



WHAT PARENTS CAN DO WHEN THEIR CHILD IS BEING BULLIED AT SCHOOL

by Anne E. McTavish

The most important things that any parent can do for their child who's being bullied is to talk with them, listen to them, be their advocate, and get them involved in a group activity that they can do well at. This last one gives the child something to do that they like, something to do well at, and the opportunity to have friends with similar interests.

Signs your child might be bullied are:

- (1) your child who loves/likes school suddenly hates going to school,
- (2) your child has a lot of headaches,
- (3) your child has stomach aches and/or digestive problems,
- (4) your active child turns into a couch potato and otherwise withdraws, and/or
- (5) your child seems to be depressed.

These responses are all INWARD responses.

Of course, there could be medical reasons behind #2-5, so taking them to a clinic or to a doctor to have these check out is always a good thing.

An OUTWARD response to bullying is to bully back. Think of it: when you're attacked, your instinct is to attack back. Children who have been bullied often put up with it because they believe there's nothing anyone can do and after a while, they can't take it any more so they bully back — and usually with a vengeance. Unfortunately, they then end up in a lot of trouble and still, no action is taken with respect to the bully(ies) who bullied them into bullying back. That's why attacking back is rarely, if ever, a good idea.

So if your child shows any of the INWARD responses above or is accused of bullying, talk with them. Not *to* them. *With* them. Find out what's happening. You need that information to help them. Go to the school. Talk with the teacher(s) and principal. Develop an action plan. And follow up to make sure it's being followed through.

Get your child involved in social activities outside the school where they have a chance to make friends (i.e., develop a social network) and to do something they like to do (develop a skill), play sports, play an instrument, etc.).

Teach them how to cope with the bullying. Teach them better ways to handle disagreements and other conflicts. Better yet, show them. That's where my upcoming book, *Secrets of Bully Whispering*, and my FISTFREE Language™ program come in.

Bullying really is at epidemic proportions. Reliable, conservative studies show that 1 in 4 students are bullied¹ and that in the workplace, 1 in 4 people are bullied². One in four!! That's the same rate as cancer.³ And in many cases, the bullying rates are higher.

Although we all think we're talking about the same thing, I like to be clear about what we're talking about. I've found that definitions are very helpful, so here are the definitions that I use when I talk about bullying.

I start with Dr. John W. Renfrew's clear definition of aggression, since bullying is social aggression.

AGGRESSION is a behaviour that is directed by an animal or person toward a target, resulting in damage.⁴

Based on this, my definition of bullying is:

BULLYING is intentionally aggressive behaviour that's excessive or unnecessary, done to hurt their target.

This definition leads us to bully whispering secrets:

- ✦ Bullies are defined by *what they do*, not by who they are.
- ✦ Anyone can bully.
- ✦ Bullying is about behaviour.

Behaviour includes both actions and words: what we do, what we say and how we say it, and what we write. By keeping our focus on what is done and what is said or written — that is, on the bully's behaviour — we can make better choices as to how to handle situations.

BULLY WHISPERING is a skillset that helps us to persuade someone who's in BULLY MODE (i.e., a bully) to behave in more positive ways, whether it's listening to what we're saying or treating us with civility and respect. It helps us cope with the chaos they create.

and

BULLY MODE is the way we “see” things, what we do, what we say, and how we speak when we're bullying.

What triggers BULLY MODE? When we're attacked, we respond defensively, and this can include BULLY MODE attacks. The situation, people around us, our own needs and what we've learned can also trigger BULLY MODE. The triggers can be described as

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| ✦ Being attacked | ✦ Change |
| ✦ Defending one's position | ✦ Learned triggers |
| ✦ Frustration | ✦ Cues from other people |
| ✦ Threats | ✦ Cues from the environment |
| ✦ Threats to goals, needs or desires | ✦ Decision to use for a purpose or goal |
| ✦ Threats to expectations | ✦ Boundary encroachment (invading your personal space, whether physical or psychological) |
| ✦ Strong negative emotions | |
| ✦ Differences | |

Here's the advice I give to students and their parents when faced with bullying at school.

1. Dealing with Physical Attacks

(a) Harassment or Threats

- Enlist the help of the school and of your parents.
 - Plan and implement a safety plan.
 - Encourage the school to deal with the bully.
- Enlist or build a supportive social group.
- Consult a lawyer.

(b) Stalking, Serious Threats, Physical Assault, Sexual Assault

- Report incident(s) to the police.
- Hire a lawyer.

- Enlist the help of the school and of your parents
 - Plan and implement a safety plan.
 - Encourage the school to deal with the bully.
 - Enlist or build a supportive social group.
2. Dealing with Verbal Attacks
 - (a) Don't fall for the bait.
 - (b) Don't attack back.
 - (c) Deal with the real issue, or simply reply, "Not really."
 - (d) Use Neutral Language.
 3. Dealing with Social Attacks (Bullying)
 - (a) Figure out how serious a bully you're dealing with.
 - (b) Enlist the help of the school and your parents.
 - Plan and implement a safety plan.
 - Encourage the school to deal with the bully.
 - (c) Enlist or build a supportive social group.
 - (d) Join a group that pursues one of your interests (sports, music, clubs, etc.).

As you can see, parents are an integral part of dealing with bullying.

Talking with your child is important. There are times, though, when what you need to do is listen to him/her, without offering any advice or suggestions. Listening is very powerful, it puts them first and demonstrates that your first concern is them, not yourself or anyone else. Talking with your child and listening to them demonstrate that you care about them and what happens to them.

Talking with your child and listening to them will give you valuable information about what's going on, how they're reacting to what's going on, what their teacher(s) and school are doing about it, and what options you have.

Following through with the school and the plans you make is also important. You may have to fine tune the plans as you go along, and that's OK. Hang in there, and keep working with your child and the school about the bullying. This problem didn't develop overnight, and it's going to take a while to work it out. And that's the point: it can be worked out.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 "28% of students 12-18 reported having been bullied at school during the previous 6 months in 2005." National Criminal Justice Reference Service at <http://www.ncjrs.gov/App/publications/abstract.aspx?ID-241345> (2007).
- 2 Pamela Lutgen-Sandvik, Sarah J. Tracy and Jess K. Alberts, "Burned by Bullying in the American Workplace: Prevalence, Perception, Degree, and Impact", (2007) *Journal of Management Studies*, 44:837-862. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-7486.2007.00715.x at p. 26. Also found at <http://www.workplacebullying.org/res/Burned.pdf>.
- 3 Thomara Latimer Cancer Foundation, at http://www.thomlatimercares.org/Cancer_Facts.htm#HowMany2Die (USA).
- 4 John W. Renfrew, Ph.D., *Aggression and its Causes: A Biopsychosocial Approach* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 6. I have used "animal or person" in place of Dr. Renfrew's technical term "organism".