

Bullying: How You Can Help Your Child Avoid It

For lots of kids, it's exciting to go back to school each fall. What parents often overlook is the fact that it can also be a time of anxiety for their children... a new teacher, new classroom, and confronting old anxieties...like bullies. But there are ways you, as the parent, can influence your child and his or her school to avoid bullies.

A good place to start is to assess your own thoughts on the issue of bullying. Do you think bullying is a problem that has been around forever and always will be? Do you believe that victims of bullies bring it on themselves and that they make people want to bully them? Do you think that being bullied prepares your child for the real world? Do you feel that ignoring a bully is the best way your child can make the bullying stop?

It is true that bullying has been around forever. But it is not inherent to the human condition. The fact of the matter is that hurtful behavior exists because it is condoned, reinforced and promoted. Stop and think for a moment about your own life. Do you see examples of coworkers and other peers in your life engaging in bullying behaviors, even in their adult lives?

Secondly, victims of bullying do not cause the bullying. Nobody wants to be hurt, least of all children who can't and don't know how to defend themselves or don't have a protective lining of peers. Everybody has the right to not be oppressed by anyone and as adults, we have to protect this right for all children.

Thirdly, being bullied, or being the bully does not prepare your child for success in the real world. In fact, the opposite is true. Those adults identified as bullies by age eight are four times more likely to be convicted of a felony than those not identified as a bully. Children who are victims of bullying are more likely to skip school. They tend to revert toward isolating behaviors and may enter a "cycle of despair."

Finally, ignoring a bully will not eliminate the bullying behavior. Bullies generally don't stop when ignored-but instead they continue to hurt others. Often, when people say they think ignoring bullying works, it is really a lack of know-how in dealing with the matter. Never ignore a bully.

Bullying is physical and it can also be verbal. It can be done silently and through gestures or body language. Bullying is done for social power. But bullying is an abuse of power, an act of superiority and especially, it is dehumanizing.

So how do we teach our children to avoid bullying, whether as an aggressor, victim or bystander (see *Bystanders to the Rescue*)? According to Martha Dobbins, director of training initiatives for No Disposable Kids®, a national training program that encompasses school children, educational staff, and parents, we start at home by encouraging positive peer relationships. "We teach our children two core values, which come from the No Disposable Kids® parent organization, Starr Commonwealth; that everyone has the responsibility to help and no one has the right to hurt, physically or verbally AND that your family believes in the oneness of humankind and will embrace all people as social equals, valuing their diversity."

Dobbins says the next step is for parents to encourage leaders in our schools to provide a positive group culture throughout the district. "Ask school decision makers to provide training programs that will teach school staff how to create a safe school environment," she says. "Then, insist that the school develop anti-bullying initiatives, by providing both physical and emotional security and emphasizing the right of all children to be successful."

If you'd like more information on No Disposable Kids®, and its multi-faceted training programs that help schools identify their strengths, analyze their weaknesses and utilize practical prevention-oriented

tools for creating safe and productive school environments, call (800) 315-8640 or visit the website at www.ndk.org.

For more information on Starr Commonwealth, a private, non-profit organization serving children and families for nearly a century, call (800) 837-5591 or visit the website at www.starr.org.

Bystanders to the Rescue!

Children who see bullying taking place have a more accurate picture and an understanding of what goes on in their school and how students interact with one another. Here are some ways your child can come to the rescue and help stop bullying*:

- Encourage your child and his or her friends to befriend new students since they are particularly vulnerable to bullying. Often bullies “size up” or tease new students until they prove their ability to defend themselves.
- Help your children to be more sensitive to students who are bullied, particularly those who become more withdrawn, sad, angry or seem lonely.
- Teach your child not to encourage hurtful behavior by laughing or chirping in. One way to help him or her carry this out is to have them remember that today, it may be a bad rumor about Jean; tomorrow it may be a bad rumor about me.
- Have your child talk about how it felt to them to see someone hurt and to also express how they think it must have felt to the one who was hurt. This helps minimize the “survivor guilt” a child can feel when they obey the unspoken code of silence.
- Encourage decision makers at your child’s school to cultivate a caring group culture in the school system and provide avenues for children to discuss their observations and feeling in a group setting.

*Developed from the training program of No Disposable Kids®, a powerful training program that encompasses school children as well as educational staff and parents. For more information on No Disposable Kids®, call (800) 315-8640 or visit the website at www.ndk.org