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# Bullying

## Information from Women's and Children's Health Network.

**B**ullying is when hurtful or upsetting things are repeatedly said or done to people. Bullying is also called harassment or peer abuse.

- ⇒ It can involve physical violence such as hitting, kicking, punching, pushing or verbal violence including teasing and name-calling.
- ⇒ It can also include damaging, stealing or hiding a victim's things or making demands for money or favours.
- ⇒ Another form is to exclude victims, by encouraging others not to have anything to do with them, spreading lies or stories about them, ignoring them and not speaking to them.
- ⇒ Another type of harassment is cyberbullying. Cyberbullying uses technology to harass, embarrass or threaten to hurt someone physically

Bullying is a form of violence and a way of having power over others. It needs to be taken seriously as it can have long-term effects on the child being bullied, the one doing the bullying and those who witness it.

Bullying often happens in places where children spend lots of time, such as in families, early childhood centres, schools, sporting or recreational clubs and work places. Any organisation which has contact with children is required to have policies to keep them safe. However children can be bullied anywhere and it's not always by other children – adults can be bullies too. Cyber bullying has become a real concern because it can happen anywhere at

any time, even in the safety of your home.

Sometimes children find it hard to talk about being bullied but will show it in their behaviour. They need adults to listen, believe and support them. You can help them by talking to adults with the power to stop it. You can also help children to develop coping strategies and to take action themselves. This way they can gain a sense of control and feel more confident.

### What is bullying?

Bullying can include threatening, teasing, name-calling, gossiping and spreading rumours, ignoring or not letting people be part of a group (excluding), ganging up, playing cruel jokes, preventing others from going where they want to, or taking away their belongings. It can also be pushing, shoving or hitting and other forms of physical abuse.

Bullying is not about a conflict that needs to be worked out; it's about one person or group trying to have power over others. It's important to develop a long-term approach which stops bullying at the source and permanently, rather than just blocking one avenue of contact. If bullying becomes assault, discrimination or harassment it's breaking the law and you may need to involve the police.

It's important that all children learn bullying is not okay and can be stopped. They need to know they can play an important role in stopping bullying by telling responsible adults who can do something about it.

- ⇒ A child who is being bullied needs to see that things can be done so they don't feel unable to protect themselves in the future.
- ⇒ Children who witness bullying can be traumatised by the experience and require support as well.
- ⇒ Children who bully others need to learn how to develop different skills so this behaviour doesn't limit them in adult life.

### Where does it happen?

Places where children and young people spend lots of time is where bullying happens most, including families. Parents can bully children, and siblings can bully each other. With the increase in blended families there's often children across a broad age range living in the same household. This creates power differences between siblings which can set the scene for bullying.

Studies show that one in six Australian school students are bullied every week. These students are three times more likely to become depressed. Children can be bullied in classrooms, gyms and toilet blocks, in the school grounds or whilst getting to or from school. All early childhood centres and schools in South Australia have a responsibility to protect children from bullying.

Sporting clubs, recreational and interest groups are other places where children are at risk of being bullied. In sporting clubs, bullying can occur on or off the pitch and can

involve players, parents, coaches, umpires or spectators. It can be quite common to hear parents and spectators at children's sporting events yelling out hurtful or negative comments from the sidelines.

Sometimes it's a coach using 'put-downs' to motivate players. Most sporting clubs have Member Protection Policies which address harassment, discrimination and abuse, as well as a complaints process. As organisations which involve children they're also required to have ways to protect them.

## Cyberbullying

Technology has increased the ways bullying can happen.

- ⇒ Mobile phones, emails, websites, chat rooms, social networking sites or instant messaging can be used to bully others.
- ⇒ Cyberbullying can include repeated teasing, sending nasty or threatening messages, damaging information or photos.
- ⇒ It's against the law to threaten someone this way.
- ⇒ Cyberbullying can be very scary because it can happen any time of the day or night. It can feel like there's no way to get away from it, even in the safety of your own home.

A cyberbully might be someone your child knows, but messages can be sent without knowing who they are from. Your child may be worried you'll take their phone or email address away if you know they're being bullied. It's important though for everyone that they don't keep bullying a secret.

## Children who bully

Children who bully can:

- ⇒ Be very self-focused and not good at controlling their impulses and aggression
- ⇒ Have limited self-awareness and take little responsibility for their actions
- ⇒ Need power over others to

feel important, admired and accepted. This often makes up for feeling scared, alone or not in control in other areas of their life

- ⇒ Think that bullying makes them popular or cool
- ⇒ Want to win at all cost. They don't pick on children who will stand up to them, they pick on children they know they can intimidate
- ⇒ See bullying as fun and believe some kinds of people deserve to be bullied, e.g. because of how they look or because they're from a certain group
- ⇒ Be easily influenced by aggressive 'models' (in real life and in movies)
- ⇒ Come from a violent family background and be the victims of bullying themselves
- ⇒ Have had extreme discipline, or sometimes limited discipline
- ⇒ Bully others as pay-back for some 'unfair' treatment.

Children who bully might be outgoing and do it in front of others so they can get recognition. Sometimes they're part of popular groups. Or they might be more reserved, controlling and manipulating others in subtle ways.

- ⇒ They're not usually affected by the distress of the victim and are likely to go on hurting others if they're not stopped.
- ⇒ They often don't do well at school and can have trouble with the law as they get older.
- ⇒ As adults they're more likely to bully their partners, their own children and people at work.

Bullying is a learned behaviour which means children who bully are able to learn different ways of dealing with things. It's important though to not bully the bully so that children don't get a double message.

## Children who are bullied

Any child can be bullied. Sometimes children who are popular, very good at something, or who are very

smart or attractive can be victims of bullying. However, bullies most often pick on children who seem easy to hurt. Children who are picked on can often be:

- ⇒ Different in some way, including their physical appearance, having a disability, being from a different cultural group or not fitting in with gender stereotypes
- ⇒ Anxious or stressed, lacking confidence to stand up for themselves
- ⇒ Not good at sport or find schoolwork difficult
- ⇒ Shy and keep to themselves, or find it hard to socialise with other children
- ⇒ Younger, smaller or not as strong and therefore unable to 'fight back'.

## Children who witness bullying

Children who witness bullying may be traumatised by the experience. They may feel powerless to stop someone else getting hurt. They need to talk about their feelings and learn what they can do.

It's important for all children to understand that bullying isn't okay, even if they're not involved. They can play a part in stopping it by:

- ⇒ telling a responsible adult such as a parent, a teacher or coach
- ⇒ refusing to join in and ignoring the bully
- ⇒ walking up to the person being bullied, talking to them and going with them to get support
- ⇒ making friends with children new to a school or club.

## Signs of being bullied

Children may not always tell adults they're being bullied. They may be afraid or ashamed, think it's their fault or that it's 'dobbing' to tell someone. They may have been threatened with something worse if they tell. They might show some of the following:

- ⇒ Bruises, scratches or torn clothing
- ⇒ Damage or loss of personal belongings
- ⇒ Sleeping problems, e.g. not sleeping, nightmares, bed wetting
- ⇒ Changes in behaviour such as being withdrawn or teary
- ⇒ Loss of confidence
- ⇒ Not doing well at school
- ⇒ Talking about problems at the place they're being bullied, or trying to avoid going there
- ⇒ Finding excuses to not go, e.g. feeling sick
- ⇒ Wanting to change the way they usually get there
- ⇒ Being upset after going to the venue
- ⇒ Saying they don't have any friends or they hate other children there
- ⇒ Not wanting to talk about their day.

These signs don't always mean your child is being bullied, but you need to check out what's worrying them.

### The effects of bullying

Bullying can make children feel afraid, lonely, embarrassed, angry, upset or physically ill. If it's not stopped it can affect health and well-being into adult life. Children who are bullied can have a higher risk of mental health problems such as anxiety, stress, low self-esteem or depression.

Bullied children learn to be 'on guard' all the time, checking where the bully is and wondering when it will happen again. When children are 'on alert' like this, they're less able to concentrate or learn. Their friendships may suffer as they're often tense, worried and unable to have fun. They may begin to believe they deserve it and become withdrawn, isolated and feel less able to fit into their world. They can even think about suicide.

Children who are being bullied need to know they have options.

- ⇒ A younger child may not be able to physically protect themselves, but they can let an adult know who can do something about it.
- ⇒ An older child may need support to think through the things they could do themselves.

Be very careful they don't think being bullied is their fault. Even though they can do things to feel more confident, it's the bully who needs to change and stop the behaviour.

### What you can do

It's not always easy for a parent to know when and how to step in. The child's age, maturity and safety all need to be considered.

- ⇒ Listen to your child and take seriously his feelings and fears
  - ⇒ Don't call him names e.g. 'weak' or 'a sook' and don't let anyone else do so
  - ⇒ Make sure he's safe. Sometimes this may require taking action he's not happy with
  - ⇒ Try to give him as much power as possible to find solutions so he can feel more in control. Solving problems himself, with your support, can create a real increase in self-esteem
  - ⇒ Work on improving his confidence by building on the things he does well
  - ⇒ If he's been traumatised he may need professional help.
- Stop bullying where it's happening:
- ⇒ Meet with the school or organisation where the bullying is happening and ask about their policy and procedures for dealing with bullying
  - ⇒ Make a list of the things that have happened. Be clear and firm about the impact of the bullying and the need for them to stop it. Find out what steps the school or club will take to prevent it happening again
  - ⇒ Be prepared to name the children who bully. If bullying persists, write down who, what, where and when

- ⇒ Keep in contact until the problem is sorted out. If you find it difficult to be assertive, take another adult with you for support.

### If it's cyberbullying:

- ⇒ Let children know they need to be open with you so you can make sure they're safe online
- ⇒ Be careful who knows phone numbers and email addresses. You may need to change phone numbers and email addresses in the short-term, but remember you need to take actions which stop bullying permanently
- ⇒ Contact your phone and Internet providers to see what can be done to prevent calls or remove bullying material
- ⇒ Talk to the school principal if cyberbullying involves students from school
- ⇒ Report cyberbullying to the police if it doesn't stop.

### How you can help children

Help her work out ways to deal with bullying and to feel good about herself. This could include:

- ⇒ Talking to an adult who can do something to stop the bullying, e.g. a teacher, a coach, a group leader
- ⇒ Ignoring the bully and walking away
- ⇒ Practising being confident when not in the situation so she knows how to react when it's happening
- ⇒ Not getting emotional, e.g. staying calm so the bully doesn't win by getting her to react
- ⇒ Not getting physical which can end up in being hurt or getting blamed for the bully's actions
- ⇒ Being true to herself, focussing on her strengths and building these up
- ⇒ Making new friends and doing things together.