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Is My Child Being Bullied? Action Steps for Parents

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Most adults can recall a time when they, or someone they know, were bullied. It usually was a humiliating experience that they preferred to forget. The "school yard bully" was avoided at all costs; rarely did adults get involved. Well, the times have changed. My career has been devoted to protecting children -- but usually due to abuse or neglect at the hands of an adult. Unfortunately, children also need to be protected from other children. To set the record straight, bullying is not teasing or the occasional name calling or arguments that happen between friends. Bullying is behavior that crosses the line and, as we've recently seen in tragic cases, can drive children to commit suicide.

Bullying can be characterized as:

- Intentional. The bully means to hurt your child, it is not an accident.
- Harmful. Bullying can cause physical and/or emotional harm.
- Repetitive. Not usually a one-time occurrence; children are often targeted due to the fact that the bully thinks they won't take action against them.
- Imbalance of Power. The bully usually has a source of power over the child they choose to bully. It can be age, size, strength or social status.

Parents should be aware that there are different types of bullying. The most common are:

- Physical threats such as hitting, shoving, spitting or punching
- Verbal bullying such as name calling, threats, spreading rumors or lies
- Social exclusion, purposely leaving the child out of activities, team sports, birthday parties.
- Cyber-bullying; threats or slurs that are conveyed through the cell phone or internet.

Bullying happens everywhere. Stopbullying.gov reports that there are no differences in the rates of bullying in rural versus urban areas; in large or small schools; or among genders. Boys and girls are just as likely to be involved in bullying, though girls may be more prone to bully others socially.

Bullying hurts. Recognize the warning signs. Your child may not want to tell you about it. This is due to being embarrassed or ashamed, afraid that your intervention may make things worse or sadly that you will dismiss their fears. Parents who are in tune with their child may notice the following:

- Depressed, or more moody or anxious than usual
- Grades slipping
- Suddenly has fewer friends

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- Lower self-esteem
- Not wanting to go to school or participate in after school activities
- Changes in sleeping and eating habits
- Appears upset after phone calls, texts or using the computer
- Loses books, electronics, clothing or jewelry
- Unexplained injuries
- Avoids certain places
- Suicidal thoughts

As a parent, there are steps you can take to help your child with bullying. They include:

- Help your child understand bullying. There are constant media stories about instances of bullying. Use them as a teachable moment to discuss this issue with your child. Reinforce that it is never your child's fault if they are bullied. It is not a reflection of anything wrong with them. The bully chose to use mean behavior -- they are the ones that need help.
- Keep tabs on your child. Check in about their school day, worries or concerns. Find out whom they ate their lunch with, or who they sat with on the bus. Teach your child how to say "no" to bullying behaviors. Strategize with them about what they would do if they are confronted by a bully. Practice their responses. This should build their self-confidence.
- Children should be encouraged to travel in groups, be calm and direct when confronting bullies and tell them that their behavior is not okay. Children should avoid fighting, but rather go immediately to get an adult to intervene. If there is no adult present, they should report the instance after the fact.
- Be informed. Learn about your school's policy towards bullying. New York State has the "Dignity for All Students Act" (2012) that protects children from harassment on school property or at a school function. Find out who you can speak to if your child is bullied. It's also helpful to write down the details regarding the incident(s) as this record can be helpful to school administrators or the police. If it's cyber-bullying, keep copies of all messages or postings.
- Commit to making bullying stop. Work closely with your school administrators, other parents and if needed, local law enforcement if the bullying persists or escalates. Get help for your child to deal with the stresses of bullying. Speak with a school counselor or your mental health professional for support.

For children, If you are bullied or see someone getting bullied the best thing to do is speak up!

- Tell an adult. Someone must step in and help you. You are not snitching, you are putting an end to abusive behavior
- Be friendly. Say a few kind words to the child that was bullied. It will make a world of difference to them.
- Get involved. Find out about your school's bullying prevention program and join the movement. Bullying is not okay. Be part of the solution.

Websites for parents and children to learn more about bullying and prevention include:

Parentfurther.com -- a great resource for parents for tips to prevent and stop bullying and what to do if your child is bullying others.

Cartoonnetwork.com -- a resource for children and parents; "Stop Bullying -Speak Up" videos by children about what helps to stop bullying.

[Stopbullying.gov](http://stopbullying.gov) -- how to "bully proof your child" provides information on how to stop bullying and bullying prevention

[Stopbullyingnow.com](http://stopbullyingnow.com) -- a resource for parents and teachers. Describes what parents can do if their child is doing the bullying.

[Olweus.org](http://olweus.org) -- a resource that provides the bullying laws by state and training for educators

[Cyberangels.org](http://cyberangels.org) -- a cyber safety guide with tips for parents.