

## October is Bully Prevention Month

# Is your child being bullied? 9 steps you can take as a parent

by Janet Lehman, MSW

As we all know too well, name-calling, cruel taunts, cyberbullying and physical bullying happen every day to kids across the country. When your child is being bullied, it's hard to concentrate on anything else – all you want to do is make it stop immediately. Janet Lehman, MSW, explains what you can do to help your child—and what could hurt them in the long run.

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At some point, your child will be picked on or will have his feelings hurt by others. We all have our trials and tribulations with our kids, no matter who we are. An unavoidable part of living is finding solutions to problems, even when they are not easy or comfortable.

In my opinion, bullying is a real problem that needs to be solved as a family. Our son was bullied in middle school and high school. We lived in a small rural community where he went to elementary school; the teachers were very aware of all the kids and very attentive. In some ways it was an ideal school. Unfortunately, they had no junior high or high school in our community, so we had to make the choice to send our son to a large urban school nearby.

Soon, he started to come home with some very disturbing stories about how other kids were teasing him, calling names and taunting him. These children didn't have any clear reason why they were bullying our son other than he was the new kid; he was perceived as being different. Our son would come home each day with terrible stories about things that had happened. My husband, James, and I tried hard not to react too strongly when he talked to us. We did not want to seem too upset about it, because we really wanted to listen to what our child had to say without making it worse by overreacting. We tried to remain as neutral as possible, but we were not always successful. Our son was upset and depressed, and it broke our hearts.

Over time we were able to resolve these issues as a family, but I want to stress that it didn't happen overnight, much as we wanted it to. It took a lot of work with both the school and our son to find a solution to the problem. Along the way, we learned some valuable lessons that I believe played a big part in resolving the issue for our son.

Here are nine steps you can take when your child is being bullied:

**1. Listen to what your child has to say:** Being a good listener is an important piece of your role when your child is being bullied. One of the best questions you can ask your child is, "What can I do to be helpful?" When your child tells you what's going on at school, as much as it hurts to listen, be open and able to hear what he has to say. Try to be supportive but neutral when he's talking. When you react too strongly to what your child is

saying, he might stop talking because he's afraid he's going to upset you.

The other side of listening is not blaming your child. Don't put the responsibility for the bullying on him or try to find a reason for it; there is no good reason or excuse for what's happening. If your child is being bullied, he is the victim, so trying to find a reason for why he's "bringing it on himself" really isn't helpful. Never blame your child because it makes him anxious and reduces what he's going to tell you. Your goal is that he continues to communicate what's going on.

**2. If you were bullied as a child, try not to personalize what is happening:** If you were bullied when you were younger, the same situation with your child will most likely bring up painful memories. It's okay to connect with your child about how it feels to be bullied, but don't take the problem on as if it's yours alone. I think the most important thing to do when your child is bullied is to remember the responses you received from others that were – or weren't – helpful. Use what worked and avoid doing what was unsupportive or hurtful.

**3. Don't retaliate against the bully or his family:** As tempting as it might be to take matters into your own hands and retaliate against the bully or his family, don't do it. This is where you have to set some examples for your child on how to problem solve. It's very difficult to hear that your child is being threatened; of course you want to immediately stop the hurt. But remember, retaliating won't help your child solve the problem or feel better about himself. Instead, take a deep breath and think about what you can do to help your child handle what he's facing.

**4. Coach your child on how to react:** Bullies tend to pick on people who they can get a reaction from; they choose kids who get upset and who take the teasing to heart. They also look for kids who won't stand up for themselves or who they can overpower. It's important to teach your child how to react. We coached our son on how to avoid bullies at school and who to go to if he felt unsafe. We also did role plays together where we practiced not reacting to what the bullies said. Another part of what we did was set it up so that our son had some control over what was going on. He couldn't stop the bullying right away, but he could get himself away from it and he could find someone to talk to about it.

**5. Find a teacher or administrator at your child's school who will help:** Remember, it is the school's responsibility to stop bullying; I think most take that seriously. The saving grace for our son was the guidance counselor at his school. She provided a safe place for our son to go when he was being picked on. The guidance counselor wanted him to feel like he had some control over the situation, so our child was the one taking the initiative to talk with her. (While we didn't openly discuss this with him, he knew at some level that we were also talking to the guidance counselor.) We felt it

was important for our child to have some sense of taking this problem on and solving it by going to the guidance counselor on his own.

After he started talking with her, she let him know that he could just sit in her office, even if she wasn't there; the school allowed him to basically take a time out or break to get away from the bullying situation. Again, that gave him some control over what was going on. It gave him a source of support and made him feel like he wasn't powerless. By talking to the guidance counselor and using his pass to go to her office, it showed him that there were some solutions to the situation.

It's also important to make sure your child keeps talking – whether it's with you, a guidance counselor or a trusted teacher, it's important that he keeps communicating about what's going on.

**6. Take your child's side:** When our son was being bullied, we constantly reaffirmed that there were things he could do to handle the situation and that he was in fact doing them. We let him know that we were going to get him help and that we loved him and we were going to support him. We also said that there was no excuse for what was happening to him. Make sure to let your child know that you're on his side; he needs to understand that you don't blame him and that you will support him.

We also let our child know that if he retaliated against the group, by swearing back or even fighting, that we wouldn't punish him at home. Our son was bullied physically and verbally, and we told him that he could do what he needed to do to protect himself. We told him that he would still have consequences at school for any misbehavior because that would be against the rules, but we didn't add to them at home.

**7. Get support:** Be sure to talk to your spouse or to supportive family or friends. Sometimes I would burst out crying after hearing about what had happened to our son. There were definitely times when James and I got angry. I think the bottom line is that this situation can really bring out emotions from parents.

We found that we needed to talk with each other about this as a couple because it was so hurtful and because we wanted to be clear in how we communicated to our son. I recommend that single parents reach out to somebody – a family member, friend or someone at the school – anyone who can help you help your child. We reached out to friends and colleagues as well and asked how they handled it when it happened to their kids. If nothing else, it helped us feel like we weren't alone and that there wasn't anything wrong with our child.

**8. Teach your child to name what's happening:** For younger kids, it's important to be able to name what's happening as "bullying." For a child who's feeling picked on, it's empowering to be able to really name it. They're teaching a lot about bullying prevention in school these days and "bully" is such a



negative word that it's good for your child to be able to attach it to the behavior. This is truly empowering for many children and can work with older kids as well.

**9. Find something your child is really good at doing:** Help your child feel good about himself by finding something he can do well. Choose some activities he's good at and reinforce it verbally. Our son got involved in swimming and it was very helpful for his self-esteem.

Fortunately, he got through that year and developed some great friendships. That summer we signed him up for a summer camp program. He went there still feeling a bit like a victim and came out a completely different human being. Camp was a place where he really excelled and it just fed his self-esteem.

So try to find a positive experience for your child to help him feel good about himself. Remember, every time he succeeds, it helps him develop better self-esteem; that feeling is the opposite of how the bullies make him feel.

Bullying is not something your child is going to get over immediately – or simply because he wants it to be over. It can be a long process. The lesson for our son was that while he couldn't stop people from saying bad things, he had some control over how he responded to it.

Look at it this way: a lot of people feel stuck in their jobs. But the minute they figure out that they have a choice – that they can either stay there or go somewhere else – they feel better. It's that stuck place, that feeling of being completely powerless and trapped, that is the worst. I think what our son got out of this whole situation was finding those small pieces of control and exerting them, bit by bit.

Again, all of this took a lot of time. We didn't come up with solutions quickly. It took time for our son to trust the guidance counselor and then for us to encourage him to go talk to her. After a while, we could see that everything we were doing was starting to work. Overcoming a bullying episode takes support and it takes everyone working together as a family to make it happen.

Signs that your child is being bullied:

- Not going to the bathroom at school. A lot of bullies attack in the bathroom, away from cameras and adults. Avoiding unsupervised activities and areas.
- Getting upset after a phone call, text or e-mail
- Losing friends they previously had
- Being more isolated and skipping activities that they used to enjoy; spending more time alone in their rooms
- Making negative statements about themselves and engaging in negative self-talk