

A guide to bullying for parents of children 5–12 years of age

Understanding bullying behaviour

What is bullying?

Bullying is defined as unwanted negative behaviour – verbal, psychological or physical – conducted by an individual or group against another person (or persons) and which is repeated over time. They can be in the form of:

- Verbal harassment or threat
- Physical assault, intimidation or coercion
- Exclusion
- Cyberbullying
- Extortion
- Damage to property
- Talking negatively about an individual to others (examples include: malicious gossiping, spreading rumours, discussing private or sensitive information out of context)
- Silent treatment
- Passive aggressive acts that are harder to detect

Any such acts may be directed repeatedly towards particular targets



Impacts of bullying behaviour

- Children who are being bullied may develop feelings of insecurity, humiliation and extreme anxiety and, thus, may become more vulnerable.
- Self-confidence may be damaged with a consequent lowering of self-esteem. While they may not talk about what is happening to them, their suffering is indicated through changes in mood and behaviour.

People bully for many reasons

Stress and Trauma

- Research shows that those who bully are far more likely than average to have experienced a stressful or traumatic situation in the past 5 years. Examples include: their parents/guardians splitting up, the death of a relative or the gaining of a little brother or sister. It makes sense because we all respond to stress in very different ways.

Aggressive Behaviours

- They are more likely to witness others using aggressive behaviour either in everyday life or in the media.

Low Self-Esteem

- In order to mask how they actually feel about themselves, some people who bully focus attention on someone else. They try to avoid any negative attention directed at them by deflecting.
- Some bully because they feel insecure – picking on someone who seems emotionally or physically weaker provides a feeling of being more important, popular or in control.

They've Been Bullied

- Research shows that those who have experienced bullying are twice as likely to go on and bully others. Maybe they were bullied as children in the past, or maybe they are being bullied now. Often it's used as a defence mechanism and people tend to believe that by bullying others, they will become immune to being bullied themselves.

Relationships

- Finally, those who bully are more likely to feel like their friendships and family relationships aren't very secure. In order to keep friendships, they might be pressured by their peers to behave in a certain way.
- In other cases, people bully because they simply do not know that it is unacceptable to pick on people who are different because of:
 1. Size
 2. Interests
 3. Looks
 4. Race
 5. Religion
- In some cases, bullying is part of an on-going pattern of defiant or aggressive behaviour.

Those who bully others are looking to gain a feeling of power, purpose and control over others. The easiest way of doing this is to focus on something that is unique about the person – either preying on or creating a new insecurity with intent to hurt that person physically or emotionally. What happens is, the person experiencing bullying starts to internalise it and becomes self-critical. People want to understand the reasons why they are being targeted and they start to blame themselves.



Signs and symptoms

A child who is a victim of bullying may display one or more of the following behaviours at home:

- Comes home from school with clothing that's torn or in disarray, or with damaged books.
- Has bruises, cuts and scratches, but can't give a logical explanation for how they got them.
- Appears afraid or reluctant to go to school in the morning, complaining repeatedly of headaches or stomach pains.
- Chooses an "illogical" route for going to and from school.
- Has bad dreams or cries in their sleep.
- Loses interest in school work and their grades suffer. If your child normally struggles in school because of a learning disability and is teased about that, school may become unbearable for them.
- Appears sad or depressed, or shows unexpected mood shifts, irritability and sudden outbursts of temper.
- Requests money from you to meet the bully's demands and might even resort to stealing money from you or other family members.
- Seems socially isolated, with few — if any — real friends; is rarely invited to parties or to the homes of other kids. A fear of rejection may lead them to shun others.

What can parents/carers do about bullying?

Safety First

If there has been a physical attack, or threat of one, the school should be contacted before the young person returns to class. Your child should not be encouraged to retaliate, as there may be a risk of injury – especially if there is a gang involved. If the incident took place at school, the principal may report it to the police as a matter of policy. You yourself may wish to report the incident to the police, particularly if the assault took place outside the school grounds.

- Any physical injuries should be treated by a doctor or at a hospital. When considering the young person's safety, you may wish to ask an older brother, sister or friend to keep an eye on them on the way to and from school and within the school itself.
- You may wish to advise your child on some of the following things while the matter is on-going:
 1. If attacked or in danger – run away and get help
 2. Stay with a group of friends and never be last to leave a building or room. There is safety in numbers.
 3. Avoid places where bullying is known to happen, e.g., isolated or unsupervised areas
 4. Stay in sight of teachers and adults where possible.
 5. Think about varying the times of arrival or departure from school
 6. Change route to school
 7. Leave valuable items at home and do not brag about possessions or money
 8. Do not provoke a bully
 9. Look the bully in the eye, stand straight and be confident.
 10. Keep a diary of bullying incidents. Record days, dates, times, those involved and what happened
 11. Shout loudly for help if under physical attack, break free if possible, and run away. Go to the nearest adult for help.
Sometimes shouting “NO!” and getting away may be enough to prevent an attack
 12. If you are cornered and subjected to a physical attack, try protecting vulnerable parts of the body – especially your head




Fighting back?

- Parents vary in their views on this question. Some believe that the simplest solution is that their child should 'fight back'. Others feel that this should be avoided at all costs. Parents or guardians need to be in agreement about what advice to give to a child in this regard. In reality, this is a complex issue with a number of dilemmas which should be borne in mind. The risk of injury to the child or another person if things go wrong is a serious consideration. Consequences may include: further victimization/negative attention from classmates, action from school (possible suspension or expulsion) and possible legal action.
- Being alert and observant is critical, since children are often reluctant to report bullying. Many children don't report it to their parents or teachers because they're embarrassed or humiliated by the bullying. They may assume that adults will accuse them of tattling or will tell them to deal with it themselves. Some children believe there is nothing adults can do to get the bully to stop. Naturally, bullies don't discuss their misdeeds with their parents or teachers. If their bullying behaviour is reported and their parents confront them, bullies usually deny their involvement.
- Phrases you can use include: "It's not your fault", "You're very brave for telling me", "We'll figure this out together", "I believe you", "Thank you for telling me/us".
- If you know or suspect your child is being bullied, but their school hasn't contacted you about the situation, you should reach out to your child's teacher(s) right away.
- Read your schools Anti-Bullying policy so that you are fully aware of the procedures and supports that can be put in place for a child that is targeted.

- Keep in mind that your primary goal should be to have the school's cooperation in putting a stop to the bullying.
- Knowing your own child is being victimized can evoke strong feelings and can be extremely distressing for parents/carers. Please ensure that you gain support for yourself.
- While you may want assurance that everyone involved is punished severely, try to focus on putting an end to the bullying!

If your child is a victim of bullying, try helping them with the following strategies:

- Listen carefully to your child's reports of being bullied. Be sympathetic and take the problem seriously. Be careful not to overreact or under-react.
 - Do not blame the victim. When a child finally works up the courage to report bullying, it isn't appropriate to criticize them for causing it or not handling the situation correctly. For example, don't ask, "Well, what did you do to bring it on?"
 - Realize that, for a child who is being bullied, home is their refuge. Expect them to have some difficult times in dealing with victimization.
 - Encourage your child to keep talking to you. Spend extra time with them. Provide constant support and encouragement, and tell them that you love them often!
 - Teach your child safety strategies
 - Remember that hitting back is not a choice at school and shouldn't be encouraged. In a school with a "zero tolerance policy" for physical aggression, encouraging your child to hit back may just get them expelled.
 - Encourage your child to walk away and tell an adult if they feel someone is about to hurt them.
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- Talk about safe ways to act in situations that might be dangerous. For example, identify a “safe house” or store or where they can find sanctuary if pursued by bullies. Encourage them to walk with an adult or older child. Give them a telephone number of an available adult to call if they’re afraid and need help dealing with a bullying situation.
- Teach your child how to report bullying incidents to adults in an effective way. Adults are less likely to discount a child’s report as “tattling” if the report includes:
 1. What is being done to them that makes them fearful or uncomfortable
 2. Who is doing it
 3. What they have done to try to resolve the problem or to get the bully to quit
 4. A clear explanation of what they need from the adult (or what they want the adult to do) to get the bully to quit.
- Brainstorm and practice strategies with your child to avoid further victimization.
- Nurture your child’s self-esteem
- Educate your child about bullying and bullies. Help them to put the problem in perspective and not take it personally.
- Teach your child how to walk in a confident manner.
- If needed, help them pay particular attention to personal grooming and social skills.
- Identify and encourage your child’s talents and positive attributes; doing so may help them feel more assertive among their peers.
- Encourage your child to make new friends. A new environment can provide a “new chance” for a victimized student, as they won’t be subjected to the negative stereotype other classmates have of them.

- Encourage them to make contact with calm and friendly students in their school. Such action may require some assistance on your part, or perhaps a school mental health professional, to develop the child's skills at initiating contact and maintaining a friendship relationship. This is especially true if your child's learning problems make their social interactions difficult. Be sure to provide on-going support and encouragement because your child, due to earlier failures, will tend to give up in the face of even slight adversities.
- Encourage your child to participate in physical training, sports, aerobics or walking, even if they are reluctant. Physical exercise can result in better physical coordination and less body anxiety, which in turn, is likely to increase self-confidence and improve peer relationships.

If your child has been the victim of bullying at school, here are some suggestions for reporting the problem to their school:

- After talking to your child, but before contacting the school, write down the details of the bullying situations reported to you by your child. Note the dates and the names of the kids involved. Try to view the situation objectively and determine how serious it is.
- Your child may resist your involvement if they fear retaliation by the bully. If so, explain to your child that most bullying situations require adult intervention to resolve the problem. Let them know exactly who you plan to talk to.
- Do not contact the bully or the bully's family directly.



- Contact school personnel for assistance in ending the bullying. First share the problem with your child's teacher(s), and work together to decide how to approach the problem. If the teacher isn't able to get the bullying under control, go to the principal and make a formal request in writing that they get the bullying to stop.
- Keep an on-going log of the dates of any further bullying incidents and the actions you are taking to help your child deal with the bullying. Inform the school of on-going bullying incidents.

What can parents/carers expect the school to do?

- School management, teachers and staff should take bullying problems seriously. The school should investigate the situation and let you know what steps they're taking to help stop the bullying.
- Written school policies and rules against bullying, harassment, and intimidation should be in place — and be enforced.
- Teachers and administrators should speak to the bully and their parents. They should also tell them what the consequences will be if they don't stop bullying others. If the bullying continues, the school should enforce the pre-determined consequences immediately.
- Teachers and administrators should increase adult supervision in the areas of the school campus where bullying incidents are most likely to occur.
- School personnel should be well-informed about the children who are being victimized by bullies so they can monitor and provide support to the victims as needed. They should also communicate often with the victims' parents to tell them how the situation is being handled at school.
- Finally, be aware that bullying prevention programs in schools are often a very effective way to stop bullying.


What can I do if my child is being bullied online?

Anonymity empowers bullies to continue to act aggressively. There are some tell-tale signs associated with cyberbullying which you can be on the look-out for.

- If your child is avoiding school or seems upset, sad or angry when (or after) using their phone or device, it may be a sign of cyberbullying.
- If your child begins shunning their device or becomes disinterested with technology, it could also be a sign, as is the rapid switching of screens when you enter the room.
- As a parent, you must also confirm that you are dealing with bullying behaviour. Ask yourself the following four questions:
 1. Is your child specifically targeted on their own or is the behaviour targeted at a group of people?
 2. Has this been happening over a period of time?
 3. Is the behaviour part of a recurring pattern?
 4. And, is the behaviour deliberately intended to harm or upset your child?

Once you have confirmed that bullying is taking place, you should get in touch with your child's school or youth organisation. Internet Service Providers should also be contacted and, if the cyberbullying is very serious, or potentially criminal, you should contact your local Gardaí.

Encouraging your child to talk to you about cyberbullying is the key to maintaining an open and positive environment which can help you deal with the situation. Responding negatively by barring internet use or a mobile phone can cause a lot of damage and will also put you out of the loop if cyberbullying happens again.



Cyberbullying: what advice should I give my child?

Start by commending your child for coming to speak to you about the problem.

- **Don't Reply:** Young people should never reply to messages that harass or annoy them. The bully wants to know they have upset their target. If they get a response, it feeds into the problem and makes things worse.
- **Save the Evidence:** By keeping nasty messages your child will be able to produce a record of the bullying, the dates and the times. This will be useful for any subsequent school or garda investigation.
- **Block the Sender:** No one needs to put up with someone harassing them. Whether it's mobile phones, social networking or chat rooms, children can block contacts through service providers.
- **Report Problems:** Ensure your child reports any instances of cyberbullying to websites or service providers. Sites like Facebook have reporting tools. By using these, your child will be passing important information to people who can help eradicate cyberbullying.

Preventing cyberbullying

- Because the issue of online bullying is constantly evolving, and also because it transcends the school environment, it is difficult to prevent and combat. However, there are some things that you can do to ensure cyberbullying is tackled head-on before it happens.
- As a parent, you can create a positive and supportive atmosphere for your child regarding bullying. Often, children are afraid to report it because they fear the bullying will escalate.
- But by building awareness and being open with your child, they will feel empowered to talk to you about cyberbullying instead of hiding it away from you.

- You should also get to grips with your child's internet use. Encourage them to show you the websites they use. It will give you the knowledge to make it easier to make the right decisions as challenges arise.
- Encouraging good 'netiquette', an informal code of conduct for behaving online, is also a good idea. Netiquette includes using correct language online, being polite and not copying other people's work, as well as complying with copyright laws surrounding music, video and image files.
- Mobile operators provide a 'dual access' service, which can be a really good tool too. It allows you to access your child's mobile phone account records so you can view numbers called, account balances, etc. Contact your mobile phone provider for more information.
- Also, a school's internet Acceptable Use Policy (AUP) should incorporate anti-bullying statements, which should be rigorously implemented and constantly reviewed. On top of this, schools should also have general anti-bullying policies.



Resources

Childline is open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year – it never closes. It's free to contact and you can get in touch in several different ways: through our website childline.ie where you can have a webchat with us, by text – 50101 or by phone – 1800 66 66 66. You can also contact us through our 'Ask Alex' service which is also available at childline.ie.

- The ISPCC's Support Line service can be contacted by email to parentingsupport@ispcc.ie or between 9am – 1pm Monday – Friday by calling 01 522 4300.
- For more information on the ISPCCs Shield Anti-Bullying programme for schools, please go to ispcc.ie
- [Webwise.ie](https://webwise.ie) offers information, advice and support to parents and children themselves on a range of internet safety concerns.
- [Tacklebullying.ie](https://tacklebullying.ie) is a national website to counter bullying and cyberbullying for young people, parents and teachers.
- For Parents of Children 6– 12
https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Parents_Coping_with_Bullying_d3.pdf