



Article for Murray's Bully Free Community Education Campaign

Why Children Do Not Report Bullying

By

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Bullying is repeated aggressive behavior (physical, verbal, written, social/relational, and electronic) that is intended to hurt someone physically and/or psychologically. Since there is often an imbalance of power it is often threatening and creates a hostile environment. Unfortunately adults in our schools only see and hear about ten percent of it and children are often reluctant to report it.

There are several reasons children may not tell an adult they are bullied. For one, children are taught very early not to “tattle tale” or to “rat” on their peers. They think telling someone they are being hurt or someone else is being hurt is wrong. When your child expresses this concern, explain that when he tattles or rats on some, he is trying to get someone into trouble. But, when he reports bullying he is trying to help someone, himself and/or others who are bullied. He is doing what he should.

Some children will not report bullying because they have seen children report it to an adult and nothing was done to prevent it or stop it. Additionally, some children have observed adults ignoring it and even non-verbally and/or verbally communicating approval of hurtful teasing. Some adults even start the cycle of mistreatment with teasing and inappropriate comments.

Other children do not report bullying because they are afraid the adults will make their situation worse. For example, sometimes when a parent of a bullied child calls the bully's parents and they defend their child, a child is teased even more, “Your mother called my mother last night. You big baby!” Sometimes when a child reports bullying the adult only half-heartedly warns the bully – almost in a joking manner. Sensing a lack of support from the adult, the bully steps up their mistreatment and the bullied child is more reluctant to report mistreatment.

Some children will not tell an adult because they are embarrassed or feel shame. Over time, sometimes bullies have convinced them that the bullying is their fault because there is something wrong with them. They are viewed as weak or abnormal in some way. Therefore, they feel defective and deserving of the mistreatment. It is true that some targets of bullying have behaviors that need to be changed, but no one deserves to be persistently mistreated. It is never right to break laws or rules to mistreat someone.

Other children will not tell their parents because they do not want them to worry about them, especially if the parents are burdened by other issues. Children need to realize it is their parent's job to worry about them. They will worry about them the rest of their lives. It is their parent's right to know what they are thinking, feeling, and experiencing.

Since a child may not report he is bullied, adults need to be alert to the following warning signs. Presence of any of these signs doesn't necessarily mean a child is being bullied, but could mean parents should pay close attention to the child's behavior discuss their interactions with others at school, especially if several of the warning signs are present.

Warning Signs a Child is Bullied

- Has difficulty concentrating and is easily distracted
- Wants to take a different route to school or different mode of transportation to school
- Has a sudden lack of interest in school-sponsored and/or community activities/events
- Has a sudden drop in grades
- Doesn't want to go anywhere on weekends
- Seems happy on weekends, but unhappy and preoccupied/tense Sunday night
- Uses "victim" body language—hunches shoulders, hangs head, won't look people in the eye, and backs off from others
- Suddenly prefers the company of adults over peers
- Has frequent illnesses (i.e., headaches, stomachaches, pains) or fakes illness
- Suffers from fatigue
- Has nightmares and insomnia
- Comes home with unexplainable scratches and bruises
- Suddenly stammers or stutters
- Has a change in eating patterns
- Seems overly concerned about personal safety; spends a lot of time and effort thinking/worrying about getting safely to and from school, to from areas in the school, and to and from community events
- Talks about avoiding certain areas of the school and/or community
- Carries a protection device such as a knife, box opener, fork, gun, etc.
- Frequently asks for extra money (supposedly for lunch, school supplies, etc.) and can't explain how money was spent
- Possessions often "lost," damaged, or destroyed without an explanation
- Has a sudden change in behavior (bed-wetting, nail-biting, tics, anger, withdrawal, disrespect, overly critical of herself, etc.)
- Cries easily and/or often, becomes emotionally distraught, and has extreme mood swings
- Blames herself for problems/difficulties
- Consistently talks about being made fun of, laughed at, picked on, teased, put down, or pushed around
- Talks about being threatened, kicked, hit, and other attacks deserving your immediate attention
- Talks about peers telling lies about them, or gossiping about them, or excluding them from a group
- Talks about not being able to stand up for himself

- Talks about dropping out of school
- Suddenly starts bullying his peers or siblings
- Becomes overly aggressive, rebellious, and unreasonable
- Has a sudden lack of respect for authority figures (*Note: May occur because those in authority have not prevented the bullying.*)
- Seeks the wrong friends and goes with them to the wrong places
- Talks about forming or joining a cult, gang, alcohol, drug, or hate group
- Has a sudden interest in violent movies, music, and video games
- Talks about running away
- Talks about feeling depressed
- Sexually active in order to gain attention, love, and peer acceptance
- Talks about or attempts suicide

When you see any of these warning signs in a child, you need to pay attention to what is happening in their life, get closer to the child, and be ready to step up your involvement. Keep in mind that some of these signs may be evident when a child is not being bullied. If you see a number of these signs over time or you see signs that the child is being hurt physically or psychologically, you should immediately take steps to protect them and get the bullying stopped.

Perhaps as you read this article, your heart was struck with fear. That is a normal response of any individual with a good heart and who loves children. The good news is that there is much you can do. In the next article of this series, I discuss what parent/guardians should do when a child is bullied.

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