

Dealing with Bullying

Bullying Is a Big Problem

Every day thousands of teens wake up afraid to go to school. Bullying is a problem that affects millions of students, and it has everyone worried, not just the kids on its receiving end. Yet because parents, teachers, and other adults don't always see it, they may not understand how extreme bullying can get.

Bullying is when a person is picked on over and over again by an individual or group with more power, either in terms of physical strength or social standing.

Two of the main reasons people are bullied are because of appearance and social status. Bullies pick on the people they think don't fit in, maybe because of how they look, how they act (for example, kids who are shy and withdrawn), their race or religion, or because the bullies think their target may be gay or lesbian.

Some bullies attack their targets physically, which can mean anything from shoving or tripping to punching or hitting, or even sexual assault. Others use psychological control or verbal insults to put themselves in charge. For example, people in popular groups or cliques often bully people they categorize as different by excluding them or gossiping about them (psychological bullying). They may also taunt or tease their targets (verbal bullying).

Verbal bullying can also involve sending cruel instant or email messages or even posting insults about a person on a website — practices that are known as cyberbullying.

How Does Bullying Make People Feel?

One of the most painful aspects of bullying is that it is relentless. Most people can take one episode of teasing or name calling or being shunned at the mall. However, when it goes on and on, bullying can put a person in a state of constant fear.

Guys and girls who are bullied may find their schoolwork and health suffering. Amber began having stomach pains and diarrhea and was diagnosed with a digestive condition called irritable bowel syndrome as a result of the stress that came from being bullied throughout ninth grade. Mafooz spent his afternoons hungry and unable to concentrate in class because he was too afraid to go to the school cafeteria at lunchtime.

Studies show that people who are abused by their peers are at risk for mental health problems, such as low self-esteem, stress, depression, or anxiety. They may also think about suicide more.

Bullies are at risk for problems, too. Bullying is violence, and it often leads to more violent behavior as the bully grows up. It's estimated that 1 out of 4 elementary-school bullies will have a criminal record by the time they are 30. Some teen bullies end up being rejected by their peers and lose friendships as they grow older. Bullies may also fail in school and not have the career or relationship success that other people enjoy.

Who Bullies?

Both guys and girls can be bullies. Bullies may be outgoing and aggressive. Or a bully can appear reserved on the surface, but may try to manipulate people in subtle, deceptive ways, like anonymously starting a damaging rumor just to see what happens.

Many bullies share some common characteristics. They like to dominate others and are generally focused on themselves. They often have poor social skills and poor social judgment. Sometimes they have no feelings of empathy or caring toward other people.

Although most bullies think they're hot stuff and have the right to push people around, others are actually insecure. They put other people down to make themselves feel more interesting or powerful. And some bullies act the way they do because they've been hurt by bullies in the past — maybe even a bullying figure in their own family, like a parent or other adult.

Some bullies actually have personality disorders that don't allow them to understand normal social emotions like guilt, empathy, compassion, or remorse. These people need help from a mental health professional like a psychiatrist or psychologist.

What Can You Do?

For younger kids, the best way to solve a bullying problem is to tell a trusted adult. For teens, though, the tell-an-adult approach depends on the bullying situation.

One situation in which it is vital to report bullying is if it threatens to lead to physical danger and harm. Numerous high-school students have died when stalking, threats, and attacks went unreported and the silence gave the bully license to become more and more violent.

Sometimes the victim of repeated bullying cannot control the need for revenge and the situation becomes dangerous for everyone.

Adults in positions of authority — parents, teachers, or coaches — can often find ways to resolve dangerous bullying problems without the bully ever learning how they found out about it.

If you're in a bullying situation that you think may escalate into physical violence, try to avoid being alone (and if you have a friend in this situation, spend as much time as you can together). Try to remain part of a group by walking home at the same time as other people or by sticking close to friends or classmates during the times that the bullying takes place.

Bullying Survival Tips

Here are some things you can do to combat psychological and verbal bullying. They're also good tips to share with a friend as a way to show your support:

Ignore the bully and walk away. It's definitely not a coward's response — sometimes it can be harder than losing your temper. Bullies thrive on the reaction they get, and if you walk away, or ignore hurtful emails or instant messages, you're telling the bully that you just don't care. Sooner or later the bully will probably get bored with trying to bother you. Walk tall and hold your head high. Using this type of body language sends a message that you're not vulnerable.

Hold the anger. Who doesn't want to get really upset with a bully? But that's exactly the response he or she is trying to get. Bullies want to know they have control over your emotions. If you're in a situation where you have to deal with a bully and you can't walk away with poise, use humor — it can throw the bully off guard. Work out your anger in another way, such as through exercise or writing it down (make sure you tear up any letters or notes you write in anger).

Don't get physical. However you choose to deal with a bully, don't use physical force (like kicking, hitting, or pushing). Not only are you showing your anger, you can never be sure what the bully will do in response. You are more likely to be hurt and get in to trouble if you use violence against a bully. You can stand up for yourself in other ways, such as gaining control of the situation by walking away or by being assertive in your actions. Some adults believe that bullying is a part of growing up (even that it is character building) and that hitting back is the only way to tackle the problem. But that's not the case. Aggressive responses tend to lead to more violence and more bullying for the victims.

Practice confidence. Practice ways to respond to the bully verbally or through your behavior. Practice feeling good about yourself (even if you have to fake it at first).

Take charge of your life. You can't control other people's actions, but you can stay true to yourself. Think about ways to feel your best — and your strongest — so that other kids may give up the teasing. Exercise is one way to feel strong and powerful. (It's a great mood lifter, too!) Learn a martial art or take a class like yoga. Another way to gain confidence is to hone your skills in something like chess, art, music, computers, or writing. Joining a class, club, or gym is a great way to make new friends and feel great about yourself. The confidence you gain will help you ignore the mean kids.

Talk about it. It may help to talk to a guidance counselor, teacher, or friend — anyone who can give you the support you need. Talking can be a good outlet for the fears and frustrations that can build when you're being bullied.

Find your (true) friends. If you've been bullied with rumors or gossip, all of the above tips (especially ignoring and not reacting) can apply. But take it one step further to help ease feelings of hurt and isolation. Find one or two true friends and confide how the gossip has hurt your feelings. Set the record straight by telling your friends quietly and confidently what's true and not true about you. Hearing a friend say, "I know the rumor's not true. I didn't pay attention to it," can help you realize that most of the time people see gossip for what it is — petty, rude, and immature.

What If You're the Bully?

All of us have to deal with a lot of difficult situations and emotions. For some people, when they're feeling stressed, angry, or frustrated, picking on someone else can be a quick escape — it takes the attention away from them and their problems. Some bullies learn from firsthand experience. Perhaps name-calling, putdowns, or physical force are the norms in their families. Whatever the reason, though, it's no excuse for being the bully.

If you find it hard to resist the temptation to bully, you might want to talk with someone you look up to. Try to think about how others feel when you tease or hurt them. If you have trouble figuring this out (many people who bully do), you might ask someone else to help you think of the other person's side.

Bullying behavior backfires and makes everyone feel miserable — even the bullies. People might feel intimidated by bullies, but they don't respect them. If you would rather that people see your strength and character — even look up to you as a leader — find a way to use your power for something positive rather than to put others down.

Do you really want people to think of you as unkind, abusive, and mean? It's never too late to change, although changing a pattern of bullying might seem difficult at first. Ask an adult you respect for some mentoring or coaching on how you could change.

Steps to Stop Bullying in Schools

If the environment at your school supports bullying, working to change it can help. For example, there may be areas where bullies harass people, such as in stairwells or courtyards that are unobserved by staff. Because a lot of bullying takes part in the presence of peers (the bully wants to be recognized and feel powerful, after all), enlisting the help of friends or a group is a good way to change the culture and stand up to bullies.

You can try to talk to the bully. If you don't feel comfortable in a face-to-face discussion, leave a note in the bully's locker. Try to point out that his or her behavior is serious and harmful. This can work well in group situations, such as if you notice that a member of your group has started to pick on or shun another member.

Most people hesitate to speak out because it can be hard. It takes confidence to stand up to a bully — especially if he or she is one of the established group leaders. But chances are the other students witnessing the bullying behavior feel as uncomfortable as you do. They may just not be speaking up. Perhaps they feel that they're not popular enough to take a stand or worry that they're vulnerable and the bully will turn on them. Staying quiet (even though they don't like the bully's behavior) is a way to distance themselves from the person who is the target.

When a group of people keeps quiet like this, the bully's reach is extending beyond just one person. He or she is managing to intimidate lots of people. But when one person

speaks out against a bully, the reverse happens. It gives others license to add their support and take a stand, too.

Another way to combat bullying is to join your school's anti-violence program or, if your school doesn't have one, to start one of your own.