

Bullying

About bullying

Bullying is one of the most common problems that young people face. About one in two primary school children and one in four secondary school children have been bullied at some point. Although it is very common, it may still be very distressing for the young person. Bullying behaviour can be both emotional and physical in nature, and can include things like:

- Being called names or being teased (this can happen for no obvious reason at all, but sometimes it is more specific and focussed on, for example, physical appearance, disability, religion, sexual orientation, colour or race.)
- Being physically hurt, for instance pushed, kicked, punched or pinched, or even hit and attacked.
- Having your possessions stolen or being forced to hand over money.
- Being threatened with physical attack, ridicule or blackmail.
- Threatening e-mails, text messages or rumours spread via online forums.
- 'Happy slapping' - having your photo or a video clip taken of you while being physically bullied and having them sent to other people's phones and published on the web.
- Sexual harassment - uninvited and unwanted sexual attention of any kind, including sexual innuendoes, jokes, personal comments, spreading sex - related gossip and offensive sex talk in the young person's presence.
- Relational bullying - someone deliberately harming the young person's relationships. This includes spreading rumours, gossiping, shunning, befriending and not keeping confidences and deliberately splitting up the young person's friendships causing the young person to become isolated.

Bullying can happen for a long time without being noticed by anyone but the young person. Some possible indicators that a young person is being bullied include things like:

- Coming home from school with damaged or missing clothes or other items, or missing money that they should have.
- Physical injuries like scratches or bruises.
- Avoiding going to the place where the bullying occurs or changing their route to or from this place (often their school).
- Appearing generally more angry, frightened, alert, easily upset and emotional.
- Possibly getting into fights (often with the person who is bullying them).
- Having a sudden change in friendship groups - avoiding certain friends with no explanation.

- Being very hungry when they get home from school might indicate that they have not had lunch - either their dinner money was stolen or their packed lunch was destroyed.
- Labelling themselves in a negative way. The young person may be repeating negative things that have been said to them.

Being bullied can be very frightening and distressing for the young person. It is humiliating and often leaves the young person feeling sad and angry. It makes them feel bad about themselves, lowering their confidence and sense of self-worth. Children and young people often feel that they deserve the bullying for some reason. This can make it very difficult to talk about, and they may not know what to do about it at all.

Things to think about

Anyone can be on the receiving end of bullying behaviour, and it is not the result of something the young person did to start it. It is often even a former friend who is the bully, which makes it even more distressing to cope with.

If the young person is avoiding school, or shows anxiety about attending school, bullying should be considered as a possible reason for this.

Anyone can display these bullying behaviours at various times. The young person might not be bullied by another young person; it could even be an adult or a teacher who is bullying them. A young person can both display bullying behaviour and be on the receiving end at different times.

Bullying behaviour can have a huge impact on a child or young person. It's worth bearing in mind that, although the bullying may have stopped, the impact might not have; children and young people can live with the effects of bullying for a long time and they may require support to help them deal with how they're feeling.

Children and young people often don't tell adults they're being bullied for fear of making the situation worse. When they do tell, they want the bullying to be addressed with the minimum of fuss - be mindful of this.

Those who display bullying behaviour themselves often have their own problems, and feel upset and angry. Bullies often do not like themselves and take it out on others. This does not excuse the behaviour in any way, but it is important to understand that the bullies themselves are often feeling insecure and might be having problems at home. They may be victims of bullying themselves, and do it only because they are scared that others might do it to them.

Think about yourself

When we discover a child or young person is being bullied it can evoke very strong emotions in us. These can be of anger or fear possibly because of your own experiences of being bullied. It is important to be aware of your own responses to what the child/young person is telling you. Although it can be helpful for the young person to feel that you understand their situation, try to react in their best interest and not simply to reduce your own anxiety or express your anger in an unhelpful way. For example being over protective or becoming excessively angry is unlikely to be helpful. Remember to deal with their bullies, not your own.

For further advice, see section on being aware of yourself and your own response.

What you can do

"Before I was scared to tell the teachers I was bullied, the bullies told me not to tell, when [worker] came and helped me realise that when I do tell it will stop, it worked"

Young Person

- It is important to remember that some young people cope with and sort out the bullying themselves.
- If you suspect a child/young person may be being bullied, ask them and others, for example, their friends or teachers, if there is anything worrying them at school or elsewhere.
- Remember that it might be difficult for the young person to talk about what has happened, so encourage them to talk about it without being pushy. For more information, see section on counselling techniques.
- Always take them seriously, and do not dismiss their experiences as a 'normal part of growing up'.
- Avoid just telling them to "stand up for themselves" or "ignore the bullies".
- Assure the young person that it is not their fault and that you respect them.
- Bullying behaviour can lower confidence and self-worth, so be affirming and remind them of their strengths, successes and good qualities.
- If you need to talk to the school or other authorities like the police about this, it is important to involve the young person. Try to discuss this with them, and avoid just 'taking over'.
- If the bullying is happening at school or in another organisation, agree a plan of action with the head teacher/manager to address the bullying and to make sure measures are in place to ensure the safety of the child while the situation is being dealt with.
- Try to involve them in coming up with a solution together, as this is often a lot more effective than just telling the young person what to do. This also helps the young person feel empowered and build their confidence. For more information, please see the section on solution-focused techniques.
- Even after you have come up with a solution, it may be that the bullying does not stop straight away. Encourage the young person to keep telling you about it, but avoid interrogating them for information.

When to contact a mental health specialist

- When bullying occurs in combination with other worrying behaviours or psychological problems, such as depression, suicidal thoughts or self-harm.
- If your attempts to help uncover issues that you are inexperienced in dealing with, e.g. sexual abuse.

How to contact a mental health specialist

You should get in touch with your local health centre or hospital to obtain a contact number for the appropriate children and young people's mental health specialists.

Remember - you can contact your local mental health specialists for a number of reasons, for example:

- For advice on how to make a referral about a named child.
- For advice about whether or not to make a referral (it is normal practice to seek this advice without naming the child in the first instance).
- For advice about what to do (once again there should be no necessity to name the child).

By not naming the child you are protecting their right to confidentiality. This method of seeking advice also has the advantage that you do not need to get anyone's consent in advance of your contact phone call.