



Bullying and young people – what family and friends can do to help

families/
carers

Bullying



Raising sensitive issues and working out what to do can be challenging when you think a young person you know may be being bullied. It can be difficult to know when to give advice, when to push an issue, when to back off and when to seek help. Family and friends play a critical role in supporting young people involved in, or experiencing bullying. It's important to manage your own feelings so you can work through the issues together in a constructive manner.

Four key ways you can help

1. Be supportive: be consistent, ask questions and cultivate trust
2. Be involved: show that you are interested in young people's life, friendships, hobbies
3. Establish and maintain good communication: ask open ended questions and listen
4. Be prepared to seek help: establish a support system and remember that help is available

What is bullying?

Bullying is the intentional (often repeated) intimidating behaviour by an individual or group against another person or group. Bullying is not simply 'part of growing up'; it is a destructive issue that can have serious effects on a young person's physical and mental health.

Bullying takes many forms and can occur in a real (face to face) or virtual (online) environment. Face to face bullying can be verbal, physical, relational (social), or indirect (involving a third

party). Cyber bullying involves intimidating/degrading behaviour via technology such as text messages, email, chat rooms, and social networking sites such as facebook and tumblr. This enables the bullying to occur outside of the school yard, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Bullying is a complex and dynamic issue and individuals may at different times (or in different situations) be the target, the perpetrator or the bystander in relation to bullying behaviour.

Parenting and bullying: what helps?

Warm and positive family relationships can help buffer young people from the negative consequences associated with being bullied (Bowers et al, 2010). Young people who receive high parental support, report fewer depressive symptoms than

those receiving low parental support, regardless of whether they are the ones engaged in bullying behaviour or the target (Connors-Burrow et al, 2009).

If you know bullying is occurring

If bullying is occurring or suspected, don't ignore it – the consequences can be serious – ask your young person how they are, listen and take their feelings and fears seriously. You can:

- Normalise any feelings of embarrassment, hurt or fear
- Reassure them that bullying is not their fault and that they are not responsible for what is happening to them
- Make sure they are safe. Sometimes this may require taking action they are not happy with. Have a conversation if this might be the case
- Try to give them as many options as possible to find solutions so they feel more in control. Solving problems, with your support, can increase self-esteem
- Work on improving the young person's confidence by building on the things they do well
- Help them feel good about other things in their lives
- Reassure them that they are not alone, it shouldn't be the responsibility of your young person to 'do something' about the situation by themselves. [Adapted from Parenting SA, 2010]



Finding out if someone is being bullied

Knowing if someone is being bullied can be difficult; often parents and carers do not know, or underestimate its frequency and/or severity (Fekkes et al, 2005; Goodman et al, 2010; Holt et al, 2008). Family and friends are often in a good position to notice changes in behaviour, mood and general wellbeing as well as early signs of mental and physical health issues. Not all young people will ask for help and it may take time for a young person to speak about their experiences. Always ask your young person how they are, especially if you suspect they are being bullied.

Try open-ended questions:

- Have you ever seen kids at school call each other names or hitting or pushing each other?

- What is lunchtime like at school? What do you do?
- Do you ever feel lonely at school or left out of activities? What happens and what do you feel?
- Do kids ever tease you? Bully you? Hit you? Pushed you around? Let's talk about what you do when this happens.
- What can I do to help?

Be mindful that constant and persistent questioning can be stressful for some young people and may make them less willing to talk. Encourage them to speak to someone they feel comfortable with and don't take it personally if they want to speak to someone other than yourself. [Adapted from Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2008].

The importance of a young person's support network

Research suggests that social support may help buffer young people against the negative impacts associated with bullying (Rothon et al, 2011). Support your young person to make new friends and maintain existing friendships – encourage them to

engage with others outside of the school they attend (or away from where the bullying is happening). Identify their strengths as well as things they enjoy and find ways to develop these, especially in a social context.

Other things to consider

- Documentation will be useful if the issue needs to be taken further (ie. with the school, police or support services) so keep a record of events including; when it occurred, who was involved, what happened, where did it happen, did anyone else see it happen, what type of bullying occurred (physical, verbal, cyber bullying?). Did anyone intervene? Has it happened before?
- Get to know the websites and social networking tools that

young people use and talk to them about how to use these safely

- If the bullying is occurring in or around the school, approach the school to discuss your concerns or seek advice as how best to proceed. It may be helpful to discuss the process with your young person before you begin
- If you're concerned that your young person may need more help than you can provide, seek professional help

Other useful websites:

Help lines and support:

- Lifeline www.lifeline.org.au
- Kids Help Line www.kidshelp.com.au
- There are parent helplines in every State and Territory of Australia; Google "Parentline" along with your State or Territory

Websites and further information:

- Bullying No Way – www.bullyingnoway.com.au
- The Alannah and Madeline Foundation – www.amf.org.au/bullying/
- The Australian Psychological Society – www.psychology.org.au/publications/tip_sheets/bullying/
- Cybersmart – www.cybersmart.gov.au/

References:

- Australian Institute of Family Studies (2008). Working with families concerned with school-based bullying. Australian Family Relationships Clearinghouse Briefing No. 11
- Bowers L, Maughan B, Caspi A, Moffitt T, & Arseneault L. (2010). Journal of Child Psychology & Psychiatry, 51(1). 809-17.
- Connors-Burrows N, Johnson D, Whiteside-Mansell L, McKelvey L, & Gargus R. (2009). Psychology in Schools, 46(7). 593-604.
- Fekkes M, Pijpers F, & Verloove-Vanhorick S. (2005) Health Education Journal, 20(1). 81-91.
- Goodman K, De Los Reyes A, & Bradshaw C. (2010). Clinical Child & Family Psychology Review, 13(4). 366
- Holt M, Kaufman-Kantor G, & Finkelhor D. (2008). Journal of School Violence, 8(1), 42-63.
- Parenting SA. (2010). Bullying: Parent easy guide 29. Parenting SA: Child, Youth & Women's Health Service, Dept of Health, Government of South Australia.
- Rothon C, Head J, Klineber E, & Stansfeld S. (2011). Journal of Adolescence, 34. 579-88

For more information, and to find out how to get help, visit the headspace website: headspace.org.au