

Stop Bullying Now: Presenting practical research-based strategies for reducing bullying in schools

Stan Davis

www.stopbullyingnow.com

Advice for parents and guardians

What if your child is being mistreated by another student?

Parents have been given frequent, and sometimes contradictory, advice. Some books and materials suggest "bully-proofing" children and youth by teaching and encouraging them to stand up to the student who has mistreated them. Other advice includes telling your child or teen to ignore mistreatment. My experience, and input from more than 13,000 youth in the Youth Voice Project research I am conducting with Dr. Charisse Nixon at Penn State Erie, suggest a wider range of more effective strategies we can use. Here are some suggestions for positive actions to protect your child and teen from mistreatment and trauma. Later in this article I will discuss actions to take if your child is doing mean things to others, or if your child is distressed by seeing mean behavior.

How can I raise a child who is strong and who is less likely to be hurt if he or she is bullied? There are many helpful strategies for building resiliency.

- Spending family time together. Decades of research shows that there are many ways to build inner strength. First, young people who spend time with their parent(s) or guardian(s) talking, enjoying shared time, and doing activities they are interested in together are more resilient. They are more likely to weather the storms and stresses of childhood and adolescence than youth who do not spend time in these activities with their families. Even having dinner with your teens on a regular basis and talking during the meal has been shown to make a positive difference in their lives. Two excellent books have practical suggestions about maintaining family connectedness as youth become teens: *Get Out of My Life, But First Would You Drive Me and Cheryl to the Mall?* by Anthony Wolfe, and *The Second Family*, by Ron Taffel.
- Encouraging positive relationships with adults outside the immediate family. Youth who have positive and stable connections with teachers, coaches, youth group leaders, extended family members, and other adults are likely to be more resilient.
- Encouraging active participation in hobbies and interests. The concentration, learning, and joy that comes from active involvement in playing music, playing sports, doing art, and other activities of young peoples' choosing can counteract the negative effects of peer behavior.
- Encouraging service to others and helping youth see that they have made a positive difference by helping others. When young people know that their actions have helped others, they acquire authentic self-esteem which buffers them against others' mean or excluding behavior.

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•Teaching young people to understand that some people they meet in life may say or do mean things to others. We found in our research that youth in seventh grade and above often found it helpful to remind themselves that mean behavior is a choice made by perpetrator. These youth said that they reminded themselves that they did not cause others' mean behavior, and that it was not a reflection of

anything wrong with them. Instead, they saw the mean behavior as evidence that the other person was acting in an immature way. It can also help young people to understand that sometimes people who do mean things are just having a hard day. We should still do everything we can to stop harmful behavior, without labeling someone else a bully.

•Helping your child develop problem-solving skills. Three key problem solving skills that can be practiced in day-to-day life at home are:

- Self-calming strategies using breathing, exercise, and other techniques;
- Thinking about three or more possible next steps to solve any problem before choosing what to do. In considering different options, young people can also think about what might happen next if they use each step. When youth have more than one problem-solving option, they can fall back on a second option if the first doesn't work.
- Asking for help. Most of the mistreated youth in our study did not ask adults for help. Those who asked for and got help from adults reported that they were less hurt by the mean behavior.

•Helping your child build friendships and other peer connections outside school through activities and groups. If youth have several groups of friends and others with shared interests, they are less vulnerable to mistreatment in one location.

If your child or teen has been mistreated, you can try the following techniques:

Decide how important what happened is. As you talk with your young person, I suggest thinking about the seriousness of what has happened. How unhappy and/or frightened is your child? How seriously do you take what happened? You may want to get advice from a friend who has good judgment and who knows your child in making this decision.

•**If the behavior toward your child is just annoying or is having little impact**, it can help to advise your child to ignore the actions, to stay away from the person, to spend more time with other peers, or to ask the other child to stop. Even in this situation, it may be a good idea to check back with your child periodically in a calm, supportive way to see if things have gotten better or worse. Your child or teen should not be surprised if the actions listed above do not change the other person's behavior.

•**If the behavior toward your child is bothering him or her moderately**, it can help to brainstorm with your young person. Find out what he or she has already tried and what has happened when he or she tried those strategies. You may want to begin a log of events, including words, actions, times, and places, in case the behavior or your child's reaction escalates. As with the more trivial actions described

above, it is important to stay calm as you discuss these events with your child to avoid increasing his or her anger, fear, or concern. You and your child may choose to approach the school at this point if the behavior has happened at school. In my experience it is most often helpful to talk with the teacher calmly, providing a list of what has been done to your child. Ask if these actions are considered acceptable at school. If not, ask what the school will do to prevent them and to help your child build positive peer connections. If talking with the teacher does not lead to improvement, you may need to have the same conversation with the principal. Ask about how your child will be protected against possible retaliation for reporting the behavior.

- **If the behavior toward your child, and your child's reaction to it, are clearly having a negative effect on sleep, eating, learning, and other daily activities,** it is important to approach the school if this is a school-based problem. If the problem behaviors are happening outside of school, you will most likely talk with the people who supervise the setting in which they are happening. Depending on the actual behavior and on relevant state law, you may also want to make a police report. If you see signs of disruption of daily activities or of rage or depression, you may want to have a mental health professional assess your child's need for counseling.

- Talking with the parent of the child who is being mean to your child is unlikely to help, in most situations. Most parents do not welcome other parents telling them that their child is behaving badly, and this kind of conversation may lead to conflict.

- Increase steps to build resiliency and inner strength as described above. If your child is mistreating others, you can try the following strategies: Consider the possible reasons behind your child's actions.

If your child mistreats others, that does not make him or her "a bully." There are many reasons youth do mean things. Here are some of them:

- Youth who mistreat others may be watching and imitating characters in TV shows and movies that glorify mean behavior.

- They may be trying to be funny.

- They may be expressing anger about events in their lives.

- They may be lacking in skills like empathy, thinking before they act, or sharing with others.

- They may be retaliating for others' negative actions instead of using more positive strategies to stop those actions.

- They may be trying to get the approval of their peers.

- A very few youth truly wish to hurt others.

If your child or teen repeatedly behaves in negative ways toward others, it is important to take this seriously. If young people get status, pleasure, power over others, or other positive outcomes from mean behavior, they are more likely to continue those mean actions into adult life. Searching for reasons may be helpful, yet we should not let the reasons for mean behavior become excuses. Young people who mistreat others need to learn to take responsibility for their actions and choices. They also need to take responsibility for the harm their actions can cause.

We should ask our children to describe their negative actions, tell us why these actions are wrong, and think about what else they should have done in the situation they were in. We should also look for situations in which our children act in a kind, considerate manner and point these out to them. When we do this, young people can notice how good they feel when they help or include others and make other positive choices. Similarly, we can involve youth in positive hobbies and in helping others, so they experience the satisfaction of hard work and kindness.

What if your child mistreats others repeatedly and the strategies listed above do not help, or if the negative behavior is severe?

In that case, evaluation and possible treatment by a mental health professional who is experienced in dealing with issues of aggression can be very important. Repeated mean behavior may be a sign of real distress or of significant problems, which can often be addressed effectively by a therapist.

What if your child is distressed after witnessing mean peer behavior?

You can encourage him or her to find a way to support the young person who was mistreated or alone, or to tell adults at school what he or she sees. Mistreated or bullied youth told us in our research that what they most wanted was someone to spend time with them, to encourage them, to help them feel hope, and to help them remember that the mean behavior was not their fault. Your child can do all of these things and they are likely to help. "Standing up against bullying" - that is, telling bullying youth to stop, may lead to someone getting hurt. It is sometimes possible; yet befriending, including, and encouraging youth who are bullied is more likely to help them and more likely to be safe for your child.