

## HOW TO HANDLE A BULLY

### What Children Can Do:

- A wise line of defense is avoidance. Know when to walk away. It is thoroughly adaptive behavior to avoid a bully. Being picked on is not character-building.
- Use humor to defuse a bully who may be about to attack. Make a joke: "Look, Johnny, lay off. I don't want you to be late for school."
- Or tell the bully assertively, "Get a life. Leave me alone." And walk away. This may be the best defense for girls.
- Recruit a friend. Observers find that having a friend on the playground is one of the most powerful protectives, especially for boys.
- In general, seek out the friendly children and build friendships with them.

### What Parents Can Do:

- See that your child has a grounding in assertive behavior. The real first line of defense against a bully is self-confidence.
- Spread the word that bullying is bad for bullies.
- Ask your children how peers treat them. Children often are ashamed to bring up the subject. Parents must.
- Enroll your child in a social-skills group where children learn and practice skills in different situations.
- Model good relationships at home. Help siblings get along.
- Increase the social opportunities of all kids, but especially victimized ones. Invite other children, and groups of children, over to the house. Encourage sleepovers. This is your job; parents are social engineers.
- Enroll your child in classes or groups that develop competencies in activities that are valued by peers. Even kids who don't love sports may like karate, tae kwon do, and similar activities.
- Shut off the TV. Most programs reinforce the idea that aggression is the only way to deal with conflicts.
- Empathy helps. Instill in all kids a sense of the distress that a victim experiences.

- Help your child come up with a set of clever verbal comebacks to be used in the event of victimization by verbally abusive peers.
- See that kids in groups have plenty of things to do. Provide play materials. Buy a soccer ball. Paint a hopscotch pattern on the sidewalk. Bullying flourishes when kids are together and have nothing else to do.
- Do not tell or teach a kid to fight back. Fighting back is the *worst defense*. In most instances, victimized children really are weaker and smaller than the bully -- thus their fears of losing these fights may be quite real. Besides, not all bullying takes the form of physical aggression. Counter aggression to any form of bullying actually increases the likelihood of continued victimization.
- Do not expect kids to work it out on their own. Bullying is not simply a problem of individuals. Given the influence of the peer groups and reputational factors in maintaining the behavior of bullies and victims. It is extremely unrealistic to expect kids to alter the dynamics of bullying by themselves.
- Always intervene. Adults have a crucial role to play in the socialization of children. And consistency counts. Any time adults do not intervene they are essentially training others to solve problems through aggression.
- Intervene at the level of the group. Let all kids know bullying is not OK. Declare emphatically: "This is not acceptable behavior. You can't do this here."
- Talk to your child's teachers to find out what is normal behavior for children of that age group and to find out what the class atmosphere is like.
- Talk to other parents; where there's one victimized child there are likely to be others.
- Get the school involved. At the very least, ask that the school declare bullying off-limits. A change in the atmosphere of the school is not only possible, but helpful in reducing bullying.
- Go to the school administration and demand that bullies be transferred to other classes or schools. Every child has the right to a safe school environment.
- If all else fails, see that your child is transferred to another school. The same child may thrive in a different school with a group of children having different values.

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