

Tips for how to deal with childhood bullying

By Tracy Protell

As children get ready to go back to school, I understand bullying is one of the last things parents want to worry about. However, bullying is a salient and, unfortunately, common occurrence. It can take place on school grounds, after school, and through electronics (cyberbullying).



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Bullying is defined as a repetitive and deliberate use of physical force or emotional aggression intended to harm another person. Examples, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, include repeatedly making threats, spreading rumors, attacking someone physically or verbally, or excluding someone from a group.

Studies show that up to half of children and adolescents report being victims of bullying. Bullying has short-term mental and physical health consequences as well as an increased risk of long term issues that carry into adulthood. Victims and perpetrators of bullying show increased rates of anxiety disorders, depression, psychosis, drug and alcohol abuse, self-harm, and suicide.

With the prevalence of bullying so high and many avenues for bullying outside of parent or guardian's sight, what can you

do?

Tip No. 1: Have open communication. Your children need to feel comfortable coming to you if they feel unsafe or victimized. Regularly ask about their life in a nonjudgmental way and listen without trying to place blame or solve problems. Especially with adolescents, express less emotion. They are more likely to open up if they do not fear your emotional reaction.

Tip No. 2: Monitor media use. Keep a close eye on what is being said or shown to your child through phones and computers. Many parents have lost touch with their children's lives because so much occurs online or through text messages. For some reason, parents do not monitor electronic usage the way they monitor where their children hang out and with who. Know what your child is doing online and with whom.

Tip No. 3: Action is important. The problem may not just "go away." Studies have demonstrated that involvement of school officials, such as principals, counselors, and teachers is an important step. Even when bullying occurs outside of school, problems can be addressed through school discipline systems. Telling a child to fight back or dealing with the child's family directly can backfire, causing more distress and on-going issues. Take your child's complaint seriously to avoid a feeling of re-victimization, and reinforce that bullying is not OK.

Tip No. 4: Teach your children the importance of empathy and kindness. At an early age, instill in your children that different is not bad and acceptance of other types of families, cultures, and backgrounds makes this life better. Teach your children to respectfully stand up for themselves. Let them know who they can turn to when they experience disrespect, putdowns, threats, and other demeaning words or actions.

There are many supportive people and families in this community. My wish is that every child grows up feeling safe, secure, and appreciated.

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