

What adults can do to help youth experiencing bullying

As an adult, you are an important catalyst in guiding kids through addressing and preventing bullying. When young people experience bullying, they often feel like there's nothing that can be done to stop it. Whether you're a parent, educator, or concerned adult, there are ways you can help.

1. Listen

When a child approaches you about a bullying situation, be prepared to listen without judgment and provide a safe and supportive space in which the child can share their experience and work out their feelings. Recognize that it can be hard to talk about the experience. They may be experiencing the emotional effects of bullying— insecurity, embarrassment, fear, vulnerability, anger, or sadness—and it could take time for them to fully share their story.

Help the child recognize the signs of bullying

Adults can prepare themselves to talk with children by considering how they are going to handle the child's questions and emotions. They can also decide what information they would like to give the child about bullying.

When a child begins to tell their story, listen and ask questions that encourage them to talk. Even if you know all the students involved, don't make assumptions. Bullying is frequently socially nuanced; there may be important details that are overlooked or not reported, not every bullying situation is as it seems on the surface, and there is always more than one side to the same story. Respond with empathy, concern, and care. It's important to learn as much as possible about the situation, such as how long the behavior has been happening, who has been involved, and what steps have been taken. Giving the child space to talk through their experience and emotions is an important step. Bullying can be traumatic and opening up about the experience could take time. Be patient and allow the child to confide in you on their own terms.

2. Provide support and encouragement

Reassure the young person confiding in you that you are glad they're talking about their experiences. Let them know that they are not alone, and you are there to help. Just as bullying can be an emotional issue for the child experiencing it, bullying can also be emotional for you. It's natural to experience your own feelings, like frustration, anger, confusion, or sadness, but always remember that the child is now looking to you for help.

The best way to help the child is by taking measures that focus on their emotional and physical health, such as keeping their self-esteem intact and making sure they feel safe at school.

It's important to recognize that some typical adult responses to bullying are not helpful for children. Adults sometimes have the impulse to tell the child to stand up to the person who is bullying, to advise them to ignore the bullying, or to take matters into their own hands. While these reactions express genuine concern and good intentions, they are likely to be ineffective.

How to show your support

- Tell the child that it is NOT their fault and bullying is never justified
- Remind them they are NOT alone
- Explain that it is your responsibility as an adult to help them and ensure they feel safe and protected
- Let them know that they deserve respect just like everyone else
- Assure them that they have a right to feel safe at school and at home
- Help them create an action plan by thinking through the possible ways of responding and moving forward

3. Empower

After learning the child's story, it's time to think in terms of "self-advocacy" for the child. This process means first letting the child *communicate what they need* and then *helping the child get what they need*. One idea to encourage self-advocacy is to work together to create an action plan outlining a strategy and response to the bullying. When developing the plan, talk with the child about how they would like the situation to be different and how to make that happen.

Involving the child in defining a solution to the bullying can be powerful. So often, those who are bullied feel helpless and think nothing will ever change. Working together creates solutions that are inspired by the child's strengths and abilities and can help build confidence and resilience.

Student Action Plan

A document designed to help develop a customized strategy to address bullying. Incorporates a 3-step process designed to think through solutions fit for the individual.

PACER.org/bullying/info/publications/student-action-plan.asp

4. Think who else should be involved

As part of developing a plan, it is also helpful to identify others who can help the child. Think about those who influence their life. When a child is being bullied it can impact their education, emotional well-being, and even physical health. It's important to think through not only what can be done to address the bullying, but also how to build the child's confidence, increase resiliency, and develop self-advocacy skills.

When dealing with a bullying situation, it's important to involve a parent or guardian and adults at school such as teachers and faculty members to ensure the child feels supported at home and at school. A trusted physician or counselor can be included to help with issues like anxiety, depression, and self-image. You may also want to talk with a coach or the leader of a club activity to determine if there are any bullying issues among the participants, or if being part of the team or club could provide the child with stronger social connections. Work with the child to identify whom you want to contact, what you want to ask them, and how you will be involved moving forward. The next step is to share this action plan with the other adults involved in the child's life.

5. Understand local and federal laws and policies

In cases of bullying, it's important to have a working knowledge of student rights. **Follow these steps** to ensure that you understand all the help and support available.

- **Document all events and communication.** This is important because written records provide a history. Keep your writing factual, not emotional, and include background on any steps you plan to take or have already implemented. Save all written correspondences, like emails, texts, and posts on social media.

PACER.org/publications/bullypdf/BP-3.pdf

- **Check your state's legislation on bullying.** Each state has different laws and policies pertaining to bullying, along with requirements for how schools should respond.

stopbullying.gov/resources/laws

- **Contact your school** and request a copy of the district’s bullying policy.
- **See if there is a Safe Schools bullying prevention office for your state’s Department of Education;** it can be a local resource to learn more about your state’s legislation.
- **Determine if the bullying is based on race, national origin, sex, age, disability, or religion.** Bullying of this nature can qualify as discriminatory harassment. Schools are required to respond to these situations under federal civil rights laws.
stopbullying.gov/resources/laws/federal

Did you know?

Through legislation, education codes, and model policies, state and local lawmakers and educators have taken legal and administrative action to prevent bullying and keep all students safe. Ask your school for their policy. Access detailed information on a specific state’s protections at [StopBullying.gov](https://stopbullying.gov).

Why is it important for adults to get involved?

- If students could stop bullying on their own, they would
- Bullying can make kids feel powerless; they need to know someone is there for them
- Kids see adults as role models and kids will follow their example
- Adults set the rules, so adults need to be the ones who enforce them