

Parent Factsheet: What to do when your child keeps being bullied or coerced by others

Immediate Action

Talk gently to your child about how they feel about how others are treating them. Listen without judgement. Ask them about their friendships and relationships with others and who they feel safe with and who they don't, and why.



Description

If you notice your child doing things they might not ordinarily do, or being taken advantage of, there may be more going on behind the scenes. If your child is being pressured, bullied or coerced by others, intervention is needed. Whilst the behaviours may start out as small as asking your child to buy a sandwich for them or give them a pencil; over time, coercive or bullying behaviours can escalate into violence or sexual assault, which can have short and long-term devastating effects.

People who take advantage of, or bully, others will often target those who they perceive to be unable to stand up for themselves, such as people with special needs. Your child may need help identifying unhealthy behaviours in their relationships so they can ask for help when they arise. You can support and empower your child to stand up for themselves by making sure they are clear about what is 'ok' and 'not ok' for them, and ensuring they feel safe to come to you or a trusted ally when others are pressuring, abusing, bullying or coercing them.

Key Terms

Bullying - Bullying is an ongoing and deliberate misuse of power in relationships through repeated verbal, physical and/or social behaviour that intends to cause physical, social and/or psychological harm (DET).

Pressure - Making someone do something by insisting until they say yes, or making them feel bad if they don't.

Coercion - Making someone do something by threatening, blackmailing or bribing them.

Enthusiastic consent - When you not only agree to something but you are excited and show positive body language throughout the activity.

Personal boundaries - The limits and rules we set for ourselves within relationships. A person with healthy boundaries can confidently say 'no' or 'yes' to a request in line with their own values or wishes.

Values - An individual's perspective on what is important in life.

Why does this happen?

To embarrass or humiliate

Sometimes bullying or pressure is considered entertaining by the perpetrator/s. They may want to embarrass or humiliate the victim so that they feel better about themselves or connected to others in some way. Degrading people who are different from them is one way that humans attempt to form a sense of belonging with others who are like them.

Power and control

Some people will bully, harass, control or intimidate others to make themselves feel powerful. They might see opportunities for personal benefit by taking advantage of others, such as financial benefit or social approval.

Lack of knowledge about healthy relationships

Students need to have a clear understanding of social and emotional boundaries from an early age to ensure they understand how to behave appropriately with their peers. Historically, this has not always been the case. Learning how to identify the signs of an abusive relationship can help your child choose who to avoid or spend time with. Likewise, teaching them the importance of enthusiastic consent can help them decide what they say 'yes' or 'no' to.

How to respond to your child

Tip 1

Calmly and openly speak to your children about healthy and unhealthy relationships. If your child wants to share any personal stories, listen to them without judgement. Acknowledge that it can be hard to handle bullying, pressure and coercion but you are here to help and this is something they will need to practise throughout their life.

Tip 2

You can strengthen your child's self-esteem and personal boundaries by helping them identify what they are good at, what they value and what is ok or not ok for them. Your child can also learn communication strategies for standing up to bullies. This lesson includes resources that could help.

Tip 3

Keep lines of communication open and take opportunities to discuss different scenarios together. You may suggest certain ways of saying 'no' in the moment or come up with a plan together. This could include your child texting you to come and pick them up. Reassure your child you will be there for them when they need you and no situation is too hard to deal with.

Tip 4

Help your child identify people who demonstrate healthy relationship behaviours and who could act as allies in bullying situations. Encourage them to strengthen their relationships with these people.

Tip 5

If you're worried that your child's friends could be a negative influence or are bullying your child,

criticising and banning them from interacting with your child is not the answer. Your child may become defensive or withdrawn, or it could make the bullying worse. It's important to focus on the behaviours and not the people and gently try to lead your child to discover for themselves that these relationships are harmful for them by educating them to recognise the signs of bullying and unhealthy relationships.

Tip 6

Encourage your child to access a wider social network. This may include joining a new sports club or social group. Having multiple friendship options exposes your child to different social settings and gives them a chance to find meaningful, healthy friendships.

Tip 7

If you notice further changes in your child's mood, behaviour, sleeping or eating habits they may need further support. Offer and encourage your child to access professional services such as psychology, counselling or Kids Helpline (1800 55 1800).

How to communicate with relevant adults

Tip 1

You may feel stressed and concerned for your child in this situation. It can be tough facing these situations as we might recall the negative impacts of bullying or coercion from our own lives. Reach out and contact a fellow trusted adult to support you if needed or contact 1800 RESPECT (1800 737 732).

Tip 2

If you know the parents of your child's friends who may be pressuring or coercing your child to behave a certain way, it might be good to have a chat with them. If you can both get on the same page and educate your children about consent and healthy relationships it will help. Share this factsheet with them so that they can handle the situation delicately. In some situations, you may decide to allow the children to work it out between them over time to teach them how to deal with future relationships and instil personal boundaries. In other situations, you might decide to intervene directly to protect your child, such as if you're concerned about their safety (e.g. them being threatened or blackmailed) or wellbeing. You will know your child best.

Tip 3

If you need to communicate with your child's school or any other adults keep in mind your child's privacy and wellbeing. Only share information that is necessary to keep your child safe. Sharing personal information about your child with others could make their situation worse and cause them to withdraw from you.

Key References

- <https://bullyingnoway.gov.au/>
- <https://raisingchildren.net.au/teens/behaviour/peers-friends-trends/peer-influence>
- <https://kidshelpline.com.au/teens/issues/being-assertive-and-setting-boundaries>
- https://prod-media.coolaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/16112036/SCSC_ConsentContinuum2_RMdesign.pdf
- <https://kidshealth.org/en/teens/abuse.html>