

PARENTS' GUIDE TO BULLYING



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What is bullying?

There is no legal definition of bullying, but the [Gov.uk website](#) defines it as behaviour that is:

- intended to hurt someone either physically or emotionally
- repeated
- often aimed at certain groups (for instance, because of race, religion, gender or sexual orientation)

It takes many forms, including:

- physical assault
- teasing
- making threats
- name calling
- cyberbullying – bullying via mobile phone or online (for instance, email, social networks and instant messenger)

Bullying can have a profound effect on a child's mental health. It can lead to depression, anxiety and suicidal thoughts. It therefore needs to be tackled quickly and decisively. This guide will give you advice on how bullying happens, how to recognise that your child is being bullied and how to work with a school to tackle it. It will also give you advice on what to do if your child has been accused of bullying.

If your child's mental health is suffering as a result of bullying you should talk to your GP and ask for a referral to the [Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service](#) (CAMHS).

Inside the mind of a bully

According to developmental and clinical psychologists, bullies often have deep feelings of shame and inadequacy. By allowing them to avoid engaging with these feelings, bullying serves as a sort of self-defence mechanism – one of which the bullies themselves are essentially unaware. The [TeenSafe website](#) offers a useful summary.

As a primary school teacher, I find bullying one of the most difficult issues to tackle. It can be so subtle and hidden. Sometimes I tackle a child about bullying behaviour and they genuinely don't understand what they've done wrong. When I repeat back what they've said or describe what they've done they're horrified – it's like they honestly had no insight into how hurtful they were being. Just pointing out the behaviour can be enough – it breaks the cycle, and that's the end of it. More entrenched bullying is far harder to tackle.

The classic image of a bully is of a ringleader and followers viciously targeting an innocent victim for no good reason. In fact, bullying is more about the power dynamic that builds up between certain children. Bullies and their victims can often start out as friends or appear to continue a friendship while the bullying is going on.

Bullying can begin with relatively innocent remarks or jokes that get a negative reaction that the bully finds they enjoy. Things can then escalate, with the bully looking for a bigger and bigger reaction. Over time a bullying relationship can become almost normal, with both victim and bully playing out their roles without really thinking. Victims can end up defending their bullies, much like partners in abusive relationships. They might even assist their bullies in bullying somebody else, whether out of fear or because they believe the focus will shift to a new victim. The complexity of these relationships is one of the reasons why schools can struggle to recognise and tackle bullying.



How do I know if my child is being bullied?

Some children may confide in their parents straight away, but others may not even realise they are being bullied. Some might feel fear or shame, leaving them reluctant to talk about what is happening to them. There are some tell-tale signs to look out for if you are worried your child is being bullied.

A child who is being bullied might:

- become quiet and withdrawn
- become reluctant to go to school or make up excuses not to go
- begin making self-critical remarks (for instance, "I'm so stupid", "I can't do anything right" etc)
- complain of physical symptoms such as headache or stomach ache
- have unexplained cuts and bruises
- start coming home with damaged or dirty possessions
- start coming home *without* possessions
- become anxious and touchy
- become difficult and badly behaved

My son suddenly became absolutely impossible in the mornings – he wouldn't get dressed, he wouldn't eat his breakfast, he was rude and uncooperative. I was tearing my hair out. It wasn't until I noticed he didn't have his precious Star Wars pencil case that I suspected bullying. With some very careful investigation, I found out that his entire group of friends had turned against him. It was awful and an absolute minefield to deal with. I was friends with the parents of some of the bullies, and those friendships were destroyed. In the end my son and another boy broke away from the group and became very close – they saved each other really.

The [NSPCC website](#) offers further information about how to recognise bullying and how to get help.

Talk to your child

The first thing to do if you suspect your child is being bullied at school is to talk to them. Be aware that they may clam up and refuse to talk to you if you "grill" them about who has been upsetting them. More subtle questions about how they feel about school might be more effective. These are the sort of questions you could ask:

- How many friends do you have at school?
- What would your friends at school say if I asked them to describe you?

- Do you enjoy lunchtime/playtime? What do you do out in the playground?
- Is there anything you don't like about school?

The answers to these questions should give you an indication if there are any problems. Don't get worked up if your child says someone is targeting them, as this may frighten your child and make them think they are in trouble. Stay calm and let them talk. Reassure them that any negative behaviour they might mention shouldn't have happened and they didn't deserve it. Write down the details, which will help if you need to talk to the school.

My mother knew something was wrong, but she never actually asked me what was happening. She would just bombard me with "positivity" – going on about how lovely I was. Her heart was in the right place, but really all I needed her to do was listen and help me to find ways of dealing with the bullying.



Talk to the teacher

The next step is to make an appointment with your child's teacher to discuss the problem. Don't be afraid about getting upset – teachers are used to upset parents and shouldn't mind at all. Avoid accusing the teacher of not noticing or doing nothing. Remember that bullies are often very clever at hiding their behaviour and it is impossible for a teacher to be aware of everything that is going on between every child in a class of 25 or more. A good teacher will be sympathetic and keen to help. If the teacher is dismissive then you should immediately ask for an appointment with the head teacher.

Here are some points you should bear in mind when talking to the teacher:

- It is important that the teacher knows exactly what has been taking place, so explain in as much detail as you can what has been happening between your child and the bully/bullies.
- Ask about the school's policy on bullying. At this point the teacher should be able to show you or refer you to a written policy on the school's website.
- Ask how the school is going to put the bullying policy into action for your child. You should come away from the meeting with some practical solutions.

The teacher may ask you to come back with your child so that you can all talk the situation through together. A follow-up appointment should be made for you to discuss the progress of the plan to tackle the bullying.

Don't speak directly to the other child or their parents. Emotions will be running high, and it won't do any good.

I was so nervous about addressing the bullying with my daughter's teacher, but she was brilliant. She used something called restorative practice, which involved her working with my daughter and the bully to get them to understand each other's point of view. It was amazingly effective. My daughter and her bully were certainly never friends, but they had respect for each other. My daughter's confidence increased enormously, and it was a very positive experience for her.



Work with your child to develop confidence

It is worth figuring out how and why your child got locked into such a negative power relationship with a bully. Bullies may behave the same way with every child but will often target only those who give the “best” reaction – in other words, those who are most upset or most compliant. While you should never suggest to your child that they should change themselves in order to be less of a target, working with them to develop their self-esteem and confidence will have a positive impact on all aspects of their life – including their school relationships.

Some ways to develop confidence include:

- **Role-playing:** Act out a social situation with your child and give them the words they need to deal with that situation. Help them to handle the anxiety of a particular scenario – for instance, asking someone to play with them – by talking them through it step by step.
- **Finding friends:** Having the support of a kind peer will be a huge boost to your child. Help them to identify a youngster they like and support them in cultivating a friendship. Talk to the other child’s parent(s), perhaps during school drop-off/pick-up. Arrange for the children to spend time together, including at your home. It might seem forced at first, but most parents will be very welcoming.
- **Sport:** Encourage your child to do exercise of any kind – running, swimming or simply kicking a ball around – as this will develop a sense of wellbeing and improve their mental health.
- **Drama/singing:** Engaging in a performing art can bring children out of their shells and give them a chance to express themselves in a safe environment.
- **Things I like about me:** This is a simple exercise that can be great for younger children. Ask your child to lie down on a large piece of paper, draw an outline around them and fill the space with positive statements about the child. Hang the completed picture on their wall so they can see it every day.

Dealing with bullying and the effect it has on your child can be a long, stressful process. Keep talking to your child and to the school. Talk to the governors if the school doesn’t seem to be dealing with the problem. If you still don’t get a satisfactory response – and, above all, if the bullying continues – it might be time to consider changing schools. schoolreviewer.co.uk is the best place to find out all you need to know about the schools in your area. We would also encourage you to leave a review about the difficulty you had with your child’s school – this is valuable information for other parents.

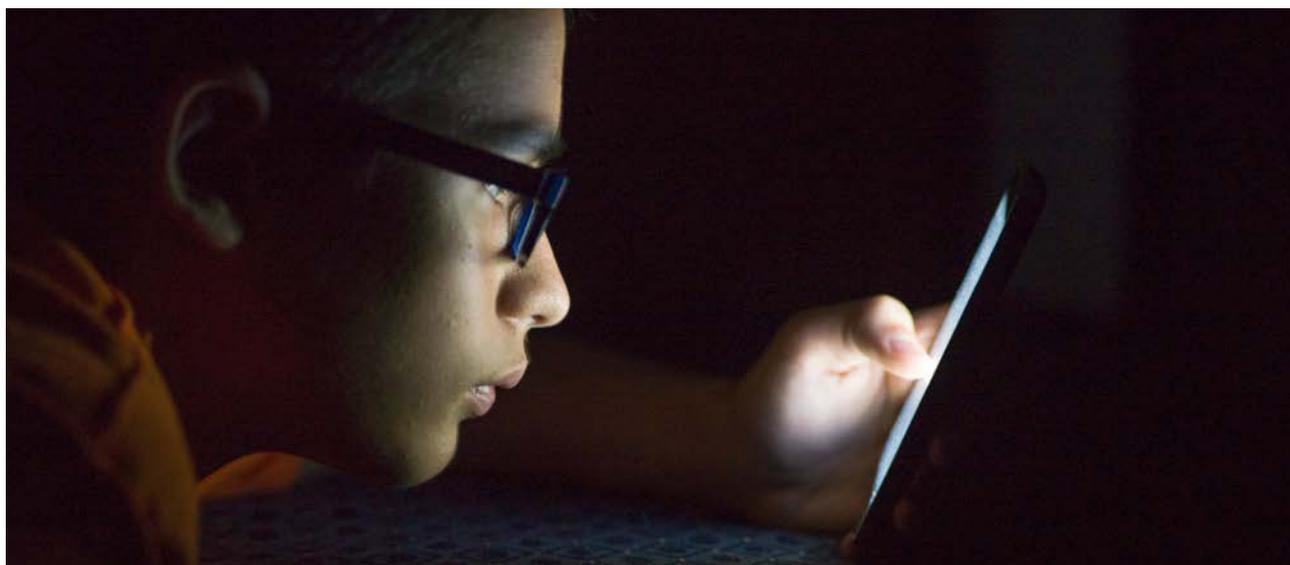
Cyberbullying



Cyberbullying is of particular concern because, unlike with face-to-face bullying, it is possible for the bully to “follow” the victim via their smartphone or computer. It is especially a problem for teens, who spend a lot of time online and conduct many of their relationships through social media. The internet widens the pool of possible bullies beyond the people teens encounter in their day-to-day life and into a much wider group that could include adults.

Cyberbullying can take a number of different forms:

- **Targeting:** This involves the use of email, messaging and social media to wear a victim down through threats and insults. The victim can feel they have no means of escape from the bully.
- **Trolling:** A teen may encounter “trolls” through involvement in an online game or by joining a forum or a social media platform such as Twitter. Trolls deliberately target others online, excluding them from games, writing offensive posts and commenting negatively on others’ posts – all just to get a reaction. Even a troll a teen doesn’t know in the non-digital world can have an impact on them by preventing them from participating in online conversations or by damaging their self-esteem.
- **Shaming:** Here the bully might use some aspect of a teen’s looks or behaviour to embarrass them online. It could involve the use of a picture that has been altered or the spreading of private images.
- **Identity theft:** A bully who manages to get hold of the login details for a teen’s social media accounts may use them to post offensive material or to message the victim’s friends in order to destroy their relationships.
- **Outing:** Many teens use anonymous forums to discuss sensitive personal issues. A bully may “out” a teen by revealing their identity, cutting them off from their support system and embarrassing them.



How to deal with cyberbullying

Start early by talking to your teen about online behaviour even before they have their first social media account.

Most social media platforms don't allow children under 13 to be members. Don't allow your child to circumvent this rule, which is designed to protect children who aren't mature enough to understand how the online world works.

Remind your teen that the online world can be quite different to the real world. People tend to say things online that they would never say in a face-to-face situation. Remind them, too, that not everyone online is who they say they are and that some people will contact them just to hurt them.

Take time to go through all of your teen's technology to ensure everything they are using is secure. Remind them that any photos or information they place online, either on social media or through email, can be passed on and used to embarrass them.

Help them to create secure passwords for their online accounts and warn them never to give their passwords to anybody – not even their best friend. Ensure they know how to change their password in the event that someone does get hold of it.

Show your teen how to block other users on social media. This allows them to ignore people who are causing problems for them online.

Lots of parents have a rule that tablets and smartphones stay downstairs at night-time. This not only encourages your teen to get a good night's sleep but also means they at least get a break from any online bullying that might be taking place.

Tackling an online bully can be particularly difficult because of their ability to remain anonymous or set up multiple accounts under different names. However, anything a bully writes can be used by a victim to demonstrate what is happening. Messages from bullies should be kept – either via saving or screenshot – with a view to being used as evidence to show to parents, teachers or even the police.

The best thing a teen can do once they have made a record of such a message is to disengage from the bully entirely – to block them and not get involved. It is worth reporting incidents of cyberbullying to a head teacher if bully and victim are from the same school – although there may be little that can be done unless the bully is using school hardware, as schools have no powers to prevent their students from posting online in their own time. Threats should be reported to the police.

Choose social media platforms carefully

There are advantages and disadvantages to different social media platforms when it comes to avoiding bullying situations.



Facebook and Instagram:

On both Facebook and Instagram it is possible for parents to set up their own account and befriend/follow their teens to monitor their behaviour. However, on both platforms images are permanent and can be downloaded, making them less secure. It is also difficult to control the privacy of a Facebook or Instagram page: if a friend of a teen comments on a post, for example, friends of friends can also see that post and comment – spreading the content even further, reducing privacy and increasing the threat of bullying.



Twitter:

Twitter has a particularly bad history of facilitating bullying and trolling, due to the fact that it is very difficult to restrict who sees and responds to tweets. It isn't really suitable for personal information and tends to be used more for "broadcasting" than for engaging with others. Twitter tends to be unpopular among teens, but if your teen wants to use it they should be aware that a single, badly placed tweet can very quickly go viral and attract abuse.



Snapchat:

Applications like Snapchat are more closed and private than Facebook. Snapchat also has the advantage that posts disappear after 10 seconds. It is still possible to screenshot images, but the fact that they disappear reduces the danger of them being downloaded and used inappropriately. Note, though, that bullies can use the private and temporary nature of these applications to their advantage, leaving victims with no record of their actions.



Tumblr:

Tumblr is a microblogging site. Keeping posts private on Tumblr is difficult, and the potential for bullying and trolling is therefore high. Teens may enjoy using the site to share thoughts and images, but they should be aware that, because the platform is very open, their material could be ridiculed or used to embarrass them.

Whichever platform your teen chooses, it is important that you encourage them not to be secretive about what they are doing and to remember that even if they do something silly – for instance, sending explicit images to another person – you will always support and help them. They should know that they can talk to you, no matter what happens.

My child has been accused of bullying – what should I do?



Being called into school to be told your child has been accused of bullying can be devastating. But it is worth remembering that they are learning to navigate the complicated world of social relationships and that making mistakes is to be expected. Don't assume your child is a bad egg. There is a chance they didn't even realise how much they were hurting the other child. The problem shouldn't get worse if you work with the school to tackle the situation.

You should particularly bear in mind the following points when dealing with the school:

- Don't be defensive. Listen carefully to the teacher.
- Ask the teacher if he/she genuinely believes your child is a bully. You may find the situation is more complicated than it first appears.
- Ask for specific examples of the bullying and take notes so that you can ask your child about it later.
- Ask how the school plans to deal with the bullying. There should be a practical plan that doesn't restrict your child too much.
- Don't talk to the other child or their parents unless it is at a meeting arranged by the school. It simply won't help.

Talk to your child

Don't be aggressive. You want to find out exactly what is going on, and feeling attacked won't encourage your child to tell you anything. Choose a quiet time and sit down with your child. Tell them exactly what the teacher has told you, without any accusations. Don't imply that you are disappointed in your child or, for that matter, that you think the other child is in the wrong. Tell them that all you would like is to hear their side of the story so you can understand exactly what has happened.

What you are likely to find is that your child will have excuses and justifications for their behaviour – for instance, “I was only joking”, “I didn't mean it”, “He hit me first” etc.

Ask your child how they think they would feel if someone said something nasty to them at school. Explain that you understand your child might not have meant to upset anyone but that in reality their behaviour has been hurtful and needs to stop. At this point your child may reveal that someone else has been nasty to them and that the situation is more complex. It could be that there is a culture of nasty behaviour in the class, which is something that needs to be addressed with the school.

You may also find your child has been drawn into the bullying situation by another child and that they are participating to avoid being targeted themselves. This is a more complicated situation, and your child will need support to escape the unhealthy relationship with the bully.

Equip your child with the right social tools

As well as telling your child to desist from bullying, it is important to explain what constitutes the *right* behaviour. It is easy to assume a child knows automatically how to engage with others, but for some children this isn't at all obvious. Bullying can arise because they know of no other way to interact. You need to work with your child to foster empathy so that they understand how their actions affect others.

Role-playing

Set up a role-play situation in which you play the bullying victim. Ask your child what kind of things the victim says in a typical school situation – for instance, during lunchtime or PE. Play out one of these situations with your child, with you saying something the victim would say and your child giving their typical response. If your child says something rude or nasty then you should respond by saying: “Now I feel disappointed/upset/confused.” Discuss with your child why the victim might feel that way. Don't tell your child off at any point – this is a learning exercise, not a punishment.

Ask what other way your child could deal with such a situation and give them some help if they are stuck. It could be that you advise them to say nothing or that you suggest they say something friendly, depending on how negative the interaction seems to be. Play out the same situation again, this time with your child engaging in the correct behaviour.

My two boys were always quite mean to each other. I ignored it – I had a “Boys will be boys” sort of attitude. But then it emerged that the younger one was using the same sort of language with his friend, who was a much quieter child. One day the friend came out of school completely distraught because of what my son had said. I was mortified. When I tackled my son about it I realised he adored his friend but had no way to express that. I actually had to teach him how to say something nice. It felt really silly at first, but in the long run it also improved his relationship with his brother. They still call each other the foulest names, but they say the odd nice thing as well!

If your child's behaviour is particularly troubling and doesn't change, even in light of your intervention, it might be time to ask the school for help. A good school will recognise you have made an effort to improve things and will work with you to find solutions that will support your child. If your school isn't supportive then you can seek help from your GP. It might also be worth moving your child to another school. schoolreviewer.co.uk has all the information you need to decide on the best school for your child.

Bullying is the product of a negative situation that has become entrenched over time. It needs to be tackled – not with further negativity but with constructive, positive solutions. Punishment may change behaviour in the short term, but it won't tackle the underlying issue. Work with your school to understand exactly why the problem has developed and to allow both victim and bully to break out of the situation and move forward.



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