

## Bullying: Information for parents from [www.DEST.GOV.AU](http://www.DEST.GOV.AU)

Dear Parent

Bullying among children at school is a serious matter. In Australia, nearly one child in five between ages 8 and 17 is bullied weekly, according to the best research on the subject.

Bullying has always happened, and there is nothing to suggest it is better or worse now than in the past.

However, just because it has always happened is not a reason to let it go on. Education departments, parent groups, school communities, principals and teachers are all working on ways to cut it out.

Bullying is not a normal part of growing up and it is not part of any 'toughening process' that a child has to go through. It can seriously harm a child physically and emotionally.

You, as a parent, are very important in helping your child. Children who are being bullied usually turn first to their parents for help, but often they put up with a lot of hurt before they tell anybody.

This brochure is designed to help you see the tell-tale signs if your child is being bullied, and to give you some ideas about what to do if it happens.

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**Minister for Education, Science and Training**

\* Bullying in Schools and What To Do About it (1996). Rigby, K. Australian Council for Educational Research, 19 Prospect Hill Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124.

### On this page

- [What is bullying?](#)
- [What are the signs?](#)
- [What can you do?](#)
- [Helping your child cope](#)
- [Where to get more information](#)

### What is bullying?

Bullying is repeated incidents involving:

- a bigger, stronger or more powerful child on a smaller or weaker child, or
- a group of children on a single child.

These might be:

- Verbal: the child is called names, put down, threatened.
- Physical: the child is hit, tripped, poked, kicked, or belongings are stolen or damaged.
  - Social: the child is left out, ignored, or rumours are spread.
  - Psychological: the child is stalked or given dirty looks.

Bullying is different from ordinary teasing, rough-and-tumble or schoolyard fights. What makes it different is that the incidents are ongoing, and there is usually an imbalance of size, strength and power between the children involved.

The bully might have power not only because he or she is bigger and stronger, but because other children side with the bully often to protect themselves.

Research shows:

- Boys are more often bullied by a single individual; girls more often by groups. There is not much difference between the number of boys and girls who suffer from bullying.
- The size of the school, or whether the school is single-sex or co-educational or government or non-government, makes no significant difference to the amount of bullying that goes on.
- Children are most often bullied when they are in their first few years of primary school and again in their first few years of secondary school.

### **What are the signs?**

Bullying may be very hard to see. Victims may already be having trouble getting on with other children or with teachers. They are often picked on by bullies for this reason.

Bullying usually happens out of sight, away from teachers or other adults. The people who are most likely to know what is going on are other children.

Children who are being bullied often don't like to tell anyone because they feel weak or ashamed, or are frightened that it will only make things worse. They also feel it is wrong to 'dob in' or tell tales on other children.

If they tell anyone, it is most likely they will tell their parents – usually their mother – or their friends before they will tell a teacher.

**Some tell-tale signs are:**

- bruises, scratches or cuts that your child can't really explain;
- torn or damaged clothing;
- damaged or missing belongings;
- headaches, stomach aches and other pains that the child can't put a finger on;
- unexplained tears or depression;
- unusual outbursts of temper;
- not wanting to go to school;
- not wanting to play with friends;
- wanting changes in the way he or she travels to and from school;
- school work falls off in quality; and
- wanting extra money without giving a reason.

There are things you can do to help your child if he or she is being bullied.

### **What can you do?**

By the time children tell their parents they are being bullied, they may have tried everything they can to deal with it on their own. Telling parents is often a very hard step to take.

Children need to:

- feel believed and listened to;
- develop trust in how parents will handle it;
- talk more openly about what has happened;
- gain some control over what is happening;
- learn things they can do to protect themselves; and
- regain self-confidence.

It helps if parents:

- involve the children in making decisions about what to do;
- listen to what children say;
- tell them they understand.

It does not help if parents:

- get angry or upset;
- feel guilty or ashamed;
- make the children think it is not important;
- blame the children;
- blame the school;
- accuse people without knowing the facts;
- look for scapegoats;
- demand to know all the details at once; and
- look for easy solutions.

Many parents do get angry, quite understandably, and want to go to the school and sort it out NOW!

This might not be the best first step. For one thing, the child will almost certainly be reluctant to involve the school straight away because something they would rather keep quiet could be spread around. The child might also feel at risk of the bully taking revenge.

As a first step, it is usually best to:

- encourage the child to talk through it as far as he or she wants to, so you get the basic facts straight;
- try to keep an open mind, remembering you are hearing one part of the story only;
- ask questions gently;
- help the child reflect on what has been done so far; and
- help the child work out what might be done.

It is important to find out:

- what happened;
- who was involved;
- where;
- when; and
- did anybody else see it, and, if so, who?

It is a good idea to write down what you find out.

There are some important next steps to consider:

- Never try to sort out the bullies yourself. This rarely works and often makes matters worse.
- Once you have a clear picture of the situation, and some idea about how you and the child would prefer to handle it, contact the school.
- Make an appointment to see the principal or the class teacher or whoever you think would be best to see. Don't barge in. Sometimes, the school welfare officer or chaplain might be a good person to start with.
- Present the information you have as calmly as possible.
- Do it in a way that makes it clear to the school that you see yourself and the school as partners in trying to fix this problem. Tell the school what you and your child would like to do, and ask them for ideas as well.
- Ask about the school's policy on bullying.
  - Most, if not all, schools have a policy on responding to bullying. Your school will be as concerned as you to deal with the problem.
  - The school will need time to investigate the matter and to talk to teachers, other students and even other parents if that's the best thing to do. Remember the school staff may not have seen the incidents and it is not always easy to judge if it is bullying or just a bit of harmless fun which has gone too far.
- Make a note of what the school says it will do, and arrange to make a follow-up call to see what has been done.

### **Helping your child cope**

If the bullying is happening on the way to or from school, see if your child can go a different way or join up with other children. This might help while things are being sorted out. It might also be possible for your child to be paired with another more robust child for the time being too. The school could help with this.

If your child finds it hard to make friends, encourage them to make a special effort. One good friend can make a big difference.

Invite school friends home to strengthen the relationships begun at school.

Talk to your child about some of the things that have happened, and discuss some ways of dealing with them, such as:

- pretending not to hear hurtful comments;
- using silent 'self-talk' such as, 'That's their problem, not mine', or, 'I'm OK', to reinforce self-confidence;
- developing greater self-assertiveness, so as to be able to face the bully without becoming scared, upset, abusive or violent; and
- believing that it is OK to tell someone when bullying happens – that it is not 'dobbing'.

It is important that children understand the difference between 'dobbing in' and reporting something that is serious. Bullying is serious. People get hurt, and some are harmed for a long time. Children have said that being bullied is almost the worst thing that can happen to them.

### **Where to get more information**

In addition to visiting your school, or the schools you are interested in, there are several places you can go for more information, including:

- the school council or board members,
- the school-based parent organisations,
- your State or Territory Department of Education, Catholic Education Office or Independent Schools' Association.

If you would like a printed copy please contact:

Drug Education and Student Wellbeing Section  
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