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Bullying in Children and Youth: Guide for Caregivers

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Summary: Bullying is a form of aggression where a person uses their strength or influence to intimidate another person.

What is Bullying?

Bullying is a form of aggression in which one individual is exposed to deliberately harmful actions by a more aggressive person. Bullying can be physical (e.g., hitting, pushing, tripping), verbal (e.g., name-calling, insults, put-downs), social (e.g., social isolation, rumours) or cyber (e.g., threats or insults spread through the internet or cell phone).

It is also possible for the same child to be both a bully and a victim. There are also "provocative victims" (a term coined by Olweus, 2001) who display negative behaviours that annoy bullies and lead them to take action.

School bullies typically watch out for situations in which they know they can get away with bullying behaviour. They target other children that seem unlikely to be protected by other children. They behave as bullies more intensively at times and in places where there is not enough adult supervision.

Children who are neither bullies nor victims also play an important role in maintaining bullying or helping stop it. Bystanders can encourage the bullies, defend the victims, inform adult authorities, or do nothing at all.

Although a great many children are victims of bullies at some point in their lives, only a very small minority are victimized regularly and repeatedly. Research has shown that this minority is not very likely to "outgrow" the problems caused by the victimization. Without help, chronic victims are often lonely, unhappy, and depressed for many years after the bullying has started.

Signs of Bullying

Your child might be being bullied if you notice that they:

- Don't talk much about school. Children who are being victimized may seem unclear or evasive when asked how their day went.
- Change their route to school. They may ask to be driven directly to the school entrance in order to escape from being bullied on the way. If they walk to school, they may choose an indirect route to avoid places where bullies are known to gather.
- Have unexplained physical complaints (e.g. headaches, stomach aches).
- Appear sad, moody or irritable, particularly after coming home from school.
- Arrive home missing possessions or arrives home hungry (because the bully took their lunch or lunch money).

- Act aggressively towards others, e.g. bullies siblings.
- Brings home or asks for ‘gifts' of money or other items for or from ‘friends' at school.

Do You Suspect Your Child is Being Bullied?

- Recognize that bullying is serious and that something must be done. Some parents were bullied themselves and remember bullying as a normal part of growing up. It is not!
- Inform the school and work together with them.
- Talk to your child about your concerns and ask about bullying. This can be challenging because bullies often threaten their victims with retaliation if adults are told about the bullying. Your child may be afraid of being a "tattle-tale", feel ashamed or embarrassed. Your child may believe that telling will make things worse or that adults may be unable or unwilling to do anything to help. Let your child know that in order for things to get better, they can talk to a trusted adult so that others can help.

OF ALL THE THINGS YOU CAN DO, THE MOST IMPORTANT IS DIRECT ACTION TO STOP THE BULLYING.

THE FOLLOWING MAY HELP AS WELL:

- Spend positive time with your child to build channels of communication. If you talk regularly with your child and get to know their friends, it will be easier to pick up on possible bullying.
- Encourage your child to participate in programs that enhance their self-confidence, e.g. sports programs, martial arts programs, music programs
- Do help your child with social skills. Social skills training is not likely by itself to end the bullying, teaching your child social skills so that they can form more friendships may help. You might enroll him/her in an organized social skills group. The more friends your child has, the more protected they are from bullying.
- Don't try disciplining the bully without support from others. It is generally unwise to discipline other people's children. Consider informing the bully's parents directly. If at school, inform the school. With bullying that is occurring in other places (such as organized sports), inform those in charge (e.g. the coach).
- Consider counselling for the victim in addition to direct action to stop the bully. Seeing a therapist/counsellor may help your child learn how to cope with the bullying as well as learn new ways of coping to avoid being a victim. However, the consensus of authorities in the field favours a more direct approach in which the bullying is stopped directly.

Do You Suspect Your Child is Bullying Others?

- Do not excuse the bullying as being normal behaviour. Bullying is often the first step to more serious problems such as skipping school, alcohol/drug use and even criminal activity.
- Inform the school and work together with them
- Increase supervision. Ask others about your child's behaviour, rather than waiting for someone else to report it.
- Talk with your child and make it clear that bullying behaviour is not tolerated. The child must learn that there is no excuse for bullying. He/she will only learn that if adults accept no excuse.
- If there is bullying, intervene immediately with appropriate, non-physical consequences, e.g., removal of privileges for a period of time.

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THE FOLLOWING MAY HELP AS WELL:

- Give praise for caring and respectful behaviours.
- Create opportunities for your child to do good things for others.
- Eliminate physical punishment in the home, as studies show bullies are often raised in home environments where physical punishment is used.
- Model non-aggressive ways of solving conflict.
- Adults must not encourage any aggression, even in subtle ways. Sports coaches must make it clear that they support healthy competition but not bullying. If adults do nothing or say nothing about bullying,

children will think that these adults approve of it.

How are bully/victim problems prevented?

It is important for parents to work together with the school (or those in charge of the recreational setting where bullying is happening).

Environments must be set up where bullies won't achieve anything by their bullying. There are several ways of doing this:

- Enlist the help of other children who are not directly involved. These children should learn what bullying is and what is wrong with it. They should be taught to inform adults immediately if they suspect someone is being bullied.
- Authorities should talk together with the bully and their family. The bully finds out in this way that everyone knows about the bullying. There should be an appropriate, brief, and non-physical consequence for the bullying. It may be useful to increase supervision of the playground at recess time.

Some schools use packaged anti-bullying programs, in which teachers, pupils, and parents participate. These programs usually include devising, implementing, and publicizing school policies against bullying. School-wide campaigns raise awareness about the problem and encourage children to report bullying. Sometimes, children are designated as special monitors to resolve conflict if they can or to report problems. These programs have been successful in some communities, schools and classes but unsuccessful in others. Therefore, each intervention should be evaluated in a systematic way.

Although it is important to advocate for anti-bullying programmes in schools and communities, it should not be assumed that any program developed to fight against bullying will work. It is a mistake to invest energy and enthusiasm in these programs unless an evaluation of the effects of the program is planned.

For more information

Useful websites

- The Offord Centre has information about a variety of mental health conditions in parent-friendly language. http://www.knowledge.offordcentre.com/
- *Children's Mental Health Ontario is the professional association representing children's treatment centres throughout Ontario, however they also have an excellent section of reviewed links to useful websites with child and youth mental health information. http://www.cmho.org*

Books for children and youth

- How to Handle Bullies, Teasers and Other Meanies: A Book That Takes the Nuisance Out of Name Calling and Other Nonsense, Kate Cohen-Posey, 1995
- Bullies are a pain in the brain, by Trevor Romain, 1997

Books for adults

- The Bully, the Bullied and the Bystander by Barbara Coloroso, 2002
- Bullying: a Parent's Primer, by Rita Toews

References

Olweus, D. (2001). Peer harassment: A critical analysis and some important issues. In J. Juvonen & S. Graham (Eds.), Peer harassment in school: The plight of the vulnerable and victimized (pp. 3-20). New York: The Guilford Press.

About this Document

Written by the Dr. Barry Schneider, Psychologist at the University of Ottawa, and the eMentalHealth Team.

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