



Article for Murray's Bully Free Community Education Campaign

When Your Child Bullies (Part I)

By

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In the last article of this series, I discussed the warning signs that might indicate your child is bullying others or has potential to bully others. This article is the first of three that will discuss what to do when your child persistently mistreats others. Some of the tips discussed are also preventive, so all parents/guardians need to read this article.

The good news is that we know how to help children who mistreat others and we know how to prevent much of their behavior. However, aggression in some children can be a very stable trait and continue into the adult years.

So, what can you do as a parent/guardian to help your child who mistreats others?

- First, be careful about labeling your child a "bully." They may seek to prove you are right and behave like bullies.
- You may or may not have observed bullying behavior in your child. Bullies often do not mistreat others when adults are present. This is especially characteristic of girls who bully. Therefore, be thankful you know about the bullying and take the problem seriously. Don't ignore it and don't deny that your child is mistreating others. Avoid feeling defensive. When someone expresses disapproval of your child's behavior, do not see it as an attack on your parenting practices. Even the best of parents/guardians can't be perfect and children aren't perfect. Parenting is one of the most difficult jobs on this earth. Children are complex beings who are always exploring the limits of behavior, especially when parents aren't around. By honestly facing the facts, you will be increasing the likelihood that your child will be happy and able to maintain positive relationships.
- Frequently discuss with your child how others are treated at school and in other community locations. The more time you spend do this, the easier it will become for your child to talk about it. In addition, always compliment your child for her willingness to share information with you, even information that may disappoint you.
- Try to find out why your child is mistreating others. Once you discover the causes, you can apply the appropriate corrective strategies. You will want to involve your child in this journey to discover reasons for her behavior. However, keep in mind that most children who bully will minimize or deny wrongdoing. Don't accept such excuses as "It was all in fun." or "She brings it on herself." There should not be anything entertaining about

belittling or degrading someone. No one deserves to be bullied, not even those who provoke your child or whom your child dislikes. The Golden Rule doesn't say treat others the way you want to be treated only if they don't irritate you or if you like them. The reasons children bully are too numerous to discuss here. Some of the most common reasons are: (1) to have power and control because they have seen it rewarded or have been reward; (2) to hurt; (3) to express feelings of anger, loneliness, and so on; (4) for the fun of it; (5) jealousy; (6) they feel they are better than others; (7) they may be imitating the behavior of adults around them; (8) they are depressed and angry; and/or (9) they are victims of bullying. Questions you should ask yourself are:

- What is happening right before my child misbehaves that might be triggering her behavior?
- What happens immediately after my child misbehaves that might be encouraging her to continue the behavior?
- Is my child acting out of anger?
- Does my child misbehave to get attention?
- Is my child's behavior motivated by self-centeredness or jealousy?
- Does my child lack self-control?
- Is my child testing my limits with her inappropriate behavior?
- Does my child lack empathy and sensitivity toward the feelings of others?
- Is my child watching too much violence in movies and video games?
- Are there any patterns to her behavior (people she's with, times, days, places, and so on)?
- Is my child imitating me or someone else at home?
- Is my child mistreated at home and therefore taking her anger out on others at school?
- Have we taught our child the Golden Rule? Have we made it a conviction in her life?
- Have we helped her develop empathy for others?
- Have we helped her develop self-control by consistently setting limits on her behavior?
- Have we consistently applied negative corrective consequences for inappropriate behavior?
- Have we been too critical?
- Have we praised and rewarded her for appropriate behavior?
- Have we taught her how to express her feelings appropriately?
- Have we taught her not to be prejudiced and to respect all people as humans of value?
- Ask your child if there is anything that is making her upset or angry or sad. Ask her if she feels that these things are making her mistreat others. If your child is young, she may be better able to express herself through drawing or through play. For example, you may notice that when she is "playing school" with her dolls, she seems to use a lot of angry words or creates angry interactions.
- When the time seems right, ask your child about the bullying incident to find out what occurred. Avoid making "you" statements. When you start statements with "you," your child may feel she is being attacked. Be sure to listen to your child's description of what happened, without interrupting. Listen to what your child says about her actions and the actions of the victim(s). Seek answers to the following questions:
 - Who was involved?
 - What was said and done by your child and others?

- What happened or usually happens immediately before the bullying occurs?
- Who were the bystanders, and what did they say and do?
- When did or does the bullying occur?
- Where did or does it happen?
- Was there any adult supervision? If so, who were they?
- Are there video cameras in the area recording activities?
- What happened or usually happens after the bullying event?
- Who has been told about the bullying and what have they done (if anything)?
- How long has this been occurring?

Avoid having a knee-jerk reaction to your child's answers to your questions. After listening, ask additional questions to fill in the gaps, but don't interrogate your child. Don't overload your child emotionally by asking too many questions at once. During the process of listening to your child, you may discover why she is mistreating others. If not, wait until you think the time is right to ask her why she thinks the bullying happens. If you ask this question too soon, she may not share everything with you or may not tell the truth. It is important to have the facts about what has happened. Sometimes children leave out critical information that affects our understanding of what occurred. Keep in mind that the "Why did you . . .?" line of questions rarely works with anyone, even adults. If the conversation gets heated, call for a break so that everyone can calm down. It will be easier to discuss it with your child when everyone is calmer.

- Help your child see errors in her thinking. For example, your child may blame everything on the bullied child and be blind to her own quick temper, lack of self-control, disrespect, and lack of sensitivity. Help your child examine the facts as well as her perceptions of what happened.

We will continue our discussion of this topic in the next article.

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