



What if Your Child *IS* the One Showing Bullying Behavior?

The word “bullying” often conjures up an image of a schoolyard scene, with a big, intimidating student towering over a small, cowering child. However, that’s just one of the many faces of children who bully.

Another face of someone who bullies might be that of your own child. Surprised? Many parents are. Often they have no idea that their child is bullying other children. Yet recognizing the situations—and acting to change the behavior—is vitally important in making the future safer for your child and all children.

Here’s why. Children who bully can be affected as much as those they target. Statistically, they are significantly more likely than others to experience school failure, depression, violence, crime, and other problems. The message is clear: Bullying is too important to ignore.

Could your child be bullying others? Would you know? Once you found out, would you know what to do? Here is some information that can help.

What is bullying?

Bullying is different from the routine conflicts of childhood. It is intentional behavior that is meant to hurt and dominate another person. Characterized by an imbalance of power between the child who bullies and the target, bullying can be physical, verbal, emotional (social), or sexual. It includes harassment using technology, such as texts, email, and social media.

“Bully” versus “child who bullies”

The language used when referring to bullying behavior is important as it influences how students involved in bullying situations are perceived. Bullying is about behavior. Instead of labeling a child as a “bully,” consider using the terms “child who bullies” or “a child with bullying behavior,” which recognizes that they are first and foremost a child and second that they have exhibited a specific behavior. Children with bullying behavior should be provided with consequences and discipline that allow them the opportunity to redirect their behavior in more positive ways as behavior can be changed.

So who does it?

Think the person bullying is the big guy who wears black, has low self-esteem, and gets mad a lot? Could be, but it can also be the petite cheerleader or the quiet honor student. It’s not appearance that defines someone who bullies; it is behavior. They can come from any background, race, income level, family situation, gender, or religion. Research has shown that despite their differences, children who bully typically have one or more of the following traits. They may:

- Be quick to blame others and unwilling to accept responsibility for their actions
- Lack empathy, compassion, and understanding for others’ feelings
- Be bullied themselves
- Have undeveloped social skills
- Want to be in control
- Be frustrated, anxious, or depressed
- Find themselves trying to fit in with a peer group that encourages bullying

If you see these traits in your child or hear from others that your child is bullying, it's important to look into the issue. If you do discover that your child is bullying, take heart. Bullying is a learned behavior—and it can be “unlearned” and replaced with more positive behaviors. By talking with your child and seeking help, you can teach your child more appropriate ways of handling feelings, peer pressure, and conflicts.

Here are some ideas.

Help your child to stop bullying

Talk with your child.

Children may not always recognize their behavior as bullying. They may see it as “just having fun” and not realize the impact it has on another child. Help them understand what defines bullying and emphasize that negative behavior is not appropriate.

Explore reasons for the behavior.

Find out why your child is behaving in a manner that is harmful to others through an open, non-judgmental discussion. You might ask your child how he or she is feeling, if he or she is being bullied by someone else, or if your child is experiencing peer pressure from friends who are also bullying.

Confirm that your child's behavior is bullying and not the result of a disability.

Sometimes, children with disabilities who have certain emotional and behavioral disorders or limited social skills act in ways that are mistaken for bullying. Whether the behavior is intentional or due to a disability, it still needs to be addressed. If your child with a disability is bullying, you may want to include bullying prevention goals in his or her Individualized Education Program (IEP).

Develop an action plan.

Behavior can be changed, but it won't just happen. Your child is not likely to outgrow it. It's important to think through the steps that work for you, your child, and your situation. An important first step is to determine and understand the situation. Next, think through how it could be different and what needs to change. Then, determine who needs to be involved and the steps that need to be taken.

Teach empathy, respect, and compassion.

Children who bully often lack awareness of how others feel. Try to understand your child's feelings and help your child appreciate how others feel when they are bullied. Let your child know that everyone has feelings and that feelings matter.

Make your expectations clear.

Let your child know that bullying is not okay under any circumstances and that you will not tolerate it. Let them know that there will be consequences for their behavior. Take immediate action if you learn that he or she is involved in a bullying incident.

Provide clear and consistent consequences for bullying.

Be specific about what will happen if the bullying continues. Try to find meaningful consequences that fit the situation, such as loss of privileges or activities.

Teach by example.

Model nonviolent behavior and encourage cooperative play. Help your child learn different ways to resolve conflict and deal with feelings such as anger, insecurity, or frustration. Teach and reward appropriate behavior. Play games and engage in activities that build empathy.

Role play.

Help your child practice different ways of handling bullying situations. You can take turns playing the part of the child who does the bullying and the one who is bullied. Doing so may help your child understand what it's like to be in the other person's shoes.

Provide positive feedback.

When your child handles conflict well, shows compassion for others, or finds a positive way to deal with feelings, provide praise and recognition. Positive reinforcement can help improve behavior and is usually more effective than punishment.

Be realistic.

It takes time to change behavior. Recognize that there may be setbacks. Be patient as your child learns new ways of handling feelings and conflict. Keep your love and support visible.

Talk with school personnel.

Reach out to those who work with your child at school and share information about your concerns. You may also want to talk with the school principal or social worker to determine if the school offers a bullying prevention program and how your child might be involved. Research ways for your child to be involved in groups that encourage cooperative relationships and focus on working with others.

Seek help from your community.

Your child's doctor, faith-based professionals, coaches, or a psychologist can help you and your child learn how to understand and deal with bullying behavior. It's important to address bullying in both the school and community.

Create an action plan

The following resources can be used to help create an action plan for your child and family:

- **Student Action Plan Against Bullying** ([PACER.org/bullying/pdf/StudentActionPlan.pdf](https://www.pacer.org/bullying/pdf/StudentActionPlan.pdf))
The student action plan helps students develop a strategy to change bullying behavior. This can be done on their own or with the help of a parent or teachers.
- **Safety in the Online Community: A conversation with your 13-year-old about Facebook and Instagram** ([PACER.org/publications/bullypdf/BP-27.pdf](https://www.pacer.org/publications/bullypdf/BP-27.pdf))
This guide helps parents talk with their teens about popular social networking sites Facebook and Instagram. It covers setting up a new account, safety tips, and commonly asked questions. This guide is accompanied by discussion points for talking with your child and steps for responding to harassing content.

Parents of elementary school students

Visit PACER's Kids Against Bullying website ([PACERkidsagainstabullying.org](https://www.pacerkidsagainstabullying.org)) with your child and check out the following page:

- **Students Who Bully-What Can They Do?** ([PACERkidsagainstabullying.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/ifYouAreBullying.pdf](https://www.pacerkidsagainstabullying.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/ifYouAreBullying.pdf))
This resource helps students understand the reasons why bullying may occur and encourages them to think about new ways to respond.

Parents of middle and high school students

If your teen is demonstrating bullying behavior, encourage them to visit PACER's Teens Against Bullying website ([PACerteensagainstabullying.org](https://www.pacerteensagainstabullying.org)) and check out the following pages:

- **Initiating Bullying?** ([PACerteensagainstabullying.org/tab/experiencing-bullying](https://www.pacerteensagainstabullying.org/tab/experiencing-bullying))
This page features reasons why teens may think bullying is OK and the reality behind these thoughts.
- **Do You Bully? Quiz** ([PACerteensagainstabullying.org/tab/bullying-defined/do-you-bully](https://www.pacerteensagainstabullying.org/tab/bullying-defined/do-you-bully))
This quiz can help teens recognize that their words and actions might be bullying behavior.