

# TIP SHEET

## BULLYING

### Dealing with Bullying and Bullies

Bullying is hurtful and threatening behaviour, such as teasing, name calling, physical aggression (e.g. hitting, fighting, pushing), gossiping about another child maliciously, attempting to stop another child from going somewhere, and intimidation. Sometimes we may conjure up a picture of a bully in our minds who is large and physically violent; however, this is not always the case. "*Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me,*" is a little riddle that rings true to many parents/carers suggesting that bullying that is verbal like name calling and teasing is not harmful. But all of us who have been victims of name calling and teasing as children know too well that it is bullying. And with cyber bullying on the increase via emails, blogs, and text messaging, this type of bullying through mean words and exclusion is gathering momentum.

It is important to deal with both parties involved in the bullying behaviour, being the child doing the bullying usually called the bully, as well as the victim of the bullying usually called the bullied child. First some tips for parents/carers on how to deal with the bully and then how to help children who are victims of bullying.

#### WHEN MY CHILD IS THE BULLY

1. Try and identify why the child is being a bully. Is he going through a transition (a move, a new house, a new school, a divorce), is she finding it difficult to make friends, is there something going on at home which is causing the family stress, is there an absence of emotional support, is she frightened about something, is he jealous of the new baby, does he lack the skills to deal with his anger properly so is aggressive, is he learning his aggressive behaviour from the parents/carers, is it sibling rivalry or is he seeking attention? When you have identified the cause, then you will be in a better position to solve the bullying problem.
2. Bullies can sometimes have low self-esteem and will pick on others in an attempt to make themselves feel better. If this is the case, you need to help your child develop a healthy self-esteem. Research shows that constant criticism from parents/carers damages self-esteem. And remember the Pygmalion effect as children will often behave in accordance with how you treat them. If you treat them as stupid, lazy, aggressive, etc. then they will more than likely live up to your expectations. Research also shows that children of involved parents (knows friends of children, volunteers at school, knows what their children are doing, etc.) have a healthy level of self-esteem. Sometimes it is argued that parents should not use negative emotions such as shame or guilt to direct their children's behaviour because it will damage their self-esteem. However, this is unfounded. To raise a child with morals and values, instilling a sense of guilt or shame can be the most effective way of parenting. It does not mean that it is OK to criticise.

You can distinguish between their behaviour and them as a person. For instance, you would not say, "*You bloody idiot. You're a bully just like your father.*" Rather you would say, "*It is wrong to bully, you need to learn to deal with your anger in a better way without hurting someone else.*"

3. Bullies often have an inability to deal with aggression in an appropriate way. Refer to tip sheet, Aggression.

4. Bullies sometimes learn their behaviour from their parents/carers. Check your own behaviour. Are they copying your behaviour? When they do something that annoys you or they get in the way of you doing something, do you bully them, by hitting, intimidating, screaming, and being generally aggressive? If you do, they will most probably copy your behaviour.
5. Giving into children when they want something once they have gotten to the point of aggression leads to a pattern of aggressive behaviour. They throw a tantrum and you give in because it is easier. This rewards bad or undesirable behaviour.
6. Cyber bullying is a form of bullying which occurs on the internet through things such as email, chat rooms, instant messaging, on web sites or by sending text messages via mobile phones. A bully may use the internet to spread rumours about someone, sending mean spirited messages or images or excluding people from online friendship groups. Cyber bullying such as harassment and making threats, is a criminal offence. For more information on cyber bullying go to [www.netalert.net.au](http://www.netalert.net.au), or telephone 1800 880 176.

#### WHEN MY CHILD IS THE VICTIM OF THE BULLYING

1. Stay in touch with your child emotionally so that if they are being bullied by their peers, then you are aware of what is going on. When you the parent/carer are aware, you can provide suitable guidance. Children, especially if they are more introverted by nature, may not tell you what is going on. You may have to look for signs of bullying, such as talking about not having friends, not wanting to go to school, wanting to go to another school, finding excuses for not going to school, tantrums or sadness after getting home from school, scratches or bruises, etc.
2. Listen to your child when they are ready to talk. They may tell you immediately after school or they may dwell on their fears and tell you in a round about way before bed. Whenever it happens, acknowledge their feelings of fear, sorrow, etc. before reacting or responding to the situation. They need to be heard properly, so give them time to express themselves without judgment. This empathetic approach will help your child feel that it is not their fault that they were bullied.

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3. State clearly to your child that bullying is wrong. There are some excellent children's books that reinforce this. Refer to the **Children's Booklist** in the back of your workbook.
4. Do not criticise your child for being bullied or allow others to do so. Saying things like, *"You are a big sook,"* will only exacerbate the problem. Research shows that criticism has detrimental effects on the emotional development of children. If you have concerns, refrain from judgment (bite your lip) and manage your self-talk (*I am patient, I am empathetic*). Use the feedback model to communicate your feelings about their behaviour or response to the bullying if you believe that it is exaggerated or unwarranted. *"John, I can understand that you are upset about the boys pulling your school tie and I can imagine that it hurts your throat when they pull it. It's wrong that the boys do that. I also know from the teacher that sometimes you do things that annoy some of the other children in the class like screaming in their ears. When you do that it makes the boys angry. I know you are probably excited to be outside in the playground. What are some things that you could do so that you can control yourself better? Yes, maybe you could play a game of handball or basketball to help you burn off that extra energy you have"*.
5. Encourage your child to come up with some ideas about how to solve the problem of being bullied. If they have trouble starting, start them off with some ideas of your own. By encouraging your child to solve the problem they are learning important life skills, such as resilience, accountability, confidence, assertiveness, problem-solving, decisiveness and conflict resolution. There are some children's books that teach problem-solving generally and [childsworld.com](http://childsworld.com) have some great games on bullying and conflict resolution if the problem becomes complex to solve.
6. Teach your child to express themselves properly by being assertive rather than aggressive when responding to the bullying. Being assertive means being firm and direct about your feelings. For example, *"When you call me a girl it embarrasses me in front of the other boys. Please don't say that. If you do continue to say it, then I will tell the teacher."* *"When you push me it hurts and I don't like it, so don't do it in future otherwise I will play with someone else."*
7. If the bullying is verbal teasing you could teach your child to ignore it, rather than always targeting or punishing the bully. By ignoring the teasing, the potential conflict is diffused rather than ignited. Coaching your child on positive self-talk can be helpful here. For example, you could say to your child, *"When someone teases you it's not your problem, it's their problem. They don't feel good about themselves. They may get teased or bullied at home. What nice words could you say to yourself so that their nasty words don't bother you?"* Some examples may include, *"Stop. I don't like that. I am confident. I am sociable. I am good at making and keeping friends."*
8. If the bullying continues and cannot be solved quickly by yourself, you may need to get the school, family or club involved in solving the problem. Friends in the playground, siblings at home, other members of a club, or players in a team can also learn important skills to be assertive and can show empathy and kindness by not allowing the bullying or teasing to continue to their friend.
9. If your child is a victim of cyber bullying refer to the comprehensive web site [www.netalert.net.au](http://www.netalert.net.au) and telephone 1800 880 176 which teaches parents all about this new form of bullying. On this site are many tips on how to detect if your child may be a victim of cyber bullying; how to make a report to the police; what actions you can take as a parent and victim of cyber bullying and much more. Some of the warning signs that may occur if your child is being cyber bullied include: mood swings; unusual behaviour; irregular or secretive use of the internet; self-harm; poor grades; avoiding friends at school; and change of sleep patterns.

**Recommended Reading****8-12 years**

What do you think about bullying (Jillian Powell)  
 Indigo's Star (Hilary McKay)  
 Step in to the Dark (Bridget Crowley)  
 The Eighteenth Emergency (Betsy Byars)  
 The Angel of Nitshill Road and The Tulip Touch (Anne Fine)  
 The Diddakoi (Rumer Godden)  
 The Present Takers (Aidan Chambers)  
 Bullies and Gangs (Julie Cole)

**13-18 years**

Spaghetti Connection (Sandra McCuaig)  
 Mandragora (David McRobbie)  
 Sticks and Stoans (Andrew Matthews)

**Refer also to *Making and Keeping Friends* tip sheet and to BISI Australia's KidsSpeak on *Bullying: Everybody's Business***