
I N S I G H T S

FOR FAMILIES



Dealing with bullies and “mean girls”



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INSIGHTS FOR FAMILIES is provided by your child’s school in recognition of your role as a partner in education. Insights is produced by Marcia Latta, communications consultant.

Excitement about the new school year is often mixed with anxiety. Kids are nervous about the start of school, a new teacher and a new group of friends. Sometimes they fear their fellow classmates, who may be among a growing number of bullies in school hallways, classrooms and playgrounds.

What bullying is — and is not

Bullying has been on the rise among youth for many years. It is defined on StopBullying.gov as:

“Unwanted, aggressive behavior among school aged children that involves a real or perceived power imbalance. The behavior is repeated, or has the potential to be repeated, over time. Repeated, frequent intentional actions that harm an individual.” www.stopbullying.gov/what-is-bullying/definition/index.html

Bullying can be verbal, physical or social. Many people believe that the teasing, name-calling, social exclusion, tripping and pushing among children is normal childhood behavior, which it is. It rises to the level of bullying when it is targeted and frequent.

Not all mean behavior among children is bullying. Unfortunately, kids test the social order with unkind behavior from time to time. Bullying is unkind, but not all unkind behavior is bullying, especially in young children who are learning about appropriate behavior and how to get along with peers.

A universal experience

Most people can remember being on either end of the bullying spectrum – the bullied or the bully. Some statistics show that as many as half of all children are bullied at some point during their education. www.eduguide.org/article/girls-who-bully-what-when-where-why-and-how

Those are the reported numbers. The actual numbers are likely even higher. Most adults, when asked, can recount some event or personal tormentor that made them avoid a social situation or question their self-worth at some point in their education.

Who does it hurt?

Bullying is harmful to students. Bullying can cause serious long-term harm to the victims, including depression, physical ailments and sleep problems, academic problems, self-esteem issues and even suicide. (www.eduguide.org/article/girls-who-bully-what-when-where-why-and-how). Even the bully feels the negative consequences of their behavior, with increased rates of alcohol and drug abuse, absenteeism and fights. www.stopbullying.gov/at-risk/effects/index.html#bully

(Over)

Mean girls

Both genders can be skilled bullies or hapless bully victims. While bullying is not limited to either boys or girls, female bullying – mean girls – is in the spotlight because girl-on-girl social aggression is increasing and has a variety of emotional and relational negative consequences

The worst consequence of bullying is suicide. Bully victims are between two and nine times more likely to consider suicide. Suicide is the third leading cause of death among young people, and the rate of suicide attempts is estimated at about seven percent among high school students. www.bullyingstatistics.org/content/bullying-and-suicide.html

Researchers aren't sure what causes mean girl behavior. It could be the result of parental or sibling influences, hormones from early onset puberty or the amount and type of media exposure, especially socially aggressive shows, which have a negative effect on girl behavior that hasn't been found in boys.

<http://nyti.ms/1oxaaBU>

One study found that students trying to climb the social ladder and increase their popularity is a cause of aggression among students. Students who were secure in their place in the social structure were unaffected, but students who tried to increase their social standing were at greater risk of bullying or being bullied. <http://bit.ly/1whgYsF>

What can we do?

Research shows that anti-bullying programs work when implemented consistently throughout the whole school. Teachers must respond to bullying on a daily basis, and the school must have a culture of zero-tolerance for bullying behavior.

Many websites have good tips to help girls respond to bullies. Girlshealth.gov provides resources to help parents understand bullying and girls to respond to a bully, including:

Tell an adult. An adult can make you feel better and help end the bullying.

Stand up for yourself. Responding to the bully in a calm, confident voice will help you earn respect from others in the social group.

Tell the bully to stop. Calmly walk away. If you don't react, the bully will stop targeting you, and others will respect your self-confidence.

Do not fight back! Engaging in a fight with a bully could land you in trouble, too, and will prolong the conflict. Ignore your bully if you can.

Make new friends and get involved. Find new friends and get involved in extracurricular activity. You'll gain new confidence and a new circle of friends.

Don't blame yourself. Remember that it is not your fault. No one deserves to be treated this way. <http://girlshealth.gov/bullying/stopping/beingbullied.html>

The Washington Association of State School Directors has produced an easy to read survey of bullying issues and current research. It is available at: <http://bit.ly/1qB2WRL>