

How to Talk with Educators at Your Child's School about Bullying/Tips for Parents of Bullied Students

Bullying among children is aggressive behavior that is intentional and involves an imbalance of power and strength. Parents are often reluctant to report to educators that their child is being bullied. Why?

- Parents may be unsure how best to help their child and may be afraid that they will make the situation worse if they report bullying.
- They may be embarrassed that their child is being bullied.
- Children sometimes ask parents not to report bullying.
- Parents may fear being seen as overprotective.
- They may believe that it is up to their child to stop the bullying.

Children and youth often need help to stop bullying. Parents should never be afraid to call the school to report that their child is being bullied and ask for help to stop the bullying. Students should not have to tolerate bullying at school any more than adults would tolerate similar treatment at work.

THE SCHOOL'S RESPONSIBILITY

All children are entitled to courteous and respectful treatment by students and staff at school. Educators have a duty to ensure that students have a safe learning environment. Fortunately, most educators take their responsibilities to stop bullying very seriously. Several states have passed anti-bullying laws and require public schools to have an anti-bullying program in place. Ask for a copy of your school's policy or check the student handbook to see whether your school has policies that will help resolve the problem.

WORKING WITH YOUR CHILD'S SCHOOL TO SOLVE THE PROBLEM

If your child tells you that he or she has been bullied or if you suspect your child is being bullied, what can you do?

- Keep a written record of all bullying incidents that your child reports to you. Record the names of the children involved, where and when the bullying occurred, and what happened.
- Immediately ask to meet with your child's classroom teacher and explain your concerns in a friendly, nonconfrontational way.
- Ask the teacher about his or her observations:
 1. Has he or she noticed or suspected bullying?
 2. How is your child getting along with others in class?
 3. Has he or she noticed that your child is being isolated or excluded from playground or other activities with students?
- Ask the teacher what he or she intends to do to investigate and help to stop the bullying.
- If you are concerned about how your child is coping with the stress of being bullied, ask to speak with your child's guidance counselor or other school-based mental health professional.
- Set up a follow-up appointment with the teacher to discuss progress.
- If there is no improvement after reporting bullying to your child's teacher, speak with the school principal.
- Keep notes from your meetings with teachers and administrators.

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WHAT CAN YOU EXPECT STAFF AT YOUR CHILD'S SCHOOL TO DO ABOUT BULLYING?

- School staff should investigate the bullying immediately. After investigating your concerns, they should inform you as to what they plan to do about it.
- School staff should never have a joint meeting with your child and the child who bullied him or her. This could be very embarrassing and intimidating for your child. They should not refer the children to mediation. Bullying is a form of victimization, not a conflict. It should not be mediated.
- Staff should meet with your child to learn about the bullying that he or she has experienced. They should develop a plan to keep your child safe, and they should be watchful for any future bullying. Educators should assure your child that they will work hard to see that the bullying stops.
- School personnel should meet with the children who are suspected of taking part in the bullying. They should make it clear to these children that bullying is against school rules and will not be tolerated. If appropriate, they should administer consequences (such as a loss of recess privileges) to the children who bullied and notify their parents.

- Educators and parents should be careful not to “blame the victim.” Bullying is never the “fault” of the child who is bullied, and he or she shouldn't be made to feel responsible for being bullied. However, if your child is impulsive or lacks social skills, talk with a school counselor. It is possible that some students who are bullying your child are reacting out of annoyance. This doesn't make the bullying right, but it may help to explain why your child is being bullied.
- Give the school reasonable time to investigate and hear both sides of the story. Sometimes, a child who bullies will make false allegations about a child as an additional way of bullying them. Educators should not jump to hasty conclusions and assign blame without a thorough assessment of the situation. This entire process should not take longer than a week.
- If bullying continues, write to the school's principal or administrator and include evidence from your notes to back up your complaint. Putting a complaint in writing is important so there is a record of your concern.
- Most administrators and staff are responsive to bullying concerns. However, if your school administrator is unable or unwilling to stop the bullying, write to your school superintendent for assistance.
- Be persistent. You may need to keep speaking out about the bullying that your child experiences.

WHEN SHOULD LAW ENFORCEMENT BECOME INVOLVED?

- Consider involving the police if another child has physically assaulted your child or is seriously threatening him or her with bodily injury.
- If the problem persists or escalates and your school officials are unable to stop the bullying, you may want to consult an attorney.
- Ask the school to keep a written record of all offenses committed against your child in case law enforcement officials need the information for further complaints.

BULLYING PREVENTION

- Bullying happens in every school, but with an effective bullying prevention program, bullying can be reduced. If your child is being bullied, chances are that there are other children in the school who are having similar experiences.
- If your school does not have official anti-bullying policies or an active bullying prevention program, work with other parents and your school officials to develop one.