

# What to Do if Your Child Exhibits Bullying Behavior

Ingrained stereotypes about children who bully—physically strong, a “mean girl,” the loner—may make it difficult to recognize socially aggressive tendencies in our own children. Most youth who engage in social cruelty are not isolated or lacking in self-esteem, and they often don’t fit neatly into the categories that society has created for “the bully.” If you learn that your child has been engaging in bullying or other aggressive behaviors, the following guidelines can help you to address the problem and promote positive behavioral change.

## Does your child exhibit some of these warning signs/traits of an aggressor?

- Needs to be in control
- History of depression or anxiety
- Easily angered or frustrated
- Lacks empathy, compassion
- Quick to blame others, feels justified in negative behavior, unwilling to accept responsibility for actions
- Has been the target of bullying
- Comes from family where parents or siblings bully
- Tries to fit in with peer group that encourages bullying
- Family is inconsistent with discipline/supervision, does not take an active interest in child’s life
- Gets into physical or verbal fights often
- Views violence in positive way, overly interested in violent games/TV/literature
- Often in disciplinary trouble at school
- Has extra money/new belongings that cannot be explained

## 1. Initiate Dialogue

If your child has demonstrated bullying behavior, be objective, listen carefully and encourage them to share how they feel. Avoid reflexively scolding or punishing your child in ways that may shut down communication.

## 2. Assess the Cause

In order to take appropriate action, it is important to evaluate what may be motivating the aggressive behavior. Below are some factors you may want to consider:

- Does your child have a behavioral or learning disability that may contribute to aggressive or antisocial behavior? (If so, talk with your child’s teacher or counselor about including bullying prevention goals in his or her IEP, or Individualized Education Program.)
- Is your child acting out due to loss or trauma?
- Has your child been bullied by others in or out of the home?

## 3. Treat the Problem Seriously

Calmly let your child know that you will not tolerate cruel or aggressive behavior. Help your child to understand that bullying hurts everyone involved.

## 4. Develop Clear Guidelines

Establish clear rules and expectations for social conduct on and offline, and praise your child when they demonstrate positive behavior. When rules are violated, respond consistently with rational consequences, such as:

- Apologizing to the target(s) of the bullying and taking concrete action to make up for the harmful behavior;
- Removing or limiting Internet and cell phone privileges for a period of time;
- Taking away a privilege or valued activity for a period of time, and allowing your child to earn it back through positive behavior.

## 5. Monitor Behavior

Carefully supervise your child's on and offline activities by observing at school, watching social interactions more closely, participating in extracurricular activities and using monitoring software if necessary. Learn who your child's friends are and how they spend their free time. Redirect undesirable behavior and work with your child to develop strategies for being kind and resisting negative peer pressure.

## 6. Develop Empathy and Compassion

Model and practice with your child ways to interact with others that are kind, respectful and cooperative, and to deal with anger constructively. Consider doing one or more of the following together:

- Read a story about bullying or cyberbullying that offers constructive solutions;
- Visit Web sites and social networking forums that reflect positive interpersonal behavior;
- Engage in a hobby, club or other activity that builds on your child's talents or interests and develops positive attributes and social skills;
- Participate in volunteer work or a community service project that encourages respect and consideration for others.

## 7. Seek Support

Your child's doctor, teacher, school principal or guidance counselor can help you and your child learn how to understand and address aggressive behavior. Communication and consistent expectations among home, school and the other institutions that are a part of your child's life are a critical part of reinforcing positive behavioral change.

## 8. Be Realistic

It takes time to change behavior. Be patient as your child learns new ways of handling feelings and conflict. Keep your love and support visible.

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### References

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