deserve to be bullied.”
- “There must be something wrong with me because I get picked on all the time.”
- “I don't know what to do to make this stop.”

- “If I tell someone that this is happening to me, then I am a bad person for tattling.”
- “I’m really sad.”
- “I’m really angry.”
- “I’m really embarrassed.”
- “There isn’t a way for me to make things better.”
- “I’m too scared to go to school.”

So what can kids do when they find themselves a victim of bullying?

Positive self-talk

The first thing they can do (and parents can reinforce this) is begin by telling themselves that it’s not their fault that they’re getting picked on. Parents can help kids practice saying:

- “It’s not my problem he’s so mean.”
- “I don’t have to let her hurt me.”
- “Don’t get upset. Stay calm and decide what to do.”

Take action

After empowering themselves with positive self-talk, kids can then try one or more of the following:

- Walk away from the bully.
- Ignore the bully. (Don’t take the bait!)
- Change the subject to something else. (A neutral topic that isn’t about themselves or the bully.)
- Get support from a friend.
- Ask for help from a teacher, parent, or other trusted adult.
- Tell the bully how they feel and ask him or her to stop.

Many children do not report bullying to adults. Older children and boys are less likely than younger children and girls to report being victimized. Parents can empower their child to handle bullying by helping them practice speaking and behaving assertively (not aggressively).

Encourage kids to voice their feelings and avoid attacking or being negative towards the bully. Help them describe the bully’s behavior and how it bothers them. Doing so will help kids, not only by empowering them to stand up for themselves but also help them to accurately report bullying to adults who can help them.

Teach kids to defend others

Bystanders to bullying can serve a variety of purposes. They may come to the aid of the bully by reinforcing or assisting them. They may avoid or ignore the bullying. They may also be a defender and come to the aid of the victim.

Just as important as teaching kids to stand up for themselves is teaching them to stand up for others. Parents can engage their children in conversations that encourage them to think that bullying is mean, not funny, and that someone is getting hurt. Have children ask themselves what they would want someone to do if they were being bullied and what they can do in bullying situations to help. Encourage children to only do what they feel comfortable and safe doing.

Ways that defenders can help other kids being bullied include:

- Comforting the victim during or after the bullying happens.
- Tell an adult immediately or after the bullying happens.
- Get the victim out of the situation.
- Distract the bully.
- Tell the bully directly to stop.

The ultimate solution

Many parents feel, and rightfully so, that it is their child’s school’s responsibility to keep their children safe in their hallways. Unfortunately, many well-intentioned school districts have responded to this by instituting zero-tolerance bullying policies. These policies often have unintended consequences such as large periods of missed school because of out-of-school suspensions, court appearances and other overly punitive measures.

I propose, and research supports it, schools and parents should be responding not with *zero tolerance* but rather, *fostering tolerance*. We need to teach our children how to stand up, not only for themselves, but also for others. We need to teach children to recognize when they have hurt someone’s feelings and work to make meaningful amends. As adults, it is our job to instill values of resiliency, empathy, compassion, understanding, and acceptance. Foster the belief that, as CCA encourages, *beyond the face is a heart*.