



# What if Your Child is the One Showing Bullying Behavior?

The word “bullying” often evokes a schoolyard scene, with a big, intimidating student towering over a small, cowering child. However, that’s just one of the many faces of children who bully.

Another face of someone who bullies might be that of your own child. Surprised? Many parents are. They often have no idea that their child is bullying other children. Recognizing the different situations in which bullying can occur—and acting to change the behavior—is vitally important in making the future safer for your child and all children.

Children who bully can be affected as much as those they target. Statistically, they are significantly more likely than others to experience school failure, depression, violence, crime, and other problems. The message is clear: bullying is too important to ignore.

When you discover your child is bullying others, you may feel a variety of strong emotions. These reactions and emotional responses are natural for parents who want to believe that their children would never intentionally hurt or harm another child. To become an effective advocate for your child, it is important to acknowledge your emotions and then focus on developing an action plan to help your child.

## **What is bullying?**

Bullying is different from the routine conflicts of childhood. It is an intentional behavior that hurts, harms, or humiliates a student, either physically or emotionally, and can happen while at school, in the community, or online. Those bullying have more “power” (this could be having an elevated social status, being physically larger, or being a part of a group against an individual) and those targeted have difficulty stopping the behavior because of the power imbalance. The behavior is typically repeated, though it can be a one-time incident if that incident is very severe or arises from a pattern of behavior.

## **“Bully” versus “child who bullies”**

Bullying is a behavior, not an identity. The language used when referring to bullying behavior is important as it influences how students involved in bullying situations are perceived. As with “victim,” labeling a child as a “bully” implies that their behavior is fixed and unlikely to change. In reality, behavior can and does change. When schools, teachers, parents, and other adults label a child as a “bully,” that sends the message that they can’t change their bullying behavior, that everyone, sometimes even the child themselves, expects them to always be a “bully.” Expectations are powerful forces on children’s behavior. Often, they’ll choose how to act according to what the adults in their life expect them to do. Therefore, it’s important for adults seeking to resolve a bullying situation to avoid labeling the child engaging in bullying behavior as a “bully.”

Instead of labeling a child as a “bully,” consider using the terms “child who bullies” or “a child showing bullying behavior,” which both recognize that they are first and foremost a child and that they have exhibited a specific behavior. Children with bullying behavior should be held accountable for their actions and be given appropriate consequences, but it’s equally important to find out why they are engaging in that behavior. By addressing the behavior and the reasons for it, adults can help children make lasting, positive changes.

## So who does it?

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Despite common portrayals of someone who bullies as big, tough boys or mean, popular girls, *anyone* can bully because bullying is about *behavior*, not labels. Children who are bullying must, of course, be held accountable and experience consequences for their actions, but it's equally important to find out *why* they are engaging in that behavior.

Research has shown that despite their differences, children who bully may have one or more of the following traits:

- Be quick to blame others and unwilling to accept responsibility for their actions
- Lack empathy, compassion, and understanding for others' feelings
- Be bullied themselves
- Have undeveloped social skills
- Want to be in control
- Be frustrated, anxious, or depressed
- Find themselves trying to fit in with a peer group that encourages bullying
- Not recognize their behavior as bullying, and believe they are just joking or teasing

If you see these traits in your child or hear from others that your child is bullying, it's important to look into the issue. If you do discover that your child is bullying, take heart. Bullying is a learned behavior, and it can be "unlearned" and replaced with more positive behaviors. By talking with your child and seeking help, you can teach your child more appropriate ways of handling feelings, peer pressure, and conflicts.

Here are some ideas.

## Help your child to stop bullying

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### **Talk with your child.**

Children may not always recognize their behavior as bullying. They may see it as "just having fun" and not realize the serious impact it has on another child. Help them understand what defines bullying and emphasize that negative behavior is not appropriate.

### **Explore reasons for the behavior.**

Find out why your child is behaving in a manner that is harmful to others through an open, non-judgmental discussion. You might ask your child how they are feeling, if they are being bullied by someone else, or if they are experiencing peer pressure from friends who are also bullying. Some questions that might help: *"You've said that a lot of people make jokes about your classmate. How do you think he feels about these jokes?" "How would you feel if you were being treated this way?" "You've said it's funny that Joe gets upset when he's teased. Can you tell me more about that?"*

### **Confirm that your child's behavior is bullying and not the result of a disability.**

Sometimes, children with disabilities who have certain emotional and behavioral disorders or limited social skills act in ways that are mistaken for bullying. If your child with a disability is struggling with behaviors that would be considered bullying, you may want to include a social skills goal in their Individualized Education Program (IEP). The child may also be supported with a Positive Behavior Intervention Plan to modify the behaviors and reach the anticipated social skills goal.

### **Develop an action plan.**

Behavior can be changed, but it won't just happen on its own. Don't expect your child to simply outgrow it. It's important to think through the steps that work for you, your child, and your situation. An important first step is to determine and understand the situation. Next, think through how it could be different and what needs to change. Then, determine who needs to be involved and the steps that need to be taken. [See "Student Action Plan" below.]

### **Teach empathy, respect, and compassion.**

Children who bully often lack awareness of how others feel. Try to understand your child's feelings and help your child appreciate how others feel when they are bullied. Let your child know that everyone has feelings and that feelings matter.

### **Make your expectations clear and provide consistent consequences for bullying.**

Let your child know that neither bullying nor cyberbullying is okay under any circumstances and that you will not tolerate it. Before bullying happens, discuss possible consequences for that behavior, whether it's online or face-to-face. Take immediate action if you learn that they are involved in a bullying incident.

Be specific about what will happen if the bullying continues. Create meaningful consequences that fit the situation, focusing on activities that benefit others through kindness, acceptance of difference, and inclusion.

### **Teach by example.**

Model positive social behaviors that support others, encourage cooperative play, and help children identify the social behaviors that they see around them. Help your child learn different ways to resolve conflict and deal with feelings such as anger, insecurity, or frustration. Teach and reward appropriate behavior. Games and activities that build empathy are another way to show children behaviors that create healthy relationships.

### **Provide positive feedback.**

When your child handles conflict well, shows compassion for others, or finds a positive way to deal with their feelings, provide praise and recognition. Positive reinforcement can help improve behavior and is usually more effective than punishment.

### **Be realistic.**

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

### **Talk with school personnel.**

Reach out to those who work with your child at school and share information about your concerns. You may also want to talk with the school principal or social worker to determine if the school offers a bullying prevention program and how your child could be involved. Research ways for your child to become involved in groups that encourage cooperative relationships and focus on working with others.

### **Seek help from your community.**

Your child's doctor, faith-based professionals, coaches, or a psychologist can help you and your child learn how to understand and deal with bullying behavior. It's important to address bullying in school, in the community, and at home.

### **Create an action plan for bullying and cyberbullying** .....

The following PACER resources can be used to help create an action plan for your child and family:

- **Student Action Plan Against Bullying** ([PACER.org/publications/bullypdf/BP-25.pdf](https://www.pacer.org/publications/bullypdf/BP-25.pdf)) – This plan can help guide youth through the communication process, providing them with a structure to share their ideas and opinions about potential solutions to bullying. It can also help them feel more in control of the situation. Because most bullying will not stop until a supportive and caring adult is involved, we encourage adults to join students in working through the Student Action Plan. With the support of an adult, students can feel empowered to speak out and end the silence around bullying.
- **Parent Guide to the Student Action Plan** ([PACER.org/publications/bullypdf/BP-37.pdf](https://www.pacer.org/publications/bullypdf/BP-37.pdf)) – This guide helps adults navigate difficult conversations around a bullying situation while using the Student Action Plan. Questions, ideas, and possible actions are offered to help adults resolve a bullying situation in which their child might be involved.

## Online resources for students

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For elementary school students, visit [PACERkidsagainstbullying.org](https://www.pacerkidsagainstbullying.org) with your child and check out the following page: Students Who Bully – What Can They Do? ([PACERkidsagainstbullying.org/do-you-bully](https://www.pacerkidsagainstbullying.org/do-you-bully)). This resource helps students understand the reasons why bullying may occur and encourages them to think about new ways to respond to it.

For middle and high school students, encourage them to visit [PACERteensagainstbullying.org](https://www.pacerteensagainstbullying.org) and check out the following page: Do You Bully? Quiz ([PACERteensagainstbullying.org/tab/bullying-defined/do-you-bully](https://www.pacerteensagainstbullying.org/tab/bullying-defined/do-you-bully)). This quiz can help teens recognize that their words and actions might be bullying behavior.