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Addressing the School Bully

A Parent's Best Moves

By Michele Wojciechowski
 It's a sad fact that school bullies are nothing new. And, as a parent, now that your kids are returning to school, you may be wondering how to best handle the situation if one of them becomes the target of a school bully.

But, first, what exactly constitutes bullying? [Michael Dreiblatt is president of Balance Educational Services, LLC, in Manchester Center, Vt., which provides bullying prevention resources to students, parents, and school staff. He is also co-author of the book *How to Stop Bullying and Social Aggression* (Corwin Press, 2008). According to Dreiblatt, bullying is really about power.

Although different states have different legal definitions of bullying, Dreiblatt offers a general rule of thumb: "Bullying is the abuse of the difference in power. Someone has more power, someone has less power, and those with more power are abusing those who have less power."

Dr. Michael Bogrov, psychiatrist and service chief of the Inpatient Child and Co-Ed Adolescent Unit at the Sheppard and Enoch Pratt Hospital in Towson, agrees.

"Bullying is using power or influence to coerce somebody else," he says. "Whether it's power because you're physically more powerful, whether you're more closely affiliated with a certain group and a person is an outsider, whether you're a superior in a superior position—all of these things are the power base. Then, it's using that base to coerce somebody to do something that you want them to do, or not do something that you don't want them to do. Bullying doesn't necessarily mean physical confrontation."

Identify the Bullies
 "The main types of bullying are physical, verbal, social, and cyber," says Heather Higgins. Higgins is director of training and development for the Upside Down Organization in Baltimore, which provides professional training on topics such as bullying prevention and is a branch of The Children's Guild, a Baltimore nonprofit dedicated to serving children and adolescents with emotional and behavioral challenges. "With younger kids, you'll probably see more of the physical," adds Higgins. Dreiblatt says that, in elementary school, physical bullying tends to be most prevalent, but it may not be deliberately malicious. A boy, for example, may grab pencils from other kids because he hasn't been taught yet that it's not the right thing to do.

As children get older, physical bullying, for the most part, becomes less common. Why? "That's the type that staff members [at school] are the most likely to catch," says Dreiblatt. "Most schools will not tolerate outright physical bullying."

Which brings us to verbal bullying. "Verbal bullying is the kind that you can actually hear—name-calling, teasing, insulting, or making racist or sexist comments," explains Higgins.

Usually, verbal bullying tends to start happening in middle school and then continues into high school. Dreiblatt says that, with verbal bullying, the difference in power is in the bully's verbal ability. The bully can say five insults before the target can even respond.

"The verbal bullies don't think of themselves as being bullies; they think of themselves as being funny," says Dreiblatt.


Social bullying, meanwhile, is when a child or children make someone an outcast in a social way. While it's more typical in middle and high school, it also can take place in elementary school—like when a third-grader, for example, makes a big deal about giving out invitations to her birthday party but deliberately doesn't invite three children in the class. Or when a group of kids won't let someone sit with them at lunch or join them on a team.

The newest type of bullying is cyberbullying, which occurs when two minors are involved. (According to Higgins, in a cyberbullying type of situation, if someone older than 18 is involved, it actually can be illegal.) Cyberbullying consists of malicious messages sent repeatedly by texting, instant messaging, posts on online forums, phone calls, and fake accounts set up for a minor on social networks such as MySpace or Facebook.

"The amount of interaction that children have with their peers in cyberspace is extraordinarily high

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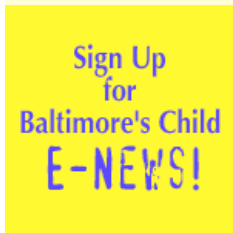


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compared to the interaction they have via other mechanisms," says Bogrov. "And that's an area that's not controlled by parents."

Adds Higgins, "The big change that we've seen in the past few decades is that bullying used to occur at school or right after school. Now, it can occur 24 hours a day because of access to the Internet."

Communicating Solutions

For various reasons, it's important to keep the lines of communication open with your child. Learning of any incidents of bullying so that you can help, of course, is one of them.

"Often, kids don't tell anyone when they are being bullied," says Higgins. "So, every day, ask, 'How was your day at school? Who did you talk to?'" When that line of communication is open from day one, then it's much easier for a child to come home and report that something happened."

If you find out that your child *is* being bullied, your first instinct most likely will be to want to protect him or her. But, what may be best is to help your child work through it instead.

So, rather than having your child go straight to the teacher, Bogrov suggests helping your child come up with ideas he or she can (or can't) do to stop the bullying. Problem-solving or role-playing and talking about what to do in the situation works well. Empowering your child, whenever possible, is important.

But, if your child has told the bully to stop to no avail, what next?

Dreiblatt says parents should determine if the bullying is happening at one particular place—such as in a certain hallway, the lunchroom, or on the school bus. If it is, suggest that the child make changes, such as sitting in a different bus seat or making sure to be with friends instead of walking alone to the area where the bullying takes place.

"Making changes that are appropriate for the situation is really important," adds Dreiblatt.

Another key, he suggests, is to make your child a social butterfly. Encourage him or her to have different friends in places other than school, such as in a church group or at a summer camp. That way, if the child has a problem with a friend or friends in one setting, he or she won't feel completely alone.

As for cyberbullying, Higgins says the best way to address that is to make your child unplug when it's bedtime—no cell phone and no computer.

"If they can't get to you via the phone or the computer, then that's the best way to prevent it from occurring," notes Dreiblatt, adding that it's often difficult to stop cyberbullying in the United States because of freedom of speech laws.

However, if all these sorts of aforementioned efforts fail and the bullying continues, it's all right, of course, to contact the school. Bogrov says to approach a teacher, school counselor, social worker, or principal—whoever is appropriate. Rather than going on the offensive, explain your child's situation and ask how the school might handle it.

"You have to presume that they've had experience doing that, and there's a mechanism," says Bogrov.

Also, set a time limit with school personnel for the situation to improve. Perhaps say that, if things are not better in a month, you'll return to see how the situation can be worked out differently.

If nothing seems to be working, Higgins says to remember that in more than 40 states, including Maryland, bullying is against the law, and you can call the police if necessary.

"Unfortunately," she says, "sometimes that's the only thing that works." **BC**

For more information on staying current on bullying solutions, Heather Higgins, director of training and development for the Upside Down Organization, a branch of The Children's Guild in Baltimore, suggests visiting the website StopBullyingNow.com.

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