

#Bullymustfall – Bully-proof your child

The topic of bullying has been receiving an increased amount of media coverage over the past few years. This growing awareness has strengthened parents' resolve to protect their children from the long term and often traumatic consequences of bullying.

To help parents gain a better understanding of the role that they can play in "bully-proofing" their child, it is important to differentiate between bullying and inappropriate behaviours. Bullying is the **intentional** and **repetitive** occurrence of behaviour that is expected to cause harm to others by the use of words, physical force, social isolation and/or technology and social media. Nasty or mean behaviour on the other hand constitute thoughtless actions that may be a once-off scoff or an accidental bump. By evaluating the severity and frequency of the behaviour (whilst keeping the child's developmental phase in mind), parents are in a better position to brainstorm possible responses with their child.

Although it is important that you praise your child for reporting a bullying incident, it is even more important that your response is both understanding and proactive. Too many children are afraid of speaking up because they think that it may make the situation worse – as a parent you have to be very cognizant of their fear whilst assuring them that action still needs to be taken. You should therefore work **with** your child in helping them deal with untoward or extreme behaviours. Although self-restraint may be the furthest thing from your mind when your child tells you that someone has hurt them, it is nonetheless more conducive to the situation to remain calm. Getting angry whilst your child is telling you about the experience may cause him to shut-down since he doesn't want to upset you any further. Parents should also avoid projecting their own memories of being bullied onto the situation and rather stay focused on dealing with the one at hand. Depending on the seriousness of the situation you may also want to consider whether it constitutes an escalated response that demands you to take matters into your own hands or whether it still leaves room for a teachable moment.

Coaching your child to deal with social situations that require her to stand up for herself is the first step to "bully-proofing" them. Creating opportunities to talk about bullying and dealing with different personalities encourages them to open up to you. This conversation could include topics about the difference between being a "tattletale" and reporting an incident; the role of the victim and the bystander, as well as meanness vs bullying. Be on the look-out for articles in the media or a storyline in a television show to introduce the topic from time to time.

It is also never too early to discuss the types of verbal and non-verbal messages they can send to bullies that will help safeguard them. By roleplaying and re-enforcing assertive responses such as the effective use of eye contact, using their tone of voice and standing their ground, your children are less likely to become targets. Another useful technique is to teach them "the hand of five" – which suggests that there are five steps to dealing with a potentially bullying situation, namely 1. Avoiding the person; 2. Ignoring them; 3. Walking away; 4. Telling them to stop; 5. Telling a teacher/parent and 5. Reporting them. Your child should also have a clear understanding of the channels they can follow in reporting a bully. It may therefore be helpful

to discuss the school's anti-bullying policy with them – which is also likely to include the school's preferred way for parents to address incidents that occurred at school. Finding a trusted person to confide in at your child's school will help you to gain a better perspective of the situation and hopefully minimize the chances of retaliation.

Standing up against bullies starts long before your child reports being bullied. It starts with incentives to build their self-esteem by encouraging problem-solving behaviours, establishing open lines of communication and teaching social skills such as assertiveness. It also means that you have to heed the following words by Shannon L. Adler: *“The most important gift you can give your children is the importance of standing up to injustice. Children will remember moments spent with you. However, it isn't togetherness that creates humane parents and righteous kids. It is the example of integrity that a parent sets and the on going lessons they teach about compassion toward others throughout their lives. A good father or mother teaches their children that cruelty is not something you cause or ignore, rather it is the moment you suit up for war.”*

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