

How to effectively engage a child who is showing bullying behavior

The word “bullying” often evokes an emotional response. When you are trying to engage with a child who is exhibiting bullying behavior, it is important to acknowledge your emotions before developing an action plan to help the child. Additionally, recognizing the different situations in which bullying can occur and acting to change the behavior is vitally important in making the future safer for all children.

Children who exhibit bullying behavior can be affected negatively as much as those they target. Statistically, they are significantly more likely than others to experience school failure, depression, violence, crime, and other problems. No matter the role that the child has in the dynamic, bullying is an issue that is too important to ignore.

What is bullying?

Bullying is different from the routine conflicts of childhood. *It is when someone aggressively uses their “power” to target another individual with repeated, unwanted words or actions.* Those who bully have more “power” (this could be having an elevated social status, being physically larger, or being a part of a group against an individual) and those targeted have difficulty stopping the behavior because of the power imbalance. The behavior is typically repeated, though it can be a one-time incident if that incident is very severe or arises from a pattern of behavior. It can happen while at school, in the community, or online.

“Child who bullies” versus “bully”

Bullying is a behavior, not an identity. The language used when referring to bullying behavior is important — it influences how students involved in bullying situations are perceived. As with the word “victim,” labeling a child as a “bully” implies that their behavior is fixed and unlikely to change. In reality, behavior can and does change. When schools, teachers, parents, and other adults label a child as a “bully,” it sends the message that they can’t change their bullying behavior and that everyone, sometimes even the child themselves, expects them to be a “bully.” Expectations are powerful forces on children’s behavior. Often, they will choose how to act according to what the adults in their life expect them to do. Therefore, reframing the focus from labeling a child as a “bully” to referring to them as a “child with bullying behavior” recognizes that there is capacity for change, and is an important step for adults seeking to resolve a bullying situation.

Children who show bullying behavior should be held accountable for their actions and be given appropriate consequences, but it’s equally important to find out why they are engaging in that behavior. By addressing the behavior and the reasons for it, adults can help children make lasting, positive changes.

So, who does it?

Despite common portrayals of a child who bullies as being tough or popular, anyone can bully because bullying is about behavior, not labels. Research has shown that despite their differences, children who bully may:

- Be quick to blame others and unwilling to accept responsibility for their actions.
- Lack empathy, compassion, and understanding for others’ feelings.
- Have been 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.
- Not recognize their behavior as bullying, and believe they are just joking or teasing.

If you see these traits in a child or learn of their bullying behavior, it is important to look into the issue. Remember, bullying is a learned behavior that can be unlearned and replaced with more positive behaviors. By talking with the child and seeking help, you can teach more appropriate ways of handling feelings, peer pressure, and conflicts.

Here are some ideas to help a child to stop bullying

1) Talk with the child.

Children may not always recognize their behavior as bullying. They may see it as just having fun and not realize the serious impact it has on another child. Children are still developing an awareness of the skills they need to maintain healthy relationships. You can help them to understand what defines bullying and emphasize that negative behavior is not appropriate. While it is important to address the intention or purpose behind the bullying behavior, it is equally important to look at the impact of the behavior on the target. Focusing on impact versus intent can be useful in situations where the person bullying indicates that, for example, “it was just a joke,” or that the target “took it the wrong way.”

2) Explore reasons for the behavior.

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

- “You’ve said that a lot of people make jokes about your classmate. How do you think he feels about these jokes?”
- “How would you feel if you were being treated this way?”
- “You’ve said it’s funny that Joe gets upset when he’s teased. Can you tell me more about that?”

3) Confirm that the 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. If a child with a disability is struggling with behaviors that would be considered bullying, you may want to include a social skills goal in their Individualized Education Program (IEP). The child can also be supported with a Positive Behavior Intervention Plan to modify the behaviors and reach the anticipated social skills goal.

4) Develop an action plan.

Behavior can be changed, but it won’t just happen on its own. Don’t expect a child to simply outgrow it. It’s important to think through the steps that work for you, the child, and your situation. A key 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. [See “Student Action Plan” on page 3.]

5) Teach empathy, respect, and compassion.

Children who bully often lack an awareness of how others feel. Try to understand the child’s feelings, help them appreciate how others feel when they are bullied, and let them know that everyone has feelings and that feelings matter. Research ways for your child to be involved in groups that encourage cooperative relationships and focus on working with others.

6) Make your expectations clear and provide consistent consequences for bullying.

Let the child know that neither bullying nor cyberbullying is okay under any circumstance and that you will not tolerate it. Before bullying happens, discuss the consequences for that behavior, whether it’s online or face-

to-face. Take immediate action if you learn that they are involved in a bullying incident and be specific about what will happen if the bullying continues. Create meaningful consequences that fit the situation, focusing on activities that benefit others through kindness, acceptance of difference, and inclusion.

7) Teach by example.

Model positive social behaviors that support others, encourage cooperative play, and help children identify the social behaviors that they see around them. Help the child learn different ways to resolve conflict and deal with feelings such as anger, insecurity, or frustration. Teach and reward appropriate behavior. Games and activities that build empathy are another way to show children behaviors that create healthy relationships.

8) Provide positive feedback.

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

9) Be realistic.

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

10) Talk with school personnel.

Reach out to those who work at the child’s 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 the child could be involved. Research ways for them to become involved in groups that encourage cooperative relationships and focus on working with others.

11) Seek help from your community.

Doctors, faith-based professionals, coaches, or psychologists can help in understanding and dealing with bullying behavior. It is important to address bullying in school, in the community, and at home.

Create an action plan for bullying and cyberbullying

The following PACER resources can be used to help create an action plan:

- **Student Action Plan Against Bullying** ([PACER.org/publications/bullyingpdf/BP-25.pdf](https://www.pacer.org/publications/bullyingpdf/BP-25.pdf)): This plan can help guide youth through the communication process and provide them with a structure to share their ideas and opinions about potential solutions to bullying. It can also help them feel more in control of the situation. Because most bullying will not stop until a supportive and caring adult is involved, we encourage adults to join students in working through the Student Action Plan. With the support of an adult, students can feel empowered to speak out and end the silence around bullying.
- **Parent and Educator Guide to the Student Action Plan** ([PACER.org/publications/bullyingpdf/BP-37.pdf](https://www.pacer.org/publications/bullyingpdf/BP-37.pdf)): This guide helps adults navigate difficult conversations around a bullying situation while using the Student Action Plan. It includes questions, ideas, and possible actions to help adults resolve a bullying situation.

Online resources for students

For elementary school students, visit [PACERkidsagainstbullying.org](https://www.pacerkidsagainstbullying.org) and check out the page Students Who Bully – What Can They Do? ([PACERkidsagainstbullying.org/do-you-bully](https://www.pacerkidsagainstbullying.org/do-you-bully)). This resource helps students understand the reasons why bullying may occur and encourages them to think about new ways to respond to it.

For middle and high school students, encourage them to visit [PACerteensagainstbullying.org](https://www.pacerteensagainstbullying.org) and check out the page Do You Bully? Quiz ([PACerteensagainstbullying.org/tab/bullying-defined/do-you-bully](https://www.pacerteensagainstbullying.org/tab/bullying-defined/do-you-bully)). This quiz can help teens recognize that their words and actions might be bullying behavior.