

# Bullying and Your Teenager

By Joe Childs, MD

**From the Disney Family Editors:** Even if your child is the victim of a bully, he may deny it or not want to talk about it. Here are signs to look for and how to change the situation. The article also discusses how to deal with your child if she is not the victim but the bully.

**The Journal of the American Medical Association reported that one out of every three students in grades six through 10 is the victim of bullies. Joe Childs, MD, vice president of medical services and medical director of the pediatric intensive care unit at East Tennessee Children's Hospital, offers the following answers to questions about bullying and gives advice to parents about how to prevent and deal with the issue.**

## What is bullying exactly?

Bullying is difficult to define, because in today's society it extends much further beyond someone taking your child's lunch money or pushing him or her around on the playground, and the effects of this type of behavior go much deeper than a black eye. Teasing, taunting, ethnic slurs and sexual harassment are all forms of bullying. Bullying behavior is generally repetitive hostility and aggression directed toward a victim who is physically or mentally weaker than the bully. This can come in various forms:

- **Physical bullying.** This is perhaps the most obvious form of intimidation. It can be anything from intentionally bumping into another child in the hall to hitting or threatening with a weapon.
- **Verbal bullying.** This can include name-calling, spreading rumors and persistent teasing. Girls typically bully and are bullied this way.
- **Emotional intimidation.** A bully may deliberately exclude a child from a group activity like a class party. The bully may also make other kids turn against a child by not letting that child play with them. Emotional intimidation is closely connected to physical and verbal bullying.
- **Racist bullying.** Racial slurs, spray painting graffiti, mocking the victim's cultural traditions and making offensive gestures are all examples of racist bullying.
- **Sexual bullying.** This form of bullying is characterized by unwanted physical contact or abusive comments.



## Why are some children bullies?

Just like their victims, bullies often have low self-esteem. They pick on kids who are weaker than they are to feel more important or powerful. This behavior is a way of dealing with their own problems, like a difficult situation at home. Some bullies have been victims of abuse themselves.

## How can I tell if my child is a victim of bullying?

Ideally, a child will tell an authority figure if he or she is in danger, but some children may be embarrassed or

feel weak by admitting to being the victim of a bully. Also, the effects of bullying aren't always as obvious as a black eye. Some signs to look for include:

- **Avoiding school.** A child may suddenly invent mysterious illnesses or stomachaches to avoid going to school.
- **Changing behavior.** A child may react to being bullied in a number of ways. Some children become withdrawn or moody, while others become overly aggressive or violent.
- **Showing pain.** Bruises and scratches may be a sign a child has been bullied, but these can be common in active youngsters. Parents and caregivers should pay close attention to a pattern of bruises that the child can't explain.
- **Losing possessions.** If a child starts mysteriously misplacing his or her favorite toys, he or she could be the victim of a bullying. Bullies will sometimes intimidate their victims into handing over their belongings.

#### **My child is being bullied at school. What can I do to help?**

First of all, do not overreact. It's understandable to be upset, but try not to let your child see that, because he or she might interpret it as you being upset with him or her. Listen to and assure your child that he or she did the right thing by telling you about the incident.

Next, talk to your child about how to handle future confrontations with the bully. Tell him or her that getting angry won't solve the problem because it gives the bully exactly what he or she wants. Walking away and ignoring the bully will give the message that the child doesn't care, and sooner or later he or she will find someone else to bother. If the bully is physically harming your child, he or she should inform a teacher or find a group of friends to provide comfort and support.

If the situation seems serious, you should work with the school to establish a plan to protect your child from future bullying incidents. You should not confront the parents of the child who bullies. Finally, encourage your child to continue talking with you about all bullying incidents.

#### **How can I prevent my child from being bullied?**

Bullies often target socially awkward children, so you should encourage your child to develop more friendships. Suggest your child join social organizations, clubs or teams. Being in a group can sometimes keep a child from being victimized. Keeping money or expensive toys at home can help your child avoid becoming a target, because bullies often want things that other kids have and will use force to take them. You can also work with your child's school to establish bullying prevention programs and policies.

#### **What can I do to help if my child is a bully?**

If you learn that your child is a bully, try to stay calm. Have your child tell you exactly what he or she has been doing. Ask why he or she bullies and what might help him or her to stop. Bullying often stems from unhappiness or insecurity, so try to find out if something is wrong. Also, try to control your aggression and the behavior of your other children.

If an older brother or sister behaves aggressively inside the home, it's likely to damage the other child's self-esteem and make him or her more likely to do the same thing. Help your child to find nonviolent ways of reacting to certain situations and always praise him or her for good behavior. You might also find it helpful to talk to a professional who can help your child change his or her behavior.

About this article: This information was provided by East Tennessee Children's Hospital, a private, independent, not-for-profit pediatric medical center which has served the East Tennessee region for over 60 years and is certified by the state of Tennessee as a [Comprehensive Regional Pediatric Center](#).