

What Parents Can Do About Bullying

by Eric J. Sigel, MD, FAAP

Nearly 30% of students in grades 6 through 10 report involvement in bullying: 13% as bullies, 10% as victims of bullying, and 6% as both bullies and victims ("bully-victims").

Bullying, which can be physical, sexual, verbal, or cyber, is more common in middle school than high school. Most people can identify **physical bullying**. **Verbal bullying** includes name-calling, rumor-spreading, teasing, and threats of physical harm. **Sexual bullying** can involve making sexually suggestive remarks to humiliate someone, threatening unwanted sexual acts, or touching someone without permission.

Cyberbullying involves sending or posting material that is cruel to others or engaging in other forms of social aggression using the Internet or other digital technologies. Cyberbullies can be anonymous. They may post hateful messages or rumors about individuals on blogs, Web pages, or through text messaging. Characteristics of cyberbullies and their victims are thought to be similar to those of other bullies, although this phenomenon has not been studied extensively.

Bullying has 3 components (1) a real or perceived imbalance of power based on physical size, strength, age, or social position; (2) a repetitive pattern of aggressive behavior toward the victim; and (3) the intention to physically harm, intimidate, or harass.

Characteristics of Bullies and Victims

Bullies are typically aggressive, belong to larger social groups, and display more leadership skills than noninvolved youth. They affiliate with other bullies and are often popular among their peers.

Victims of bullying are often submissive, withdrawn, isolated, less cooperative, and less social. They report being lonelier, have a harder time making friends, and getting into more fights.

Consequences

It is important that parents recognize whether their child is involved with bullying, either as a perpetrator, a victim, or both. **Bullies, victims, and bully-victims** demonstrate significant risk for depression, suicidal thinking, and suicide attempts. They also feel unsafe at school, and are less successful academically than their peers. **Victims and bully-victims** feel they don't belong at school, and experience physical symptoms such as headache, sleep problems, abdominal pain, and bedwetting. **Bullies** are more likely to have future trouble with the law (male bullies are 4 times more likely than nonbullies to be convicted of a crime).

What You Can Do As a Parent

Be sensitive to any signs that your child may be involved with bullying and be very careful to avoid attributing your concerns to

normal teen behavior. Bullying is not normal and it has long-term consequences for both bullies and victims.

If you believe that your child may be a bully, examine your own conduct. Do you belittle or intimidate others? If so, modify your actions. Let your adolescent know that bullying is not acceptable.

If you know that your teen has bullied others, make it clear that there will be consequences. Make sure they apologize to their victims. Consider treatment, such as family therapy, which is shown to decrease future bullying behavior and can limit the consequences of being involved with bullying.

If you are concerned that your child is a victim of bullying, explore with him or her about what experiences have occurred. Talk with your adolescent about self respect, encourage new friendships, and try to problem-solve prospective bullying situations. Victims need to understand that this is not their fault, and to appreciate why it makes no sense to retaliate physically. Do not hesitate to bring the problem to the attention of school authorities and to talk to your health-care provider about potential emotional problems, such as depression and anxiety.

Eric J. Sigel, MD, FAAP, is an associate professor of pediatrics at the University of Colorado School of Medicine. A board-certified adolescent medicine specialist, he is medical director of the eating disorders treatment program at Children's Hospital, Denver.

Online Resources For Parents

Stop Bullying Now

**US Department of Health and Human Services
Health Resources Services Administration**
<http://stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov/index.asp?area=main>

Facts for Families: Bullying

**American Academy of Child &
Adolescent Psychiatry**
<http://aacap.org/page.wv?name=Bullying§ion=Facts+for+Families>

Facts for Teens: Bullying

**United States Centers for
Disease Control and Prevention**
www.safeyouth.org/scripts/teens/bullying.asp

Tips to Help When Your Child is Bullied Online

**NetSmartz Workshop, National Center for
Missing & Exploited Children**
www.netsmartz.org/news/sep03-01.htm

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