



## ***Bullies***

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## **Bullies**

The problem of bullying has been around practically as long as people have inhabited the earth. Almost every one of you has a story about bullying involving yourself, a friend or a family member. It is far too common. And, while most of the examples with which we are familiar involve kids, bullying does not necessarily end in adolescence. As children get older, the likelihood of being physically bullied goes down, but the threat does not disappear. It just changes to more covert means of intimidation.

The dictionary defines a bully as “an aggressive person who intimidates or mistreats weaker people” and that seems a fair definition. Most people will find themselves on the receiving end of this kind of behavior at some point in their lives. Our goal is to equip you to understand and deal with this problem when it appears.

### **It’s about Power and Control**

In almost every case, bullying is about power and control. There is an imbalance of power between two or more kids and the stronger kid abuses his power to gain control over the others. This abuse of power is normally premeditated and intentional. It is not an accident. The actions of the bully are designed to subdue and coerce the victim into doing what the bully wants. And, it is not always a physical battle. Power can be exercised inappropriately by someone who is stronger in economic, social or even religious terms. Biblically, many of the Pharisees were bullies. In Matt 23:4-5, Christ describes their method of bullying, “They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger.” In the culture of the times, it was very difficult to challenge the religious elite without great fear of the consequences.

Our culture is full of messages about power and control, and almost all of them portray them as attributes to desire. But, that is not the Biblical message. When the God of the universe became man, and had ultimate power at His fingertips, how did He exercise that power? In Mark 10:45, Jesus says, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” That does not sound like a bully!

So, why do some people seek to gain power and control at the expense of other, weaker people? Ordinarily, it is because they lack confidence in their ability to gain respect conventionally (fear), or because they are prevented from exercising a normal amount of control over their lives at home or around friends (frustration).

Of course, knowing bullying behavior is based on a power imbalance is one thing, but knowing what to do about it is another. Fortunately, there are a couple of options available. Before we get to those, let's talk a little about some myths you may have heard about bullies.

## Myths

**1. Bullies are always boys.** Those of you that have girls are probably acutely aware this myth is not true. Some of the most powerful and destructive bullies are talented, popular and pretty girls. Girls may use different tactics than boys, but they are very effective bullies. While boys use physical power more often than not, girls are more subtle and use social power to achieve their goal of control. Girls use rumors, gossip, manipulation of friendships and social isolation to control those weaker than they are. Because these tactics are less obvious, girl bullies are often harder to detect in a school setting. They tend to “fly under the radar” of school administrators.

**2. Bullying is just a developmental stage.** Many people believe being bullied is a rite of passage to maturity. Most of them had a taste of what it was like to be bullied when they were a child and believe it is an inevitability of life. They reason that children need to learn that life is tough and being bullied prepares them for the world outside. We disagree. We shouldn't lie to our kids – they will face difficult people as they grow into an adult, but that does not mean the proper response is to accept childhood bullying as a fact of life.

Bullying, like many other issues your child may face, is a dysfunctional response to an underlying, unresolved psychological issue. Being a victim doesn't help your child and it doesn't help the bully. In fact, it can have the effect of reinforcing behavior that grows with your child into adulthood. There are a number of studies that predict serious long term effects on children who are bullied for a prolonged period. The Proverbs warn us, “An angry man stirs up strife, and a hot-tempered man abounds in transgression. A man's pride will bring him low, but a humble spirit will obtain honor.” (Prov 29:22-23).

Bullying is not a developmental stage children go through and grow out of. It is a symptom of deeper problems and should be dealt with as such. Untreated, it can remain a problem for the victim and the bully. Some excellent long-term studies prove that children who are bullies in elementary school remain so into adulthood.

**3. Bullying helps a child mature.** Wow! Talk about “tough love”! Some say the experience of being bullied helps children learn to become better problem solvers. These parents believe bullying helps build character in children, and that they will become stronger having gone through such an experience. Again, we strongly disagree. Children normally are not capable of dealing with the complex issues of power and control and the underlying problems that may be prompting this behavior.

Understanding the bully is hard even for an adult, and we are far more capable of abstract thinking than a child. All a child really knows is that someone stronger is forcing him to do things he wouldn't normally do, and there is little or nothing he can do to stop it. Bullying is not an age appropriate problem a child can be expected to solve without help.

**4. Bullying is no big deal.** This myth may be the most harmful of all because its result is the suffering of millions of children. For some of the reasons stated earlier, it is the opinion of many adults that bullying doesn't really harm a child and that feeling hurt as a result of a bully's actions demonstrates that a kid is too "sensitive" or "thin-skinned." But, this has not been demonstrated by research. Instead, research clearly establishes that bullying has a dramatic effect on children.

Research shows that children who are bullied are affected physically, mentally, emotionally, socially, and academically. Bullied children report a higher number of health related concerns, such as depression, anxiety, and insomnia. They also report loneliness, unhappiness, feelings of isolation and they suffer lower grades and test scores.

The symptoms of bullying affect the whole gamut of a child's well being, including physical, mental and emotional issues. It is time to stop considering this behavior as a necessary rite of passage and consider it as an abuse of power that should not be tolerated.

The apostle Paul has this to say in 1 Cor 1:27-31, "God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast before God. But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, so that, just as it is written, "LET HIM WHO BOASTS, BOAST IN THE LORD." Let's start treating bullied kids as the treasures that God considers them to be.

#### **Is Your Child Being Bullied?**

If your child is the victim of a bully, don't be surprised if he or she does not talk about it initially. They may not want to talk because the experience made them feel ashamed or weak. Remember, that is exactly the intention of the bully. You have to be careful in broaching the subject because you do not want to reinforce the bully's message. If your child is exhibiting some of these characteristics, empathetic, open ended questions and lots of reflective listening are necessary.

Here are some warning signs of bullying:

- Becomes socially withdrawn or has poor social skills.
- Has few or no friends.
- Feels sad, alone, rejected, not liked, or picked on.
- Often complains of feeling sick (not just on test day).
- Doesn't want to go to school or skips school.
- Brings home damaged possessions or "loses" possessions often (caution: ADHD kids may exhibit similar problems with possessions. You may have to distinguish between the two).
- Cries easily, talks of running away or even of suicide.
- Has a change in appetite and/or sleeping patterns.
- Threatens violence to himself and others.
- Displays "victim" body language such as a hanging head or slumped shoulders, and avoids eye contact (caution: this is not the same as poor social skills or bad posture. Again, you will have to distinguish the two).
- Tries to take "protection" to school, such as a bat or a knife.

If you have seen some of these traits in your child, be very careful. Your child will need time and space to work through the problem. You can help by being available to listen. This will be hard because you may want to show the bully “what it feels like” to be on the receiving end of a power imbalance. Here are a couple of suggestions for how to handle a difficult situation.

### **3 ways to lessen the impact of bullies**

Unfortunately, while you may find it easy to recognize a bully’s abuse of power, it is not as easy to know why he feels the need to exercise this power over others inappropriately. Undoubtedly, there is an underlying reason, but that reason may be difficult to determine, especially if you have no access to the bully. However, there are steps you can take to lessen the impact on your child.

***1. Instill a feeling of control and confidence.*** A bully robs a child of his sense of control and confidence. You can help to restore a healthy amount of those traits by letting your child know he or she is a functioning, helpful and necessary part of your family. Try giving them a “voice” at home by asking their opinion about school, sports or friends. Treat their opinions with dignity, and let them talk without interrupting. Reflect their opinions back to them to show you heard them and understand. And, if you didn’t understand, give them an opportunity to clarify.

Involving them in decisions at home is also a great way to show them they are a member of the team. For example, a mom redecorating the home might allow her

daughter to choose paint colors for her room. This gives the daughter a healthy sense of control over her environment and a chance to practice exercising that control.

Chores can also instill self confidence. I know it sounds self-serving, but age-appropriate tasks at home give kids a sense of accomplishment and value. These kinds of chores are not done for money, but for the value they add to the family. In other words, these are chores that have to be done by someone, and you feel they are the best choice for the job. It is amazing the effect that adding age-appropriate chores can have on a kid's mental outlook.

Another tip is to give your kids more choices with regard to their everyday lifestyle. Of course, these choices must be age-appropriate and they must be choices you are willing for them to make. Examples include letting them choose which coat they want to wear, or whether to carry the coat or wear it out. Others include walking the dog or setting the table for dinner. You can come up with many choices if you think about it long enough. The important thing is that giving choices allows them to exercise more control over their lives. If, because of bullying, they are struggling with significance or low self image, giving more choices will help them to understand they are competent to handle many tasks. This will counteract the message they are getting from the bully – that they are small and powerless.

**2. Model good social skills for your child.** Kids learn from experience, but they also do a lot of observing, and they *will* learn by watching you, especially when they are younger. If you remember they are watching, you can use everyday experiences to model good social skills. For example, let your kids see you interacting with your spouse or friends in a positive way. When you faced a problem during the day, talk about it where they can hear you (this is a very effective teaching technique because they will listen more intently when they don't think you are lecturing or instructing). Talk about the problem and how you tackled it as an example for them of the way adults deal with difficult situations. This is especially effective when your problem involved a superior at work – it is an adult version of dealing with unequal power.

You may also use your interactions with your child as a model for them to follow when things get difficult. You may be able to show them how you respond when a fun event turns into anxiety or anger. For example, you take your daughter out for a shopping trip to buy something she needs for school. When you get to the mall, however, she decides she wants a new belt and a purse and before long your fun trip has turned into an argument. This is the opportunity for you to model what happens when fun turns to anxiety. Show them how to remove yourself by cutting the trip short and leaving the mall. Hopefully, when your daughter finds herself in a tough situation (such as when bullying is involved) she will remember to change her environment and get out of there. There is plenty of Biblical precedent for getting out of reach of the bullies. Think of the times Jesus slipped away from people seeking to harm him (see Luke 4:28-30).

**3. Teach your child to seek help if harassed.** If your child is being bullied, it is important they know that you and other caring adults are there to help. Show them genuine concern. Let your child know he or she does not have to face being bullied alone. It shouldn't be too hard to be empathetic because most of us know the feeling of helplessness and embarrassment that come from being bullied. But, be careful not to turn concern into grief or anger, as those emotions can exacerbate the situation.

Many kids will be reluctant to talk about being bullied. They will hold it inside and give excuses to avoid confronting the issue with you, but that is not healthy. They need to get it out. The fact is most kids really *do* want to talk about it, but embarrassment or fear of *your* response keeps them from doing so. Your job is to provide a caring, safe forum for them to release the pent-up emotion. It is important not to try to solve the problem right away. Just let them know they can talk and be heard without judging. Be a good listener and give them tons of empathy. That empathy might sound like, "Oh my gosh, I bet that's hard for you... what is it like?" And, while everything in you is screaming to go and punch the bully's lights out, just keep listening. It is hard, but so necessary.

After they have had sufficient time to vent, you have an opportunity to ask them what they think they ought to do about the situation. Ask, "How do you think you'll handle it?" Give them the first opportunity to be a problem solver. You may be surprised at their ability to reason out some good solutions with you as a sounding board. If they say they have no ideas, ask them if they mind if you make a suggestion or two. Make sure you ask permission first and wait for a response. Keep in mind they have just been overpowered by a bully and it may be helpful to give them control over the problem solving.

If your child agrees to hear you out, try giving your worst suggestion first. Many kids will reject the first idea from you. Again, this may actually be healthy because they are exercising some of the control the bully took from them. Then, try a couple of the following ideas, if you are comfortable with them:

- Ask your child if he could ignore the bully, walk away and get help if pursued.
- Suggest that your child report bullying immediately to a trusted adult, such as a teacher.
- If he is unwilling to report it to an adult, suggest that you are willing to contact the school or teacher for him.

After each suggestion, seek their feedback. Ask them, "How do you think that would work for you?" Let them respond, because they need to believe in their solution. This process is helping them become a better problem solver. Don't short circuit the learning experience by interrupting or taking over. Finally, when they have a solution they are willing to try, give them a power message that lets them know you are proud of them and confident in their ability to pull this off. For example, you may say, "Let me

know this works out for you. I am really interested to see how (the bully) responds. I know that if anyone can handle this, you can.”

As a final gesture of concern, ask what you can do to help. But, remember, they need to develop their own solution (even if it requires a lot of your input). Coming up with a plan gives them real ownership in the problem *and* in the solution. It also gives them back some of the power and control they lost to the bully. There is no question this will be very hard because we so desperately want to solve the problem for them. But, hold fast. With your guidance they can use this experience to learn some very important life lessons.

### **What if my child is the bully?**

Oddly, the difference between being bullied and being the bully is less than you would think. The emotional issues are very similar. The person being bullied has lost power, and the bully is taking it from him. The bully is seeking power because he perceives he doesn't have enough. So the question becomes one of why? Why does the bully feel he needs to seek power and control this way? Where has the power been taken from him? These are questions that should be answered.

It is very important that the child doing the bullying have appropriate consequences for his actions. He should be learning that wrong actions bring appropriate consequences and that you are willing for him to learn from them. An example might be some form of community service. Learning to serve others is a healthy way to understand the plight of those less fortunate.

It is important to be empathetic with the bullying child. There is a reason he is acting this way, and you may be able to ask enough questions that the answer will reveal itself. Be a good and careful listener and you may get some clues to help you figure it out with your child.

It may also help to give your child more every day choices (just like the kid who has been bullied). This may seem like a simple solution, but it is an effective way to give your child more control over his life and it may be enough to keep him from attempting to get control in a more inappropriate way. It gives him a voice. The kids who are bullied and those doing the bullying are alike in that they are battling over power and control. The difference often comes down to physical size or social power. Help your child by giving them more control at home and maybe you can short circuit a problem.

Chris Groff & Lee Long

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