

Bullying in Schools

Seven Solutions for Parents from Kidpower

Kidpower is an educational charitable organization that, since 1989, has brought "People Safety" education to over 1.2 million children, teenagers, and adults, including those with special needs, from many different cultures - close to home and around the world. For publications; free articles, podcasts and e-newsletter; and information about our services and locations, please visit www.kidpower.org.

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Kidpower hears countless stories from upset parents whose children from toddlers to teenagers have been victimized by harassment and bullying at school. School is a big part of our kids' lives but it's usually parents who make the decisions about how and where their children get an education. This means that most young people have no choice about where they go to school.

As parents, we expect schools to provide an environment that is emotionally and physically safe for our children. It's normal to feel terrified and enraged about any kind of threat to our children's well being, especially in a place where they have to be.

Schools are often doing a valiant job of trying to meet an overwhelming array of conflicting demands. But when your own child is being bullied, it is normal for protective parents to want to fix the problem immediately – and maybe to punish the people who caused your child to be hurt, embarrassed or scared.

When possible, try to notice problems when they are small. Pay attention to changes in your child's behavior. Encourage children to tell you about what happens at school. Listen calmly without lecturing. Volunteer even a couple of hours a week in the classroom or school yard so that you can both help out and stay aware of potential problems at school.

If your child has a bullying problem at school, here are seven practical People Safety solutions that can help parents to be effective in taking charge.

I. Stop Yourself From Knee-Jerk Reactions

If your child tells you about being bullied at school, this is an important opportunity for you to model for your child how to be powerful and respectful in solving problems. As hard as it is likely to be, your first job is to calm down. Take a big breath and say, in a quiet and matter-of-fact voice, "I'm so glad you're telling me this. I'm sorry this happened to you – please tell me more about exactly what happened so we can figure out what to do. You deserve to feel safe and comfortable at school."

If your child didn't tell you but you found out some other way, say calmly, "I saw this happen/heard about this happening. It looked/sounded like it might be unpleasant for you. Can you tell me more about it?"

If you act upset your child is likely to get upset too. She might want to protect you and herself from your reaction by not telling you about problems in the future or by denying that anything is wrong. The older your child is, the more important it is that she's able to feel some control about any follow-up actions you might take with the school.

In addition, if you act upset when you're approaching school officials or the parents of children who are bothering your child, they're likely to become defensive. Nowadays, school administrators are often fearful of lawsuits, both from the parents of the child who was victimized and from the parents of the child who was accused of causing the problem. This is a real fear because a lawsuit can seriously drain a school's already limited resources.

At the same time, most school administrators truly want to address problems that affect the wellbeing of their students. They're far more likely to respond positively to parents who are approaching them in a calm and respectful way. However, no matter how good a job you do, some people will react badly when they're first told about a problem. Don't let that stop you – stay calm and be persistent about explaining what the issue is and what you want to see happen.

2. Get Your Facts Right

Instead of jumping to conclusions or making assumptions, take time to get the whole story. Ask questions of your child in a calm, reassuring way and listen to the answers.

Ask questions of other people who might be involved, making it clear that your goal is to understand and figure out how to address the problem rather than to get even with anybody.

Once you understand the situation, it works best to look for solutions, not for blame. Try to assume that overwhelmed teachers and school administrators deserve support and acknowledgment for what they're doing right as well as to be told what's wrong. Try to assume that children behave in hurtful ways do so because they don't have a better way of meeting their needs or because they have problems in their own lives.

Be your child's advocate, but accept the possibility that your child might have partially provoked or escalated the bullying. You might say, "It's not your fault when someone hurts or makes fun of you, but I am wondering if you can think of another way you might have handled this problem?"

3. Pinpoint The Cause

Is the problem caused because the school needs more resources in order to supervise children properly during recess and lunch, or before and after school? Does your child need to learn skills for self-protection and boundary-setting by making and practicing a plan with you or by taking a class such as Kidpower? Does the school need help formulating a clear policy that makes behavior that threatens, hurts, scares, or embarrasses others against the rules? Does the child who harmed your child need help too?

4. Protect Your Child

Your highest priority is, of course, to protect your child as best you can. Try to step back for perspective and keep the big picture in mind as well as the immediate problem. What protecting your child means will

vary depending on the ability of the school to resolve the problem, the nature of the problem, and on the specific needs of your child.

Through a programs such as Kidpower, make sure your child has the chance to practice skills in order to walk away from people who being rude or threatening, to protect himself or herself emotionally and physically, and to ask for help sooner rather than later.

In some cases, protecting your child might mean that her teacher and school principal, the parents of the other child, and you all work on a plan together to stop the problem. In other cases, the best solution for your child might be to change schools.

In extreme cases, you might want to explore legal action. Different countries and states have different laws about children's rights. If need be, explore the resources available in your community.

5. Prevent Future Problems

You also want to prevent future problems. All children deserve to be in an environment that is emotionally and physically safe. Dealing with ongoing harassment is like living with pollution – eventually, coping with the constant assault can undermine your child's health.

Concerned parents can help schools find and implement age-appropriate programs that create a culture of respect, caring, and safety between young people rather than of competition, harassment, and disregard.

6. Get Help For Your Child

Finally, you want to get help for your child and for yourself to deal with the feelings that result from having had an upsetting experience. Sometimes bullying can remind you about bad experiences in your own past. Parents often have to deal with guilt for not preventing the problem, and sometimes struggle with rage.

Getting help might mean talking issues over with other supportive adults who can listen to you and your child with perspective and compassion. Getting help might mean going to a therapist or talking with counselors provided by the school or by other agencies.

7. Make This Into A Learning Experience

As parents, it's normal to want to protect our children from all harm. If we monitor their lives so closely that they never fall, never fail, and never get hurt or sad, then we'd be depriving our children of having the room to grow.

Upsetting experiences don't have to lead to long-term damage if children are listened to respectfully, if the problem is resolved, and if their feelings are supported. Young people can take charge of their safety by learning skills for preventing and stopping harassment themselves, by setting boundaries, avoiding people whose behavior is problematic, and getting help when they need it.