

# Protecting Our Youngest: Preventing School Harassment Before It Begins

Recent stories about sexual harassment and threats in high schools have shocked many parents. The reality is that these issues don't appear out of nowhere in high school—they stem from attitudes and behaviours that begin much earlier. In fact, several studies indicate that bullying behaviours can occur during preschool and kindergarten years and that Grade Four may be the age where bullying is most prevalent.

## The Early Years Matter

Children learn social norms and relationship skills from a young age. The way they treat others, the media they consume, and the values we instill at home all contribute to the kind of teenagers—and adults—they become. Addressing these issues early can prevent more serious problems later.

In this article I'm going to outline five things parents can do to help their children develop empathy, consideration, and respect, while also keeping themselves safe from challenging children around them.

### 1. Teach Body Autonomy and Consent Early

When children know that their voice matters—and they know how to articulate what their boundaries are—they are less likely to be hurt and less likely to hurt others.

- Use proper names for body parts and teach children about personal boundaries.
- Encourage them to respect others' space and listen when someone says "no."
- Model consent in everyday life. For example, ask before giving hugs and respect their choices.

### 2. Encourage Empathy and Emotional Regulation

When children are able to express (or suppress) their emotions in appropriate ways for the context and can see and understand how others feel, they're generally going to thrive socially. This reduces the likelihood of harm.

- Help children recognise their own emotions and express them in healthy ways.
- Read books and watch shows that promote kindness and understanding of others' feelings.
- Encourage your kids to be upstanders, not bystanders.

### 3. Monitor Technology Use Closely

There may be nothing more insidious than tech when it comes to harms to kids (and opportunities for kids to harm others). The moment you give your child a screen, it becomes the centre of their world. You'll be in a lifelong tug-of-war to get them back into your life.

- Delay access to screens and both gaming and social platforms as long as possible.
- When your child is on a screen, be aware of what your children watch and play.
- Set strong parental controls and talk openly about online safety early and often.
- Teach them that online words have real-world consequences and that respect applies everywhere.

### 4. Model Healthy Relationships at Home

Hard reality: kids from healthy, happy homes are generally going to behave safely and kindly towards others and are also typically going to do just fine in life. There are always exceptions, but overwhelmingly it's the kids from more troubled homes that are both hurt and hurtful.

- Speak kindly.
- Spend time together in wholesome family activities.
- When conflict occurs, get curious, not furious. Solve problems thoughtfully rather than reactively.

### 5. Work with Schools Early

- Engage with your child's school to understand their policies on respectful behaviour and bullying prevention.
- Advocate for programs that teach empathy, respect, and digital safety.
- Ensure that concerns about inappropriate behaviour are taken seriously from a young age.

## Prevention Is Powerful

By actively teaching respect, empathy, and boundaries from the start, we lay the foundation for children to grow into responsible, kind, and self-aware individuals. The challenges faced by teenagers today don't appear overnight—they are shaped by the lessons they learn in their earliest years. As parents, we have the power to create a future where all children feel safe, valued, and respected.



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