

# INSIGHTS

by Michael Grose - Australia's No 1 parenting educator



## What bullying isn't, and what to do when it happens

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Bullying is a word that's wrapped in emotion. For many people bullying is associated with **bad childhood memories**. It's been estimated that around 40% of people have experienced some type of bullying in the past.

The ghosts from the past are never far away for parents and can sometimes influence the way we react to current circumstances, including when our own children experience difficulties in their relationships inside or outside school.

Bullying is an insidious behaviour that transgresses children's natural right to feel safe and secure. It can adversely affect their learning, emotional well-being, further peer relations and their sense of self.

Bullying takes many forms and guises including, physical and emotional abuse, intimidation, harassment and exclusion.

It now has a well-publicised cyber-dimension which has moved the goalposts for many kids. In the past children could escape bullying behaviours they may have experienced by being at home. Cyber-bullying now means that kids can't escape the bully like they once could.

Bullying is not the domain of one gender. Girls bully just as much as boys but they do it in less physical ways. While boys use physical intimidation or verbal abuse to wield power, girls are more likely to use exclusion or verbal sarcasm to assert themselves.

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**Bullying is about lack of power** as one person is powerless to stop the teasing or physical abuse. Bullying is the selective, uninvited, repetitive oppression of one person by another person or group. It should not be tolerated or practised by the adults who inhabit their world.

If you think your child is being bullied then handle with care as children often don't want to admit that they are on the receiving end of bullying. Some kids keep it to their chests so it helps to be on the lookout for **warning signs** such as: items being stolen, changing the route to school and withdrawal from usual activities.

### **If your child is being bullied:**

1. **Listen to their story:** Children who are bullied need someone to believe their story. Take them seriously and avoid dismissing complaints as tell-tale. Use common sense to differentiate between bullying and more random, non-selective antisocial acts. Kids can be nasty to each other, yet this doesn't constitute

bullying.

2. **Deal with their feelings:** A child who is bullied probably feels scared, angry and sad. Boys are more likely to display anger and girls claim they feel sad. The degree of emotional intensity is an indicator of the amount of bullying. Recognise and validate their emotions. Let them talk about how they think (remember boys respond better to 'think' language) and feel. It's normal to feel sad, scared or just plain confused.
3. **Get the facts:** Get a clear picture of what happens, including who is involved, the frequency and what happens prior to any bullying. Get your child to be as specific as possible by asking good questions. An accurate picture will help you determine your next course of action.
4. **Give them coping skills:** With a clear picture you can start giving your child some help about how he or she may deal with bullying including using avoidance strategies, being more assertive and changing poor body language.
5. **Get the school involved:** Bullying is best handled when parents and teachers are involved. Some parents tell me that schools can be reluctant to become involved. From my experience, schools take bullying very seriously and go to great lengths to support and empower those on the receiving end and look for ways to change the behaviour of bullies. Approach your school through the appropriate channels, make yourself aware of your schools' anti-bullying procedures and programs, and be willing to work within these guidelines.
6. **Help build your child's support networks:** Kids need a group of friends to support them when they experience bullying so look for practical ways to broaden friendship groups.
7. **Build their self-confidence:** Provide children with systematic encouragement. Let them know through your words and treatment of them that they will get through this period.

It's worth remembering that children who experience some form of bullying often come out stronger and more resourceful because they have experienced difficulties and they know they can defeat them.

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