

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. 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. 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 and most schools do take it seriously. The saving grace for our son was one of the guidance counselors at his school. 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. While we didn't openly discuss this with him, he knew that we were also talking to the guidance counselor.

After our son started talking with the guidance counselor, 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 if needed. This gave him some control and made him feel like he wasn't powerless. It showed him that there were some solutions to the situation. It showed him that there was hope.

And 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. 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, which is the opposite of how the bullies make him feel.

Bullying is not something your child is going to get over immediately. It can be long a process. But our son learned that while he couldn't stop people from saying bad things, he had control over how he responded.

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 all kids will admit to their parents that they are being bullied. It is often embarrassing to them and they are unsure how you will react. Therefore, it is important that you look out for the following 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 email.
- 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.

Related content: More practical parenting advice on bullying from EmpoweringParents.com.

About Janet Lehman, MSW

Janet Lehman, MSW, has worked with troubled children and teens for over 30 years. A veteran social worker, she specializes in child behavior issues — ranging from anger management and oppositional defiance to more serious criminal behavior in teens. In addition, Janet gained a personal understanding of child learning and behavior challenges from her son, who struggled with learning disabilities in school. She is co-creator of *The Total Transformation® Program*, *The Complete Guide To Consequences™*, *Getting Through To Your Child™*, and *Two Parents One Plan™*.