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Most people can remember some experience with a bully while growing up. Bullying occurs when one or several youths use physical, emotional or verbal abuse to make life miserable for another. Unfortunately, bullies cause psychological and physical damage to other kids. Because youth typically do not bully others in front of adults, teachers and parents seem unaware of bullying and rarely step in to stop bullies or to help children cope with being bullied. Bullying is not normal childhood behavior and should not be dismissed as “kids will be kids.”

What the research says

Studies say that children who show chronic patterns of aggression by age eight are more likely to be involved in criminal behavior and family violence later in life. They are also more likely to physically punish or abuse their own kids.

- In schools 24% of 6th graders reported being bullied compared to 7% of 12th graders.
- Among students ages 12-18, 14% reported they had been bullied at school in the previous 6 months.
- Bullying occurs most frequently in sixth through eighth grades, with little variation between urban, suburban, town, and rural areas.
- Among 8- to 11-year olds, 74% say teasing and bullying occur at their school.
- Teens rate teasing and bullying as “big problems” that rank higher than racism, AIDS and the pressure to have sex or try alcohol or drugs.
- Academic problems due to bullying are reported by 22% of 4th- through 8th-graders.
- Youth who are bullied are at greater risk of anxiety, depression, loneliness, unhappiness, and low self-esteem.
- A child who is a bully is more likely to engage in other negative behavior such as stealing and using drugs.

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Gender differences

Research has found that although males were both more likely to bully or to be victims of bullying than females, females more frequently said they were bullied verbally and psychologically (through sexual comments or rumors). Males were more likely to say they had been bullied physically (being hit, slapped, or pushed).

A very significant bullying problem involves controlling or manipulating another person by damaging or threatening to damage valued relationships. Teen girl bullies will do this by intentionally spreading rumors about another person or using body language or nonverbal actions.

This type of bullying is much harder for parents to get a handle on because it is often sneaky, quiet, or underhanded. It is harder to see and explain and it is one person's word against another.

The bystander

Some experts suggest that changing attitudes and involvement of kids who witness but are not victims of bullying may have the greatest impact on bullies.

Since bullies love an audience, a bystander's encouragement or toleration of the bully will make the

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bully stronger. Training through role-playing can help youth recognize a potentially harmful situation and assertively do something positive. By simply saying, "That's not cool," a bystander can stop a bully's activities.

Youth need to know that taking a stand for what is right can be very effective. Learn how to turn your teen into a catalyst for change.

Explain the difference between tattling and telling. Tattling is when you report something just to get someone in trouble. Telling is when you report that you or someone else is in danger.

What you can do if your teen is the victim of a bully

Typically, assertive, self-confident children do not become victims of bullying. Surprisingly, youth who are overweight, wear glasses, or are smart are no more likely to be bullied than others. Youth usually are singled out because of psychological traits such as extreme passivity, sensitivity to criticism, or low self-esteem.

- Listen to your teen's reports of being bullied and take it seriously.
- Recognize the symptoms: Lost or torn clothing, unexplained bruises, fearfulness or anxiety, moodiness, withdrawn behavior, a drop in grades, lack of friends, loss of appetite, unexplained reluctance to go to school, or sleep disturbances.
- Ask questions. Be suspicious if your teen needs extra school supplies or extra lunch money. Ask how he or she is spending lunch break, time before and after school. Ask what it's like riding the bus or walking to school. Ask if there are peers who are bullies without asking whether your teen is being bullied. Encourage speaking out.
- Teach your teen how to avoid the situations that expose him or her to bullying. Direct your teen toward experiences tailored to improve his or her social skills.
- Teach your teen how to respond to aggression. With bullies, they should be assertive and leave the scene without violence. Role-play with your teen how to react and respond in non-aggressive ways.
- Do not tell youth to strike back. This gives the message that the only way to fight violence is by using more violence. It makes them feel that parents and teachers don't care enough to help.

Adapted from Positive Parenting of Teens, "Bullying Makes Life Miserable for Many Kids" (University of Minnesota Extension Service, 1999, no longer in print).

- Report all incidents to school authorities. Keep a written record of who was injured and those you reported it to.
- Eliminate violent games, TV shows, and movies as much as possible.

What to do if your teen is a bully

- Objectively evaluate your teen's behavior.
- Teach youth to recognize and express emotions non-violently.
- Teach conflict-management and conflict-resolution skills.
- Emphasize talking out the issue rather than hitting.
- Promote empathy by pointing out the consequences for others of verbal and physical actions.
- Don't put down a bully. Bullies are intolerant of any insult to their self-concept.
- Model the behavior you want your teen to exhibit.

Adults must make it clear that aggressive behavior is not acceptable and will not be tolerated. When aggression is tolerated, everyone loses – the bullies, the victims, and the bystanders.

Where you can go for more information:

Families with Teens – University of Minnesota Extension
www.extension.umn.edu/familieswithteens/

Bullying Research
www.bullyingresearch.com

Stop Bullying Now
www.stopbullyingnow.com

StopBullying.gov
www.stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov

You may also want to look at:

Coloroso, B. (2004). *The bully, the bullied, and the bystander*. New York: Harper Resource.

Olweus, D. (1993). *Bullying at school: What we know and what we can do*. New York: Blackwell.

Wiseman, R. (2003). *Queen bees and wannabes: Helping your daughter survive cliques, gossip, boyfriends, and other realities of adolescence*. New York: Three Rivers Press.