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OCT 03 What to Do If Your Child Is Being Bullied

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A seven-

year-old girl who was described as “cheerful, funny and imaginative” suddenly appeared sullen, worried and agitated. This little girl, who loved first grade and cried when she had to stay home sick, seemed to have changed overnight. When she wouldn’t get on the bus, her mom offered to drive her instead. The bus must be overwhelming and loud, she thought. When her lunch returned home mostly uneaten each day, her mom assumed that she was spending the lunch period chatting with her friends. She thought long and hard about “quick lunches” that her daughter could shovel down while she talked. When offers for play dates were met with a disapproving stare, her mom chalked it up to the exhaustion of a new school year and more rigorous academics.

When the school refusal began, however, her mother started to worry. The little girl wasn’t talking, but her mother knew in her gut that something wasn’t right. Stomachaches kept her up at night and affected her morning routine. Headaches took over in the afternoon. In a matter of days, long and intense meltdowns made it nearly impossible to get this little girl to the school she once loved. Her mom was at a loss.

As it turned out, this little girl was being bullied at school. It didn’t start as what we think of as traditional bullying. At first, it was merely a couple of friends moving on and not always including her. It soon escalated. The friends this little girl had since kindergarten made it clear that they were no longer her friends. They used their words, their actions and the silent treatment to show

her that she was out. While there weren't any shirt-tearing, loud screaming matches or physical aggression of any kind, there was a solid dose of exclusion. There was getting up and leaving the lunch table when she sat down. There were note passing and whispers and eye rolls galore. She knew she was out, and she felt that her best course of action was to stay home.

Sometimes the signs of bullying are obvious. When bullying is physically aggressive, parents can begin to track things that can be noticed: torn clothing, missing toys or personal belongings and unexplained bruises are the clear-cut signs that something is amiss. More often than not, however, bullying is difficult to spot. Most kids don't come home from school saying, "I'm being bullied every day by these three kids and I'm really scared and unhappy."

Watch for these signs that your child might be dealing with a bully:

- school refusal
- frequent stomachaches, headaches and other physical complaints
- agitation and moodiness
- sleep disturbance (including nightmares and difficulty falling asleep)
- changes in eating habits
- bedwetting
- appearing sad, lonely, anxious and/or depressed with no known cause
- avoiding peer interactions after school and on weekends
- talking about being alone at school
- increased self-blame
- feeling helpless or worthless
- afraid of riding the bus
- sudden change in school performance
- any communication about suicide* (i.e., "No one would care if I wasn't alive.")

School refusal is often a huge red flag when it comes to bullying. If your child generally enjoys attending school and suddenly doesn't want to go, it's time to consider what might be happening with his peer group. Not all mean behavior becomes a pattern and not all mean behavior is bullying. Kids develop social skills as they grow, and some have more sophisticated skills than others. Either way, it's important to know what to do if you suspect that your child is being bullied.

Avoid assumptions. The most important thing to do is to listen to your child without judgment. Try to avoid questions like, "Did you say something to upset these kids?" or "Did you do something to them first?" I see this a lot in my practice. In an effort to figure out why a child is on the outside of the peer group, parents evaluate what the child might have done. This makes the assumption that the victim caused the problem.

Your child needs your unconditional love and support right now. Chances are he's doing enough self-blame when he can't sleep at night; he needs you to listen with an open mind.

Comment on changes and watch for nonverbal cues. If your child isn't talking but you suspect that something is wrong, share your observations and watch for clues. The best time to talk to kids is not right before or right after school. The best time is when they are calm and have had some time to decompress after the school day.

Saying, "I noticed that you don't want to play with your friends much anymore, are you still hanging out with them?" gives your child an opening without feeling interrogated.

Don't schedule a meeting with the other kid(s). Something I've seen a lot of in the past few years is "meetings." The bullied child's parent talks to the aggressor's parent and they all meet face to face to "problem-solve." In most cases, this ends up being awkward and uncomfortable for both kids and doesn't actually solve the problem.

If the families are close and the kids are having trouble getting along but it isn't "bullying," a family get-together might be useful. When one kid is in the power position and the other kid is being excluded, teased repeatedly or otherwise bullied at school, however, the child on the receiving end is likely to feel scared when face to face with aggressor. This can also break the trust between the child and the parent.

Do ask the teacher for help. It's no big secret that a lot of bullying and other mean behavior occurs on the bus, in the cafeteria and during recess, so your child's teacher might not be aware of the details. What the teacher will notice, however, are changes in your child's behavior and emotional state.

Parents often tell me that they don't want to "bother" the teacher with peer issues. You know what teachers tell me? They want to help their students feel safe and happy in school. Ask for help as soon as you suspect a problem.

Problem solve with your child. The term "bullying" is used to describe a wide range of behaviors. That makes it nearly impossible to find one solution to help all kids. When you brainstorm solutions with your child, you empower your child to take control.

Some kids are great with snappy comebacks, some need to walk away and many prefer use of the "buddy" system. I always tell parents that children don't need a table full of friends; they just need one. It's okay to have one close friend, one buddy, to seek out at lunch and recess. Over time, more friendships will emerge as your child learns to trust other kids.

Identify a touchstone. Every child needs a touchstone at school. Kids spend the majority of their days with their teachers and other kids; they need to know where they can go for help. They need a trusted person, a touchstone. Help your child identify a safe person at school who can help him if the bullying continues.

Bullying can cause long-term emotional harm for children. Whether it's physical, verbal or emotional doesn't make a difference. It's all equally harmful and can lead to anxiety, depression, loneliness, suicidal ideation and even symptoms of PTSD later in life. It is not to be taken lightly.

Above all, provide a safe space for your child to talk to you by using active listening skills and communicating unconditional love for your child.

*If your child communicates suicidal thoughts or ideas, it is essential to get your child evaluated by licensed mental health practitioner immediately.