

Navigating the Bullying Maze

A Guide for Parents

Bullying. It's a word that sends shivers down the spine of any parent. We want our children to feel safe, happy, and accepted, and the thought of them being targeted by hurtful words or actions is deeply upsetting. But the reality is, bullying is a pervasive issue. According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, a staggering 70% of Australian children aged 12-13 have experienced bullying, with one in five facing it on a weekly basis.

These statistics are alarming, and they underscore the urgent need for parents to understand the dynamics of bullying and equip their children with the tools to navigate these challenging situations.

What is Bullying, Exactly?

Bullying isn't just a playground squabble or a one-off disagreement. It's a pattern of repeated, intentional aggression, where there's an imbalance of power. It can take many forms:

Physical: Hitting, kicking, shoving, or damaging property.

Verbal: Name-calling, teasing, insults, or threats.

Social: Spreading rumours, excluding someone from a group, or manipulating relationships.

Cyberbullying: Using technology to harass, intimidate, or humiliate someone. This can include sending hurtful messages, posting embarrassing photos or videos online, or spreading rumours through social media.

The Impact of Bullying:

Bullying can have devastating consequences for children's well-being. Victims of bullying are more likely to experience:

Emotional distress: Anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and feelings of isolation.

Academic difficulties: Poor concentration, decreased motivation, and lower academic achievement.

Physical health problems: Headaches, stomachaches, sleep disturbances, and even self-harm.

Social withdrawal: Difficulty forming and maintaining friendships and a reluctance to participate in social activities.

What to Do if Your Child is Being Bullied:

Listen and validate: Create a safe space for your child to share their experiences without judgement. Let them know you believe them and that you're there to support them.

Empower, don't rescue: Resist the urge to immediately intervene and solve the problem for them. Instead, help your child develop strategies for coping with the situation and advocating for themselves. This might involve role-playing different scenarios, brainstorming solutions, or practicing assertive communication.

Document the bullying: Keep a record of the incidents, including dates, times, locations, and any witnesses. This information can be helpful if you need to involve the school or other authorities.

Partner with the school: Work with your child's teachers and school administrators to address the bullying. Many schools have anti-bullying policies and programs in place.

Build coping skills: Studies show that if a child can avoid overwhelm, process effectively, and maintain a positive mindset (recognising that bullying is bad, but is more about the bully than themselves), they cope better. Trauma is not a result of the events that happen to you. It's a result of how you process those events.

Seek professional support: If the bullying is severe or your child is struggling to cope, consider seeking professional help from a therapist or counsellor.

What to Do if Your Child is the Bully:

It can be difficult to accept that your child might be the one causing harm to others. But it's crucial to address this behaviour promptly and effectively.

Acknowledge the problem: Don't dismiss or minimise your child's behaviour, and don't make excuses for your child. Take their actions seriously and let them know that bullying is unacceptable.

Understand the motivation: Try to understand why your child is engaging in bullying behaviour. Are they seeking attention? Trying to fit in? Coping with their own insecurities?

Teach empathy: Help your child develop empathy by encouraging them to consider the perspective of the person they're bullying. Ask questions like, "How do you think your words made them feel?"

Set clear consequences: Establish clear consequences for bullying behaviour. This might involve loss of privileges or other appropriate disciplinary measures. It should *absolutely* involve finding a way to improve relationships with other students, meaningful apologies, and restitution.

Model positive behaviour: Be a role model for kindness, respect, and empathy in your own interactions with others.

Bullying is a complex issue, and there's no one-size-fits-all solution. But by staying informed, communicating openly with our children, and partnering with the school, we can create a safer and more supportive environment for all children. Helping children process challenges safely helps them develop an intrinsic capacity to cope—allowing us to then focus on the identification and re-education of those who bully.

Let's empower our kids to be upstanders, not bystanders, and create a culture of kindness and respect in our schools and communities.



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