

How do I know if my child is being bullied?

By Glenn Stutzky, MSW, School Safety Researcher, Consultant, and Clinical Instructor
with Michigan State University's School of Social Work

Bullying among school-aged children is the most frequently occurring form of violence in American schools. However, most adults have ignored it or failed to recognize bullying as a significant aspect of school violence. That is changing as researchers, educators, administrators, and parents are taking a closer look at bullying and its effects on children.

Bullying Myths

We all need a clear understanding of just what bullying is and what it isn't. How we define a problem determines the type of policies we write and the interventions we plan. So if we are going to deal with bullying, we need to dispel some widely believed myths.

- **Bullying is mainly a boy thing.** When they think of bullying, many people picture a large boy—mean, rough, not that smart, with few friends. Bullying is as much a "girl thing" as it is a "boy thing." Girls tend to use different tactics in their bullying. Using rumors, gossip, manipulation of friendships and social isolation, most girl bullies fly underneath the radar of adults in the school.
- **Bullying is just a developmental stage.** Many people believe that being bullied is a "rite of passage" that is part of learning that life is tough. Some even say that it can help children solve problems and "build character." Bullying is *not* a developmental stage that children go through and naturally grow out of. Some excellent long-term studies prove that children who are bullies in elementary school remain so into their adult life.
- **Bullying is no big deal.** This myth has been one of the most devastating because it results in the suffering of millions of children. Some people believe that bullying doesn't result in any "real" harm to a child—that if they "feel" hurt it is probably the result of being too "sensitive," or too "thin-skinned." Research clearly shows that children who suffer this type of abuse are affected physically, mentally, emotionally, socially, and academically. Bullied children report higher number of health related concerns, such as depression, anxiety, and insomnia. They also report loneliness, unhappiness, feelings of isolation and lower grades and test scores. In extreme cases bullying can lead to acts of homicidal revenge, targeting schools for violence, or to suicide—what I call Bullicide: death by bullying. Bullying is a big deal. There is no such thing as a small bullying incident.

What is bullying?

People define bullying differently, but most agree it includes the following aspects:

- Bullying is *repeated meditative actions* that bring *harm to an individual*.
- Also that there is an *imbalance of power* between the bully and victim.
- Bullying is a *relationship* in which one individual seeks to gain power and control over the life of another.

Bullying is all about power—the imbalance and abuse of power. The essence of bullying is not in the actions of a bully but in their intentions.

Is it normal peer conflict or is it bullying?

1. First, take a look at the issue of power. In a normal peer conflict, the parties involved are friends or good acquaintances and have the same power and status among their classmates. With bullying you have a clear imbalance of power, with one having greater social status than the other. Remember that bullying is deliberate, repeated over time, and causes serious harm to the target. Normal peer conflict happens once in a while, is not targeted, and usually doesn't result in serious harm.

(continued on back)

2. Second, look at the child's willingness to resolve the conflict. Children involved in normal peer conflict will try to resolve their differences, often with the help of others. In a bully-victim situation, the bully takes no responsibility for his or her actions, often blames the victim, and makes little or no effort to resolve the problem.

3. Next, ask the right questions to put the event into context. Bullying is simply the most subtle type of violence. When a child comes to us and says, "Frank pushed my pencil off my desk," our natural response is (while we may not say it out loud), "Why are you bothering me with this? So he pushed your pencil, pick it up, stop whining and being such a tattletale."

Rather we need to ask, "Has he done this before?"

If the answer is "yes," ask "How many times?"

If the answer is, "Everyday," then ask "Has he done other things?"

If the answer is "Yes, he has taken my folder and torn it up," then ask, "Anything else?"

You might then hear, "Yes, he spits on me when I'm on the playground."

The point is, an individual incident can seem petty and insignificant unless it is put into context. By asking the right questions and taking the time to listen, parents and teachers can often uncover a pattern of bullying behavior.

What can adults do?

Unfortunately, most children fail to talk to adults about bullying, both at school and at home. They may feel embarrassed, ashamed, guilty, or afraid that if they tell us it will make the situation worse. They have reason to fear; many adults fail to understand the severity of what is going on or what to do about it. What can we do?

1. The first step is become more informed on the issue of bullying.
2. The next is to make bullying a talkable subject in school and in the home
3. Most importantly, listen to young people, take seriously what they are telling us, put together a plan of action, and do it.

Bullying, like domestic violence of twenty years ago, thrives in darkness and silence. To stop the violence of bullying we must break the silence. Let's not wait for another tragedy for motivation. Now is the time.

If your child is being bullied, teach them these steps:

- Be assertive—look bullies in the eye and tell them to stop. Practice at home to find the words and tone of voice that sound calm and confident.
- Walk away from the situation as quickly as possible.
- Tell an authority such as a teacher, coach or other adult.
- Tell someone in the family
- If you're scared to tell an adult, bring a friend or write a note.
- If the adult doesn't listen, try telling someone else until someone listens.
- If you are afraid to tell authorities, ask someone from your family to help.

When talking to adults about bullies, have your child tell them:

- What has happened.
- How often it has happened.
- Who was involved.
- Who saw it happen.
- Where it happened and when.
- What you have done about it already.

Source: Stop Bullying Me! Citizens Against Bullying Association (CABA) of Northern Alberta.

For a list of bullying resources contact Prevention Network at 1-800-968-4968. Also call Partnership For Learning at 1-800-832-2464 and ask for bully prevention resources.

2005 PAM Organizers' Packet

This article was adapted with permission for use in the PAM Organizers' Packet.

It first appeared as the cover article in *Michigan Learning*, August, 2002.