

Bullying



How to Respond to Your Child

All parents wonder how best to respond if their child is bullied by another or if their child is the bully. Bullying involves an individual or a group repeatedly harming another person-physically (i.e. pushing or hitting), verbally (i.e. teasing or name-calling), or socially (i.e. spreading rumors). Bullying and social aggression create a climate of disrespect and fear in schools and elsewhere that creates barriers to learning. Even if children are not being bullied themselves, they may still be significantly impacted by witnessing social aggression toward others.

What can parents do? It is important to respond directly and to validate your child's feelings, since these experiences can be extraordinarily painful. Children's feelings need to be empathized with and taken seriously. Make caring statements like:

- "I can understand that you feel angry right now."
- "I can see how hard this is for you. I'm right here until you feel better."
- "Would you like to tell me more about what you're feeling?"
- "Is there something I can do to help you feel better?"

Questioning their experience or invalidating their feelings can lead children to mistrust their own experience, judgment, and ultimately, their own perspective. Failure to respond to the cruelty of these experiences condones the bullying, teasing, and social aggression – making even less room in our classrooms and families to talk about these issues.

When dealing with bullies, parents need to step in immediately to talk with teachers and administrators, or others in positions of authority. Be sure to reinforce with the child that it is not okay that this happened. Teachers, guidance counselors and coaches need to be firm with bullies, but respectful and provide ongoing oversight of them. Situations where bullying has occurred need to be monitored regularly.

Parent groups and schools can do a lot to foster a positive environment for all children. Recognize cruelty to others and value when individuals in the community bring it to your attention. Provide children opportunities to learn the coping and interpersonal skills that are necessary for healthy friendships. Establish a group of parents who can discuss bullying concerns and work as positive agents for change within the community.

Parents have the power to help! Loving relationships with parents' help children turn away from relationships that are bad for them. Often, the most helpful and effective way to respond is to understand and support your child's feelings. This helps your child know that he or she can always count on your loving support. Your loving relationship with your child sets the foundation for your child's self-confidence and ability to make positive choices in life, including seeking out healthy friendships. Parents have a huge influence in their child's life and it is important that you recognize this!

How to support your child:

- Ask gentle, open-ended questions to help your child describe his or her experiences and express his or her feelings.
- Engage children in conversations about how to handle social struggles.
- Serve as positive role models in your family and in relationships with other adults.
- When you see bullying and teasing happen, interrupt or discourage the behavior – attend to the emotions of all involved rather than only reprimanding the perpetrator.
- Not recognizing socially aggressive acts may be interpreted as our acceptance.
- These are opportunities to illustrate alternative ways of handling conflict.
- Encourage children to identify components of healthy versus unhealthy relationships.

The Smart Love Approach was developed by Martha Heineman Pieper, Ph.D., and William J. Pieper, M.D., and is described in their book *Smart Love*. The Natalie G. Heineman Smart Love Preschool offers classes for three to six year olds, and parent and child programs for children six weeks to 36 months. Smart Love Family Services provides counseling for children and families based on the Piepers' therapeutic approach, Inner Humanism[®]. Parenting programs include private parent coaching, educational seminars (co-sponsored by the Intrapyschic Humanism Society), parent training and support programs, and publications. © 2019 Smart Love Family Services is an Illinois-based 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.

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