

When Your Kid is the Bully

Chances are you've experienced bullying in one way or another at some point in your lifetime. Maybe you were bullied as a child or had a friend or sibling who was bullied. Perhaps you are a teacher who works every day to prevent bullying in your classroom, or maybe you are a parent whose child was bullied. One thing is certain: Bullying has been an issue for years. In fact, at least one in five students report being bullied.

If a child shares with an adult that they are being bullied at school or elsewhere, the adult works to help the child cope with the bully and inform school professionals about what's happening. What if, however, it's your child who is the bully? Because so many children report being bullied, this means there are nearly just as many who are the bullies. Joseph Siegel, an OSF HealthCare licensed clinical social worker, says the power differences among kids can be the start of the cycle.

"The power difference is interesting, especially with kids, because it can change depending on one location or another. For instance, the power structure among kids might be different at the bus stop than it is in an after school activity or at school itself in the hallway. The position of power that the kids occupy might change dramatically throughout the day, so bullying opportunities might change dramatically throughout the day also," explains Siegel.

In some cases, a parent might not want to admit their child could possibly be a bully or may ignore the signs. Some parents may not want to believe their child could be a bully, especially if they haven't seen or heard the bullying first-hand. The child may even put on a "show" at home to make them appear innocent to their parents. Sometimes, the warning signs can be missed altogether.

If you do see your child exhibiting warning signs, or if you have received calls from a professional at your child's school or their athletic coach expressing concern about your child's behavior, the important thing, Siegel says, is to listen and take it seriously. And if you hear your child might be bullying someone, you may want to look for signs at home.

Siegel recommends first asking yourself questions like, "Are they being more destructive? Do you feel like there are changes in their anger level? Who are they hanging out with now – has that changed? Have you started becoming uncomfortable with the group of people they're associated with outside of school?"

He adds other things to pay attention to include if your child is coming home from school with new things but doesn't have an explanation of where they got them, or if your child seems to automatically disagree with you on basic things or becomes argumentative frequently. The organization Stomp Out Bullying says some other signs a child might be a bully include having a positive view towards violence, being good at talking their way out of difficult situations, testing limits and breaking rules, or showing little sympathy toward someone who is bullied.

Bullying does not necessarily have to be physical. The National Bullying Prevention Center classifies bullying as any act that is aggressive, unwanted, and causes either physical or emotional harm. Bullying can range from hitting and name calling to gossiping or leaving someone out on purpose – and it's not always immediately perceived as aggressive. In any case, bullying has a high chance of continuing or progressing unless it's stopped early on.

Another question to consider – is your child exhibiting proactive or reactive aggression? Sometimes, if a child is being teased by their peers, they may resort to bullying as a defense mechanism. This is why it's important to talk to your kids about how to handle a bully so they don't become one themselves. Siegel says teaching kids to stand up for themselves in an assertive, yet nonviolent way is key.

"There is nothing wrong with being assertive. Assertive is a lot different than being violent. And the assertiveness is what I refer to when I say that it is OK to use humor. It is OK to say, 'I prefer you don't do that' or even just saying 'stop' in a loud voice and then walking away. That's being assertive. Once you get into violence, I am not sure where that is going to lead. That is assuming a lot of risk," Siegel explains.

Bullying often stems from a bully not accepting someone for their differences. Siegel says it's important to pay attention to how you speak and act in the presence of your child, adding that setting a good example and exhibiting acceptance and kindness to others is important.

Ultimately, the goal is to avoid the development of bullying behavior. The American Psychological Association (APA) provides three important tips to help with this: stop bullying before it occurs, make your home "bully free," and look for self-esteem issues and address those early on. The APA adds, however, that sometimes a bully doesn't appear to have self-esteem issues if they are internalized, and may even be considered to be a "popular" kid who is well-liked.

Siegel recommends having a conversation with your child at the end of every day about how their day went, using open-ended questions while listening and trying to understand their feelings. The goal is not to respond quickly, but to get a better understanding of your child's day-to-day life and to help identify any warning signs or underlying issues you may not have known about.

If you find your child is exhibiting bullying behavior and aren't sure where it's stemming from, or if your child isn't changing their behavior even after you've addressed the issues and followed the proper steps at home to help stop it, it may be time to seek outside help.

"You may need to seek out more professional, therapeutic help for your child. These things happen sometimes. You have disorders where people are just oppositional or they get violent. All these things can be resolved with the right kind of therapy sessions and just trying to understand what's behind these experiences that they have," advises Siegel.

For more information and resources, go to www.stopbullying.gov.