

Bullies and Victims Need Your Help

You may remember name-calling and teasing as a normal part of growing up. Behavior experts say it's bullying. And school shootings in recent years show bullying can have deadly results.



The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development set out to learn how much bullying was going on in our schools. Researchers asked more than 15,600 children in grades six through ten in public, parochial and other private schools throughout the United States about their run-ins with bullying.

As it turns out, almost 30 percent were victims of bullies, had bullied others or both. Overall, 10 percent of children said they had been bullied by other students, but had not bullied others. An additional 6 percent said that they had both been bullied themselves and had bullied other children. An additional 13 percent of students said they had bullied other students, but had not been bullied themselves.

Bullying occurred most frequently in sixth through eighth grade, with little variation between urban, suburban, town and rural areas; suburban youth were 2–3 percent less likely to bully others. Males were both more likely to bully others and more likely to be victims of bullying than were females. In addition, males were more likely to say they had been bullied physically (being hit, slapped or pushed). Females more frequently said they were bullied verbally and psychologically (through sexual comments or rumors).

Boys and girls both used name-calling and threats. Boys tended to be physically aggressive. Girls spread rumors and socially isolated victims.

Both bullies and those on the receiving end of bullying were more likely to have difficulty adjusting to their environment both socially and psychologically. Students who were bullied reported having greater difficulty making friends and poorer relationships with their classmates. They were also much more likely than other students to report feelings of loneliness.

“Bullying is something that needs attention,” says lead researcher Tonja R. Nansel, Ph.D. That’s not just because of hurt feelings. Bullies have more behavioral problems, do poorly academically and are more likely to use alcohol and tobacco, Dr. Nansel says. Victims are more insecure, anxious, depressed, lonely, unhappy and have low self-esteem.

“To solve the problem, you must get to its root,” says Barbara Frankowski, M.D., who chairs the American Academy of Pediatrics’ school health section.

Bullies may act out because they’re frustrated with school or because they’re copying the conduct of their parents. Some victims are targets because they’re sensitive, shy, easily embarrassed or different.

Researchers in Norway and England have shown that school intervention programs can be successful. These programs focused on increasing awareness of bullying, increasing teacher and parent supervision, establishing clear rules prohibiting bullying and providing support and protection for those bullied.

Is Your Child Being Bullied?

These are signs that your child may be having trouble with a bully:

- The child avoids certain situations, people or places. The child may pretend to be sick to get out of going to school.
- The child exhibits a change in behavior—withdrawing or acting in a passive manner, being overly active or aggressive or being self-destructive.
- The child frequently cries or expresses feelings of sadness.
- The child has low self-esteem.
- The child has signs of bodily injury.
- The child suddenly receives lower grades or has learning problems.
- The child complains of unexplained physical symptoms such as stomachache or tiredness.
- Consider professional counseling for victims or bullies if problem is severe.

If your child has any of the above signs, talk to your child and to your child’s doctor. Tell your child to report any bullying to the teacher and to you. Ask your child what is bothering him or her.

How to Help Those Who Bully Others

You can guide children to solve problems in the following constructive ways instead of bullying:

- Teach them to stop and think by counting to five or taking a deep breath.
- Build their sense of empathy by talking about aggression’s effect on others.
- Praise good behavior with three positive comments for every criticism.

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