

PARENTING
ALL AGES

ParentLink guides use 'he' and 'she' in turn. Change to suit your child's sex.

Bullying (also called harassment) is a form of cruelty that affects not just the bullies and victims, but those who witness the behaviour and the distress of the victim.

Bullying is widespread and most commonly found in schools. A very competitive school environment can contribute to bullying. Schools have a responsibility to create an environment where children feel safe and in recent years schools have taken steps to develop policies against bullying. However, children can be bullied anywhere and adults can be bullies.

Bullying can have a very bad effect on the child who is being bullied and on the child who is allowed to go on bullying.

Bullying needs to be taken seriously by adults.

What is bullying?

Bullying is deliberate.

- It is the desire to hurt, threaten or frighten someone.
- It can be with words or actions.
- It can be by one person or more, and can vary in the degree of severity.
- It can be a 'one-off' incident, but usually involves repeated actions by a child or children.

The differences in power makes bullying possible.

Bullying can include threatening, teasing, name-calling, excluding, ganging up, or preventing others from going where they want to, or taking away their belongings.

- It can be pushing, shoving or hitting and all forms of physical abuse.
- It includes sending hurtful or scary messages on phone calls, SMS text or emails.
- It can be one or a number of these, however, verbal abuse is the most common form of bullying.
- It happens at school—in toilets, change rooms, locker rooms and playgrounds.
- It happens outside school—at bus stops and train stations, on transport, in parks, walking home, at sporting clubs and in fun parlours.

As long as the bullying gives satisfaction and no-one does something about it, the bullying will continue.

Children who bully

There are many reasons. Children who bully may:

- pick on just anyone, or choose their victim
- find that bullying pays (get what they want or get admired by others)
- be aggressive and impulsive
- enjoy feeling powerful over others
- not be affected by the distress of the victim
- believe that some kinds of people deserve to be bullied
- see it as fun
- have been influenced by aggressive 'models' (in real life and/or on movies)
- often have a violent family background
- see their behaviour as 'pay-back' for some unfair treatment
- have been victims themselves.

Children who bully are more likely to grow up to bully their partners and their own children.



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Children who are bullied

Any child can get bullied. Sometimes children who are popular, smarter or attractive can be victims of bullying, but bullies may pick on children who seem easy to hurt.

Children can be picked on who:

- look different or are different
- are stressed, either at home or at school
- have a disability
- struggle with schoolwork
- are not good at sport
- lack social confidence
- are anxious
- are unable to hold their own because of being smaller or weaker or younger.

Occasionally children provoke other children to bully them by teasing first.

Signs of being bullied

Children who are being bullied may not always tell adults. They may be afraid or ashamed. They may think it is their fault. They may think it is 'dobbing'. They may have been threatened with something worse if they tell.

Some signs of being bullied may be:

- not wanting to go to school
- finding excuses for not going to school, for example, feeling sick or being sick
- wanting to go to school a different way, for example, changing the route, or being driven instead of catching a bus
- being very tense, tearful and unhappy before or after school
- talking about hating school or other children
- showing bruises or scratches
- damage to or loss of personal belongings
- showing problems with sleeping, for example, not sleeping, nightmares, bedwetting
- not having any friends
- refusing to talk about what happens at school.

These signs may not necessarily mean your child is being bullied, but you need to check out what is worrying your child.

The effects of bullying

Being bullied can damage lives. The long-term effects of on-going bullying can damage a person's health and well-being that lasts into adult life.

- It damages self-esteem, increases anxiety and can cause serious depression.
- Bullies are more likely to continue with the aggressive behaviour and engage in delinquency and violence.
- Bullying can make children feel afraid, petrified, lonely, angry, distressed or physically ill.
- Children who are always 'on guard' are always checking where the bully is and wondering when it will happen again.
- When children are 'on alert' like this, they are less likely to concentrate or to learn. Their friendships may suffer as they are often worried and not ready to have fun.
- Children may begin to feel they deserve the treatment and become withdrawn, isolated, and feel less able to fit into their world.

Bullying by phone or email

Children can be sent frightening SMS or emails and this type of bullying or harassment is becoming wide spread.

The sender might be known, but messages can be sent anonymously which can be scary to children—and their families.

Sometimes children may not want to tell their parents for fear of having their phone or email address taken away.

- Talk to your children about why it's important for them to be open with you.
- Be careful who knows phone numbers and email addresses.
- Contact your phone and e-mail providers to see what can be done to prevent calls.
- If it's happening at school, talk to the principal or IT manager.
- As a last resort you may need to change numbers and addresses—although this may not solve the problem long term.

What parents can do

- Listen to your child and take seriously her feelings and fears.
- Try not to take everything into your own hands, unless it is an emergency, because this is likely to make your child feel less in control. In extreme cases action must be taken without your child's approval.
- Help your child to work out what ideas she has about coping with the problem. Write them down. Include a few of your own to get started. Then talk with her about which ones might help or not help and why. Choose an idea that she would like to try and then check out how it works.
- Don't call your child names, for example, 'weak' or 'a sook' and don't let anyone else do so.
- If the bullying is verbal teasing you may be able to help your child to learn to ignore it, so the child who is doing it does not get any satisfaction out of it. You could practise at home ways to help your child gain confidence, for example, the way to walk past with her head up.
- Help your child think of ways to avoid the situation, for example, by going a different way home, or staying with a group. (Your child needs to feel safe, but should not have to change her life to avoid being bullied.)
- Some children are helped by imagining a special wall around them to protect them from the hard words that will bounce off.
- Work on improving your child's confidence by concentrating on the things she can do well.
- Find out about 'assertiveness training' which may be useful. (When victims can solve the problem unaided there is a great rise in self-esteem.)
- If your child has been traumatised she may need professional help.
- Most importantly, if the bullying is happening at school, contact your school.

Be very careful that your child does not feel that being bullied is her fault. It is the bully who needs to change and stop his behaviour, not the child who is being bullied. Do not bully the bully.

Talking to the school

When bullying happens at school you will need to talk to the school about it. Most schools have policies that deal with bullying. Schools that put in more time and effort have been generally more successful in reducing bullying.

- You may feel under a good deal of stress, you may be angry or feel powerless in watching your child suffering in this way. As a parent you have a basic right and responsibility to speak about it (and expect something to be done) in order to protect your child.
- Make a list of the things that have happened to your child. Be clear and be firm about his suffering. Be prepared to name the children who bully. If bullying persists, write down **who, what, where** and **when**.
- Talk to the principal about the school's way of dealing with bullying and what steps the school will take to prevent it happening again to your child.
- Talk to the teacher about what can be done to help your child.
- Keep in contact until the problem is sorted out.
 - If you find it difficult to talk about this with the school, take another adult with you for support.
- It is important to get professional support if:
 - this is an ongoing problem rather than an occasional one for your child
 - it happens to your child a lot, in different situations and with different children.

Research has shown that one in six Australian students are bullied every week, and that those children are three times more likely to develop depressive illnesses.

Reminders

- Let your child know that bullying is wrong.
- Take your child's fears and feelings seriously.
- Reassure your child that being bullied is not his fault, and that something can be done about it.
- Let your child know that he is not the only one who is bullied. It happens to lots of children, but it should be stopped.
- Help your child as far as possible to work out his own ways of dealing with the problem.
- Protect your child—involve the school or club or wherever it is happening. Don't give up until it stops.
- Help your child to feel good about the other things in his life.

Contacts

Child and Family Centres (parenting information and support)	9am–5pm Monday–Friday: Gungahlin	6207 0120
	9am–5pm Monday–Friday: Tuggeranong	6207 8228
	9am–5pm Monday–Friday: West Belconnen	6205 2904
Kids Help Line	24-hour	1800 55 1800
Parentline ACT	9am–9pm Monday–Friday, except public hols	6287 3833

Websites

www.cyh.com	Parenting and child health information
www.kidshelp.com.au	Kids helpline
www.parentlink.act.gov.au	Other parenting guides, including Children's mental health, Coping skills, Living with teens, Optimism, Self esteem
www.raisingchildren.net.au	Raising Children Network—covering topics for parenting newborns to teens

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