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## When a Bully Targets Your Child

Parents should take time to listen to the child, develop a game plan; how to get help from school



By

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Sept. 13, 2016 1:57 p.m. ET

Of all the challenges that school brings for students and their parents, one of the most unwelcome and worrying is bullying.

Bullying starts as early as first grade and peaks in middle school. About 1 in 5 students report being bullied each year, and figuring out how to respond is difficult. A parent's first impulse—whether to fly into a rage and call the bully's parents or dismiss the whole thing as “kid stuff”—is not necessarily the right path.

There is new understanding of bullying as a complex, multifarious problem that doesn't lend itself to one-size-fits-all responses. Educators and psychologists are placing more emphasis on teaching students coping skills, encouraging children to tell adults when they're bullied, and having parents work with teachers and school administrators to resolve problems.

Jacqui DiMarco and her husband first advised their son to ignore bullying on the playground years ago, when he was in first grade, but ignoring it only made the teasing worse. By fourth grade, her son began resisting going to school, says Ms. DiMarco, co-author of the book “When Your Child Is Being Bullied.” She soon discovered that the same bully had created a YouTube channel ridiculing her son.

Ms. DiMarco left two phone messages for the bully's parents, asking respectfully that the page be taken down, and got no response. She called the principal at her son's school, who said she couldn't help because the online bullying originated off school grounds. When Ms. DiMarco called her son's teacher, the teacher brought the bully and her son face-to-face to resolve it, and the bullying stopped, Ms. DiMarco says. By fifth grade, her son could assert himself against bullies.

Parents who discover a child is being bullied should stay calm and encourage him or her to talk about what happened. Listen closely and take notes. Invite your child to figure

out what she wants to happen. It is essential to work with the school if the bullying is intense, frequent or prolonged, but not every case is clear-cut.

Many children avoid telling their parents because they're afraid Mom or Dad will contact the bully or the bully's parents, sparking further embarrassment and retaliation, research shows. Most children who are bullied don't report it to their teachers either, according to a National Academy of Sciences report on preventing bullying, released in May.

For a child, asking a bully to stop is hard. He may fear—sometimes rightly—that it will lead to retaliation. Still, when the bullying isn't severe, some children are able to stand up to bullies themselves, with a little coaching and encouragement. Solving the problem on his own can increase a child's self-confidence.

Encourage your child to think critically about how to respond. If he suggests firing back, "Leave me alone, you jerk!" ask how he thinks the bully might respond to name-calling.

Have your child practice in front of a mirror or role-play the bully while your child speaks up. Coach him on standing tall, looking the bully in the eye and speaking in a confident voice. Ask if your child has friends at school or a trusted older student willing to stand by him.

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#### WHEN YOUR CHILD COMES TO YOU ABOUT BULLYING ...

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- Comfort and empathize, rather than judging or blaming.
- Praise your child for telling you and invite him to talk about what happened.
- Encourage the child to suggest possible solutions.
- Don't fly into a rage and confront the bully or his parents.
- Don't tell your child to ignore repeated bullying.
- Approach school officials calmly, without making accusations.
- Keep detailed notes about each instance of bullying and the school's response

Don't expect too much, says Rosalind Wiseman, an educator and author of "Queen Bees and Wannabes," the book on which the film "Mean Girls" was based, recently published in its third edition. "The bully isn't going to say, 'Omigosh, you're so

right! I'll stop!" Even when bullies rebuff them, however, victims who assert themselves are "proud when they're able to stand up for themselves," she says.

When Victoria Joseph's son was bullied in middle school for being short for his age, she bolstered his confidence, pointing out his strengths as a fast runner and a good student, says Ms. Joseph, a Bethesda, Md., clinical counselor who specializes in relationships. She invited him to think about the bully, asking, "What do you think is going on in his life" to spark such unkindness? "Let's come up with some things you could say," she told him.

Her son planned some comebacks he liked, including, "So, I'm little. You don't think I knew that?" The bullying soon stopped, says Ms. Joseph, a parent educator for the Parent Encouragement Program, a Kensington, Md., nonprofit.

If the bullying continues and it is clear that your child needs adult help, approach teachers or administrators.

Some children beg parents not to tell the teacher about bullying, and threaten never to confide in them again if they do. If your child does this, ask why, and ease his fears if possible, says Susan Swearer, a professor of school psychology at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, and an expert on bullying. If he's afraid his teacher will overreact or

Dismiss his complaint, ask whether he'd consider talking to another adult at school whom he sees as trustworthy.

Make sure your account meets your school's definition of bullying. Almost all states require school districts to have an anti-bullying policy, but the policies vary. Most define bullying as any unwanted, aggressive behavior that is repeated, causes the victim harm and involves students who aren't equal in power.

Elementary-school students can have trouble distinguishing single incidents of clumsy or mean behavior from bullying. Listening to the child and coaching her are important at this time. In middle school, subtler bullying becomes more common, such as isolating or excluding victims, as well as cyberbullying. Middle-schoolers are less likely to tell their parents about it.

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Bring detailed notes on what your child has experienced and how it has affected him at home, says Marie Newman, co-author with Ms. DiMarco of "When Your Child Is Being Bullied" and an advisor on bullying to parents and school officials. Teachers are more likely to intervene if a student shows distress, research shows, but many students

hide their feelings at school. Officials typically have to investigate bullying, and parents should ask for a timetable for keeping them informed.

Principals should be told, too, so they can track students' behavior over time, says Steven Geis, president of the National Association of Elementary School Principals.

Parents who remain calm and show skill and strength can instill confidence and hope in the child. Mario Gamboa, an at-home dad in Scottsdale, Ariz., teaches his two daughters, 10 and 14, to stand up for themselves. Last spring, however, a classmate demanded that his older daughter give her a snack she was holding. When his daughter refused, the bully shook her roughly and stole the snack. The bully's companions recorded the incident on a Snapchat video and broadcast it to peers.

He decided to speak to the principal after hearing his daughter's voice on the phone as she related the incident: "It was traumatic for her." After he showed school officials the video, the bully was disciplined for violating the school's conduct code.

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