

10 Tough Questions Parents Ask About Kids' Bullying

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These questions come up time and again, but there are no universal, one-size-fits-all answers to bullying problems. Every situation is a bit different and every kid is different, with unique strengths and weaknesses (parents, too!). However, there are many common aspects to bullying problems and all children are entitled to go to school safe and unafraid, knowing that adults will protect them if problems arise.



1. Your child tells you about a bullying problem at school. When is it time to talk to the school/teacher/principal?

Depending on the severity of the problem, if it's been going on for 2-3 weeks (sooner, if the problem is more severe), the school should know. Start with your child's classroom teacher – many problems originate in the classroom or with one class' kids, plus you'll get more help and cooperation if you keep the teacher in the loop instead of going over his or her head first thing. Even if the problem involves other classes or grades (eg, getting taunted, threatened, or beaten up by older kids), enlist the teacher's help on your way to meet with the principal. For a step-by-step guide, see our earlier blog post, *"10 Tips For Working With Your Child's School To Stop Bullying."*

2. How long do you give the school to solve the problem?

I'd go back to the school 2-6 times, 10-14 days apart, to give them updates, tell them what's working, what isn't, and give them a chance (and the push) to modify their approach. By the 3rd visit, the principal should be knowledgeable and involved. Document everything (see *"10 Tips"*). You should see convincing evidence that specific, serious action is being taken by adults, even if the problem has not been completely solved. **Bullying problems typically take at least 3 months to resolve**, with some mistakes along the way and frequent, low-level adult monitoring required from then on.

Parents and teachers are frequently at odds over bullying issues. Teachers and principals *really* want to solve bullying and other behavioural problems ASAP. Bullying makes a teacher's work life miserable and creates a lot more work. Kids try hard *not* to let adults see bullying. That's why most bullying happens in the halls, on the bus, at the playground edge, at lunch, on the smartphone, in the washrooms – the places the adults *aren't*. I've seen kind-hearted, experienced teachers with 25 years' experience, parents themselves, go looking for a bullying problem that they *know* is happening in their class and not find it. That, however, is no excuse for doing nothing. Here's where teachers must step in and say, *"Seems like we have a problem. We're going to assume everyone's involved. There must be some things that are allowing or encouraging bullying (even if we can't see it right now). This is how we're going to handle it and what we're going to change."* Parents need to give teachers some time to involve all adults at school and keep looking until the problem is found and solved. Parents need to follow up at home. Talk to kids about being kind and inclusive. We don't need to be everybody's best friend, but we must treat everyone with respect. Be clear about behavioural boundaries and limits, even and *especially* in conflict.



3. What if you're not satisfied with the school's action – what are your options?

If you're not happy that real progress is being made, you can escalate to the school board level. There's usually a department specializing in "Safe Schools" or something similar (the name varies). I wouldn't spend too long chasing that solution. After 20 years' experience, realistically, **if you've used our 10 Tips, remained polite and not turned into a bully yourself, but have been unable to elicit enthusiastic action by the school to solve this problem in 3 months or more, your chances for a successful resolution are pretty low.** You can take it higher, and you may be able to get the board to compel the school to do something different, but you have already received a pretty loud message about the school's current state of willingness or ability to put effort, weight, knowledge, and action behind this problem. **Straight talk: Keep working for a solution, but start looking for new schools.** I've seen kids kept far too long in dangerous situations while adults waffle. An in-depth discussion of this tough decision can be found in my book [Bullying Epidemic: Not Just Child's Play](#).

4. What do you say to your child who is being bullied? To your child who is the bully?

To a child who is a target:

"We love you. We are sorry you're going through this. This is not your fault."

"Tell me more." "Is there more to the story?"

"I will protect you and stay with you while we solve this."

"I don't know what the right answer is, but we'll figure it out."

"Let's brainstorm some ideas for things we can both do, together and separately."

"What do you think you might be able to do to make the situation better?"

To a child who is a bully:

"We love you, but that behaviour is not acceptable."

"You may not realize, but your behavior is hurting others." (be specific)

"We're going to work with you to help you change your behaviour."

"This will take some time – months. There will be some mistakes. We'll keep working on it."

"We have confidence in you and know that you can do this."

"This is as important as getting good grades or playing hockey."

"We're going help you monitor your progress; we'll talk to you and the school regularly."

5. When (if ever) is it a good idea to approach the bully's parents?

I almost never recommend contacting the bully's parents directly. It's a low-chance-of-success strategy and can make things worse. It often catches the parents off-guard, bringing out a defensive reaction, or the parents might have poor problem-solving skills. The request for change carries a lot more weight if it comes from the school.

If you already know the other child's parents and have a good relationship with them, then make one phone call to say *"Hey, we've got a bit of a problem here and I think I need your help."* I did that with a bullying problem involving my daughter's friends in middle school. Girls' bullying frequently involves longtime or (former) best friends. If you get rebuffed by the parent, don't call again.



6. What if your child still feels unsafe at school?

If your child tells you this at home (not at school), take the time to find out more. Use the 5 Ws: Who, What, When, Where, Why to improve your understanding of the story. What does “feels unsafe” mean? Poked, tripped, or groped in the halls? Social media messages on a smartphone? Saw another kid get physically pushed around or beaten up by peers? Knowing more about the problem will help you and your child decide whether it seems safe for your child to go back to school, how quickly you call the school, what to say about the problem, whether the police should be called, etc.

If your child tells you this while at school, depending on the severity, tell them to go immediately to the office for adult help, or to stay close to a group of kids, where it’s harder for a bully to single out one kid. Make arrangements for your child’s transportation home from school. Problems that start in school frequently carry over to the school bus. A lone child walking home from school is an easy target.

7. When do you remove your child from the school?

When you’ve tried unsuccessfully for 3-6 months to improve the problem by working closely (and pleasantly) with the school (could be as little as 1-4 weeks in more urgent situations), it’s seriously time to consider moving on. Start developing back-up plans. Ask your child – their thoughts and feelings are key to the decision. **Removing a child from school is *not* the right answer – it’s sometimes the *expedient* answer, the best answer we’ve got for right now, which keeps a child safe, and that’s our crucial priority.** I know that your kid is entitled to go to that school in peace and the school *should* solve the problem, and it may be very inconvenient to change schools, but the probability of solving a serious ongoing problem after 6 months of insufficient progress is low. It’s also likely that your child is now a bigger target, with the publicity around the problem. Kids know when adults are not serious about taking action to stop bullying. It’s a green light to continue – or escalate.

If your child is “just” a bystander, know that bystanders pay a price too. Bullying undermines learning, by distracting the focus from schoolwork and by causing stress, fear, and hypervigilance. Schools with more bullying make slower **academic** progress. It’s not just the kids. Teachers are also stressed by working in bully-encrusted environments and are both mentally distracted from giving their best and physically distracted by having to spend time on excessive discipline problems. Being an upstander, not a bystander, helps stop bullying at the earliest stages, when it’s simple and easy to fix.

8. How do you know if your child is not coping well?

Many symptoms might indicate that your child is struggling with bullying – either personally or as a bystander. Stress symptoms (anger, depression, stomach ache on school days, etc), school refusal, slipping grades, obvious symptoms (ripped clothing or bruises, missing books, backpacks, phones, ipods, or money), sudden loss of interest in activities or friends, and at later stages, alcohol, drug use, or evidence of cutting are all symptoms that something’s not right and needs your (gentle but speedy) investigation.

These days our kids live their emotional lives online as an open book – they chat, blog, and post videos of their deepest thoughts and pain. If you are worried that there’s a big problem – involving thoughts or plans for self-harm or harming another – that’s the only time that I encourage parents to gently snoop. You can learn a lot about your child’s state of mind and the kind of friends they’re surrounded by when you’re a Facebook “friend.”



Unfortunately, many symptoms of being bullying are the same as *normal* symptoms of adolescence (anger, depression, school refusal)! We're looking for changes in behaviour patterns. You know your child best.

9. When (if ever) do you involve the police?

Police Officer Ken Ambler, community resource officer from Toronto's 22 Division specializing in bullying prevention, says he'd rather see bullying stop after the first episode than wait until it's happened dozens of times. Contacting the police depends on the seriousness of the problem and how widespread it is (was a child beaten up, caught on video by a large audience of kids with smartphones? Was the video shown or sent to others?) If you're aware of group plans to assault a child or a planned fight involving two schools, the school or police should hear about it.

Ambler says one stumbling block is kids' reluctance to contact adults for help until the problem is very bad. He spends time in the schools, trying to building supportive relationships with students over time. He also talks about the value of anonymous services like [Crimestoppers](#), which allow kids to report problems with complete anonymity. The earlier we can stop the problem, the better.

10. What do you do if you fear your child may harm himself/others?

If you fear a child is considering self-harm, parents should go to their family doctor, a hospital, mental health facility, or a [Kids' Help Phone](#)-type resource for guidance and support. To prepare yourself, call the Kids' Help Phone before you talk to your child for some suggestions on how to handle the conversation calmly and gently.

If you fear a child is planning harm to others, especially if weapons are involved or threatened, bring this info to the police or school immediately.

Modify these suggestions to meet the needs of the situation and your child. The best solution to bullying problems is to intervene early, before the bad behavior becomes ingrained. Kids need to know that adults are watching and will firmly but gently put limits on kids when they get close to crossing the line.

Learn More:

[BullyingEpidemic.com](#), [Bullying Epidemic: Not Just Child's Play](#), [GirlsRespectGroups.com](#)

Safety Note: If Your Child Is In a Dangerous Situation (severe or longstanding bullying): Reading a blog article (or even a book) is not enough to prepare you to skillfully and safely navigate your child through what could be a life-threatening or mental health-threatening experience. The info on the BullyingEpidemic blog and the *Bullying Epidemic* book are good places to start, but are not a replacement for enlisting skilled professional help and individual coaching. If your child is in an emergency situation, move quickly.



Lorna Blumen is a bullying prevention specialist, speaker, trainer, and author of five books on bullying and respect issues, including [Bullying Epidemic: Not Just Child's Play](#). She works with workplaces, schools, parents, teachers, coaches, and health professionals. Lorna is also the lead developer and lead author of [Girls' Respect Groups: An Innovative Program To Empower Young Women & Build Self-Esteem!](#) GRG is an after-school program for middle and high school girls used in Canada, the US, and 130 countries worldwide.

