

## Teasing and Bullying: No Laughing Matter



**What you must know — even if you don't think it affects your child.**

By Diana Townsend-Butterworth

**T**ake our pop quiz. Bullying can:

- Include name-calling and spreading rumors, in addition to physical violence
- Have long-lasting repercussions not only for victims, but also for bullies and even innocent bystanders
- Begin as early as preschool
- Be expressed differently by boys and girls
- Cause victims to fear school or refuse to attend

The answer? You guessed it — all of the above. Bullying can take many forms, but all of them can have consequences for your child's physical and mental health, as well as her success at school.

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### What Bullying Is

Unfortunately, teasing is often part of growing up — almost every child experiences it. But it isn't always as innocuous as it seems. Words can cause pain. Teasing becomes bullying when it is repetitive or when there is a conscious intent to hurt another child, says Merle Froschl, Co-Director of Educational Equity Concepts, a non-profit organization that addresses issues of teasing and bullying. Bullying includes a range of behaviors, all of which result in an imbalance of power among children. It can be:

- Verbal: making threats, name-calling
- Psychological: excluding children, spreading rumors
- Physical: hitting, pushing, taking a child's possessions

Gender makes a difference: With girls, bullying is often subtle and indirect, says Rachel Simmons, author of *Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls*. Instead of snatching a toy from another child, a young girl might say, "Give me that toy or I won't be your friend anymore." Older girls can be mean without saying a word: by telling other girls not to be friends with a particular girl, giving her the silent treatment, rolling their eyes in class, or making rude noises. Sometimes, says Simmons, girls make a hurtful remark and then pretend they didn't mean it by saying "just kidding."

Boys, on the other hand, tend to be more physical, says James Silvia, a teacher at St. Bernard's School in New York City who has taught children from fourth through seventh grades for 38 years. "Boys push each other or take someone's sneaker and put it in the garbage, but they don't hold grudges. One boy can do something really mean to another boy and then later the same day they will be pals again."

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### How Bullying Starts

Bullying behavior is prevalent throughout the world and it cuts across socio-economic, racial/ethnic and cultural lines. Researchers estimate that 20 to 30 percent of school-age children are involved in bullying incidents, as either perpetrators or victims. Bullying can begin as early as preschool and intensify during transitional stages, such as starting school in first grade or going into middle school, says Sharon Lynn Kagan, Virginia and Leonard Marx Professor of Early Childhood and Family Policy at Teachers College, Columbia University.

Children learn bullying behavior from older children, from adults, and from television, says Kagan. Sometimes unconsciously, parents may repeat things their own parents said to them: "Why are you always late? Why do you always lose everything? Why can't you act your age?" If children experience put-downs or physical punishment at home or in school, and if they see emotional and psychological abuse go unchallenged, they believe this behavior is acceptable. Bullies like to feel powerful and in control. They are insensitive to the feelings of others and defiant toward adults.

Victims are often shy and tend to be physically weaker than their peers. They may also have low self-esteem and poor social skills, which makes it hard for them to stand up for themselves. Bullies consider these children safe targets because they usually don't retaliate.

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### Effects of Bullying

If your child is the victim of a bully, he may suffer physically and emotionally, and his schoolwork will likely show it. Victims of bullying often have trouble concentrating, says

Simmons. Grades drop because, instead of listening to the teacher, kids are wondering what they did wrong and whether anyone will sit with them at lunch. If bullying persists, they may be afraid to go to school. Problems with low self-esteem and depression, Simmons finds, can last into adulthood and interfere with personal and professional lives.

Bullies are affected, too, even into adulthood; they may have difficulty forming positive relationships. They are more apt to use tobacco and alcohol, and to be abusive spouses. Some studies have even found a correlation with later criminal activities.

Teasing and bullying create a classroom atmosphere that affects children's ability to learn and teachers' abilities to teach, says Merle Froschl. Even kids who aren't directly involved can be distressed. "Children who see bullying can be as traumatized as the victims because they fear becoming victims themselves. And they feel guilty for not doing something to help," according to James Garbarino, professor of human development at Cornell University, and author of *Lost Boys* and *Words Can Hurt Forever*.

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#### Warning Signs

If you're concerned that your child is being teased or bullied, look for these signs of stress:

- Increased passivity or withdrawal
- Frequent crying
- Recurrent complaints of physical symptoms such as stomach- or headaches with no apparent cause
- Unexplained bruises
- Sudden drop in grades, or other learning problems
- Not wanting to go to school
- Significant changes in social life – suddenly no one is calling or extending invitations
- Sudden change in the way your child talks – calling herself a loser, or a former friend a jerk

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#### How to Help

First, give your child space to talk. If she recounts incidences of teasing or bullying, be empathetic. Gene Gardino, director of counseling services and life skills at The Chapin School in New York City, suggests saying, "I'm so sorry. That must be really painful." Then place the ball gently back in your child's court, asking, "What do you think might help? What works with your friends?" If your child has trouble verbalizing her feelings, Froschl suggests reading a story about children being teased or bullied. You can also use puppets, dolls or stuffed animals to encourage a young child to act out problems.

Once you've opened the door, help your child begin to problem-solve. Role-play situations and teach your child ways to respond effectively (see below), advises Vicki DeLuca, mother of three and a graduate student at Fairfield University doing research on bullying.

You might also need to help your child find a way to move on, says Gardino, by encouraging her to reach out and make new friends. She might join teams and school clubs to widen her circle.

#### At home and on the playground:

Adults need to intervene to help children resolve bullying issues, but calling another parent directly can be tricky unless he or she is a close friend. It is easy to find yourself in a "he said/she said" argument. Try to find an intermediary: Even if the bullying occurs outside of school, a teacher, counselor, coach or after-school program director may be able to help mediate a productive discussion.

If you do find yourself talking directly to the other parent, try to do it in person rather than over the phone. Don't begin with an angry recounting of the other child's offenses. Set the stage for a collaborative approach by suggesting going to the playground, or walking the children to school together, to observe interactions and jointly express disapproval for any unacceptable behavior. In general, promote acceptable behavior with these strategies:

- Model the behavior you expect from your child. Avoid making jokes that stereotype or ridicule people.
- Make sure playdates and after-school activities are supervised. Most bullying happens when adults aren't around.
- Intervene immediately when you see inappropriate behavior. If adults are aware of bullying and don't say or do anything, children may see this as an endorsement of the behavior.
- Teach your child to be assertive and to make eye contact. Arm him with "I" messages: "When you push me, I feel annoyed. Please stop."

#### At school

Many schools (sometimes as part of a statewide effort) have programs especially designed to raise awareness of bullying behavior and to help parents and teachers deal effectively with it. Check with your local school district to see if it has such a program.

Even if it doesn't, a close partnership between parents and teachers is an effective frontline

defense against bullying. When Silvia sees a child bullying other children, he makes it clear that the behavior is unacceptable and brings the parents and the child (usually the bully, but occasionally others who are affected as well) in for a talk. Gardino finds that schools and parents can work effectively behind the scenes to help a child meet and make new friends via study groups or science-lab partnerships. If you are concerned about your child:

- Share with the teacher what your child has told you; describe any teasing or bullying you may have witnessed.
- Ask the teacher if she sees similar behavior at school and enlist her help in finding ways to solve the problem.
- If she hasn't seen any instances of teasing, ask that she keep an eye out for the behavior you described.
- If the teacher says your child is being teased, find out whether there are any things he may be doing in class to attract teasing. Ask how he responds to the teasing and discuss helping him develop a more effective response.
- After the initial conversation, be sure to make a follow-up appointment to discuss how things are going.
- If the problem persists, or the teacher ignores your concerns, and your child starts to withdraw or not want to go to school, consider the possibility of "therapeutic intervention." Ask to meet with the school counselor or psychologist, or request a referral to the appropriate school professional.

#### Additional Resources

[Educational Equity Concepts Inc.](#), a national non-profit organization in New York City, has developed research and curriculum addressing young children's teasing and bullying behavior.

[Operation Respect: Don't Laugh at Me](#) is a program on bullying for parents, teachers and children developed by the singers Peter, Paul and Mary.

#### About the Author

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