



What to Do When Your Child Is Being Bullied by Another Child

Hardly anything inflames parents like the news that someone is picking on their children. The traditional counsel to children who are bullied is to walk away or to fight back. Neither suggestion teaches long-term solutions. Children who are bullied often feel powerless. Just being able to share the feelings with a parent can diminish the loneliness and hopelessness.

Fear and humiliation can best be addressed by providing compassionate understanding. "I wonder if you felt very embarrassed and alone." "You probably hate going to school." "You must worry about getting hurt." Depending on the age and personality of the child, it may be appropriate to hold the child and rock or sit together peacefully or go out for pizza and talk. You probably know what will best help your child feel soothed and ready to talk.

By listening sensitively to your child's description of the problem, you will learn vital lessons to help you solve the problem. Does the bullying only happen when your child tries to join in with older children? Does it happen at the bus stop? Does it happen often or sporadically?

When your child feels understood by you, engage in problem solving. You might suggest actions that your child could try. You could also invite your child to think of any ideas that might help solve the problem.

When one of our children was in 8th grade, a boy who sat behind him in class would often ruffle his hair and tease him. It was very painful for our son. As we talked about the situation, it seemed possible that the tease was trying to get to know our son. We suggested that he try out a strategy. Next time the boy ruffled his hair, he might make a joke and strike up a conversation. A couple of days later our son reported to us the result of his new reaction. When the offender had ruffled his hair again, he turned around and said, "Many people like to run their fingers through my hair. I just ask that you not keep any." He then turned the conversation to shared school interests. The two boys became friends. Many tense situations can be defused by using simple conversational skills.

A child can be taught to use humor. A child who is threatened by a bully might say, "You are so much stronger than I am and I don't want to spend the next year in a hospital. Can we play soccer instead of fighting?" A child who is mocked or ridiculed might say, "Yes, I know this outfit looks very silly. But I like to think that I am years ahead of my time."

This approach will not solve all bullying. You may help your child identify high-risk situations and avoid them. A teacher may help your child and the bully get acquainted so that the bully will not pick on your child. You and your child may need to visit with a school counselor or other helper to identify solutions such as changing your child's class schedule or alerting a teacher to watch for the problem. A counselor may also suggest ways that your child can respond to bullying that are customized to the personalities of your child and the situation.

The good news is that bullying does not last forever. If a child knows that he or she is loved, can talk about stressful situations, and has strategies to try out, they may even learn beneficial skills.