How to Help Your Child Cope with Bullying

Bullying is deliberate, repeated, hostile behavior that is intended to harm, humiliate, or frighten another person. This behavior can be physical (hitting, punching, etc.), verbal (name-calling, criticizing, etc.), or relational (ignoring, isolating, etc.). Cyber bullying (bullying done through the use of cell phones, email, social networking sites, etc.) has also become much more common due to the constant advances in our technology.

Regardless of the type of bullying that occurs, the potential impact on the person targeted can be devastating. Bullying can cause self-esteem to decline, academic achievement to decrease, and a range of negative physical and emotional symptoms to occur. Furthermore, children and teens who are bullied have a greater risk of suffering from depression and other mental health problems in adulthood and have a greater likelihood of committing suicide than their non-bullied peers.

Parents and caretakers play a very important role when it comes to bullying intervention and prevention. The following are some suggestions for what to do and what not to do if your child is or has been the target of bullying:

♦ **Do listen to your child.** Allow your child to talk to you about how they’re feeling and what they’ve experienced. Don’t interrupt or suggest a solution, simply reflect what you’ve heard and thank them for sharing this information with you.

♦ **Do communicate that your child is not alone.** Let your child know that you are on their side and that you are committed to supporting them through this ordeal. Many children keep their experiences with bullying a secret from their parents out of fear or embarrassment, so emphasize to your child that he or she has nothing to be ashamed of.

♦ **Do let your child know that he or she is not at fault.** The bully is the only person responsible for the bullying behavior. Let your child know that there was nothing he or she did to cause the bullying and that he or she has a right to be treated with respect.

♦ **Do help your child explore options for handling the bullying.** Oftentimes, a child who has been the target of bullying feels powerless as a result. By encouraging your child to explore his or her options for dealing with the bully, you can help them to feel more in control of the situation. Invite your child to visit a legitimate anti-bullying website with you (www.stopbullying.gov, pacerkidsagainstbullying.org, www.stopcyberbullying.org) to get some ideas for healthy coping and intervention techniques.

♦ **Do talk to your child first before you discuss the situation with his or her school.** Although parents may do so with the best of intentions, talking to your child’s school administrators or teachers without notifying your child sends them the message that you don’t believe that they are capable of handling the bullying themselves. Encourage your child to meet with school officials with you present to discuss his or her concerns and options. Explore the reasons behind your child’s fears or hesitation if he or she absolutely refuses to discuss the matter with school officials. If need be, explore alternative options for handling the bully’s behavior that your child would feel more comfortable with.
- **Do seek professional support if needed.** Ask your child how he or she would feel about meeting with a professional counselor to discuss the bullying. Mental health professionals can help your child to work through any feelings of anxiety, depression, or trauma that he or she has experienced as a result of the bullying and can work on improving his or her self-confidence and/or assertiveness skills. Additionally, a mental health professional can help you work through your own stresses and concerns as a parent or caretaker so that you can adequately provide your child with the support he or she needs.

- **Don’t blame your child.** Talking about what your child did or didn’t do to cause the bullying or what he or she could have done to prevent it from happening removes the responsibility from the bully and places it on your child instead, where it doesn’t belong. Ultimately, the bully is the only one who can take responsibility for the bullying behavior. Your child did not cause the bullying to happen and he or she does not deserve to be bullied, regardless of anything he or she did or didn’t do.

- **Don’t minimize or rationalize the bully’s behavior.** It takes a lot of courage for children to tell their parents or caretakers that they are being bullied. When you make excuses for the bully, justify his or her behavior, or minimize the effects that the bullying has had on your child, this sends the message to your child that you are either unwilling or unable to provide them with the important emotional support he or she desperately needs.

- **Don’t rush in to solve the problem.** As difficult as it is to see your child in distress, recognize that jumping in to “fix” your child’s problem will communicate to them that he or she is powerless or that you believe that he or she is incapable of taking an active role in handling the situation.

- **Don’t tell your child to simply avoid the bully.** While encouraging your child to stay as far away from the bully as possible may seem like an effective solution, by doing so you are sending the message that you don’t believe that anything can be done about the bully’s behavior. Bullies get their power from a lack of negative consequences for their behavior and an unwillingness of others (children and adults alike) to point out that what they are doing is wrong. Work with your child to develop healthy assertiveness skills to communicate to the bully that he or she will not tolerate being treated with disrespect. Encourage your child to develop a good support system so that he or she is not alone when the bully targets him or her. There is strength in numbers, so bullies tend to avoid targeting individuals who are surrounded by a group of supportive friends or acquaintances.

- **Don’t encourage your child to fight back.** It has been shown that children who try to fight back against the bullying are less likely to counteract the bullying than children who respond using healthy assertiveness skills. Chances are, your child was targeted because the bully perceived him or her to be weaker, either physically or emotionally. A child who attempts to fight back against the bully and is unsuccessful runs the risk of feeling even more powerless and even more depressed than before.

- **Don’t confront the bully or the bully’s parents alone.** If you think it would be beneficial to meet with the bully and his or her parents to discuss your concerns, do so on neutral ground and with a third party present. More often than not, the bully has been able to get away with his or her behavior either because his or her parents have made excuses for it or because they do not believe that their child is doing anything wrong. Additionally, you may find the behavior of the bully’s parents to be just as aggressive and inappropriate as (or even more so than) the bully's.