

FEATURE PARENTING: BULLYING

What causes and how to bullying... stop it

Bullying is reaching epidemic proportions in schools all over the world, but how do parents begin to stop this behaviour from wreaking havoc in their homes (and yours)? Your Family asked the experts where to start...

Bullying in South African schools has reached 'epidemic proportions' over the past two years. This is according to Pierre du Plessis and Lloyd Conley of the University of Johannesburg, who discussed their findings at an international conference on Learner Discipline held in Potchefstroom in April this year. In a separate study conducted in Gauteng it was found that over 60% of the participants were victimised during the school year. And in another study the University of the Free State found that less than 33% of school children surveyed had never been exposed to direct or indirect verbal abuse. And as many as 32% had been physically abused by fellow pupils.

A 15-year-old boy dies after a fight in which he's savagely beaten. Two teenage girls are arrested on charges of assaulting a Grade 10 pupil at school. A boy is beaten by a fellow pupil in the classroom while another pupil films the incident on his cellphone... Understanding what causes bullying is necessary in order to work out how to prevent it and how to intervene appropriately. But it appears that there is no conclusive evidence that explains why bullying is on the increase in this country. Some believe that schools have become more aware of bullying and pupils are now reporting it more often. Others blame cultural factors, lack of discipline in schools, violence on television, the electronic revolution, a lack of strong role models, and a host of family issues such as divorce, the break-up of the extended family and poor parenting. Interestingly, low self-esteem is not on this list. Findings discussed at the recent Learner Discipline conference have shown that 'it is a myth that bullies are insecure underneath their bravado. Research indicates that their self-esteem (generally) is average or above average'.

Signs of physical bullying

Your child returns from school with unexplained cuts and bruises; he or she may change their normal route and or feel frightened of walking to school. Items of clothing and school books are torn and he or she may be hungry because lunch or lunch money has been stolen.

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What is bullying?

There are four main types of bullying: teasing, exclusion, physical bullying and harassment. A bully's intention is to hurt another person. It results in pain and distress for the victim who has not provoked the attack. Usually bullying is a campaign against a child but it can be a single incident.

- Teasing. This is verbal violence and can be the most dangerous and long-lasting form of bullying. This includes name-calling, insults, verbal demands or threats and cellphone abuse.
- Exclusion. This type of bullying is based on social manipulation. A bully will tell a child directly, 'You can't sit with us'. Or it may involve body language like getting up and moving away when the victim joins the group. The 'silent treatment', threatening poses and gestures, malicious gossip designed to turn others against the victim also falls under exclusion.
- Physical bullying. This involves regularly attacking someone who is weaker by pushing, shoving, kicking, hitting and tripping. It can also include stealing lunch or other possessions and damaging property.
- Harassment. This generally involves repeated annoying questions, statements or attacks about sexuality, gender, race, religion or nationality.

Girls can be bullies too

There's a belief that bullies are more likely to be boys but both boys and girls bully equally and both can be targets. In her book *Bully Blocking* by Evelyn M Field, the writer discusses gender differences in bullying.

- Boys usually bully boys and girls whereas girls usually bully other girls, but can also bully boys.
- Boys often use bullying tactics to make a reputation whereas girls often do so to protect their reputation.
- Boys prefer physical bullying whereas girls prefer indirect bullying, teasing and exclusion.
- Girls tend to be 'bitchy' or passive-aggressive while boys tend to be 'macho' and aggressive.
- Bullies (and targets) of both sexes usually have poorly developed assertive communication skills.

What's new about bullying?

It's called cyber bullying. Bullies send SMSs or emails to the victim with nasty messages, threats or name-calling, or bombard the victim with abusive, often anonymous texts. Poisonous messages are posted on websites or online forums and the web link may be sent to others – resulting in widespread humiliation. Indirect cyberbullying involves sending text messages belittling the victim, making untrue claims or sending embarrassing pictures around. A recent UK study has found that over the past five years the number of children suffering from email or SMS aggression rose from 14.5% to 20.6%. According to researcher Nathalie

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Noret, teachers and parents need to realise that cellphones enable bullies to reach their victims 24 hours a day. She says, 'Young people are very good at keeping up with the latest technology and have become very adept at setting up their own websites. Bullying among girls has always centred more on indirect aggression, such name-calling, text messaging and the Internet are ideal vehicles for that'.

What parents can do

- Encourage your child to talk about her feelings. Avoid overreacting as this might frighten her. Don't let her blame herself.
- Let her know she has your support and do what you can to increase her confidence.
- Help your child to develop a sense of humour as a way of to defuse the taunts.
- Discuss other tactics that might stop the bullying.
- Network with other parents at your child's school and put pressure on the school to adopt a 'no tolerance' policy if there is not one already in place.
- If nothing changes, contact your child's teacher. If this does not help write a letter to the principal. Once you've taken these steps you may have to move your child to another school if the bullying continues.

Beastly babies

Can toddlers be bullies in the making? Shareen was horrified when she fetched her son Clifton from his day mother to be told that he had bitten one of the other two-year-olds in the group. 'I was told that he was very aggressive and that a lot of the kids are afraid of him,' she says. Clifton's antisocial behaviour is not uncommon. But is her son's behaviour simply frustration at not getting his own way or the first steps towards becoming a full-blown bully? According to child experts, Shareen shouldn't be too concerned. Most children between the ages of two and four will bite, kick, scratch, smack and push others – at least occasionally. And while it can be disruptive and difficult, such behaviour does not mean your child is developing into a playground bully. Toddlers just don't have the verbal skills to communicate their irritation, confusion or distress so they act it out. Between the ages of three and seven children are better able to control aggression but if your child is still being excessively aggressive from eight years onwards, you need to take action.

How to tame your toddler

When your two-year-old bites or hits, ignore him and make a fuss of the 'victim' instead. This will cause a fuss but your child will realise that there is no positive

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reinforcement in such attention-seeking behaviour. When your child does play well with his friends offer positive reinforcement and encouragement.

What you and your kids can do

I Tell your child not to reply to nasty comments. I Change codes/passwords and only tell close friends. I Alter voicemail so that the bully doesn't know who he is calling. I Let parents reply to the bully. I Block the bully's emails. I Tape record or print out a copy and give it to the school or the police – it may be a criminal offence. I Reply: 'Your message has been forwarded to the police'. I Turn off the phone.

If your child's a bully

Bullies also need help and support. It's important to find out why your child is being a bully. Usually it means they are unhappy about something or they've got in with a peer group and are being strung along. Sometimes bullying is an experimental stage they're going through. Talk to your child and consider involving your child's teacher.

Suggested reading

Help, I'm Being Bullied by Dr Emily Lovegrove (Accent Press Ltd)

Bully Blocking by Evelyn M Field (Finch Publishing)

When Your Child is Bullied by Jenny Alexander (Simon & Schuster)

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