

Playground Bullying

What's a parent to do?

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"Boys will be boys." "Girls have to learn to deal with rumors and gossip — it's just part of growing up." "He has to learn to stand up for himself." "She should learn to just walk away." "He needs to fight back and not be a wimp."

Do these sentiments sound familiar? They seem to be popular notions about bullying, but do they make sense? Research suggests that none of these approaches is very helpful for promoting the development of positive mental health, and some may be harmful. What is the right thing to do when your child is being bullied?

1 Know what bullying is. A single fight between two peers may not be bullying. Bullying involves an intent by the bully to harm someone who is in some way less powerful than the bully. The imbalance of power could arise when a bully is physically stronger, more popular or just older and more clever than the victim. The harm that is done could be physical, verbal or social. When that harm is coupled with the threat of future aggression because it occurs repeatedly, then we have a case of bullying.

2 Take proactive steps to prevent it. Monitor your child's friendships, helping him find or make friends if necessary by setting up play dates or other activities. Volunteer your yard as the place neighborhood kids can get together to play. Have a conversation with your child every day. Make sure your child knows she can come to you and tell you anything that is troubling without fear of your judgment.

3 Recognize the signs of bullying and ask about it. Even in the most warm, open families, some children will not feel comfortable coming to a parent with news of being bullied. Look for other signs, such as sudden unexplained changes in behavior (losing interest in school, sleep problems, aches and

pains, a drop in grades, social withdrawal). When asking your child about bullying incidents, rather than being direct, try asking if there are any bullies in his class, what they do and whom they pick on.

4 Listen. Instead of asking yes/no questions, say things such as, "Tell me more about that." Resist the urge to offer a solution immediately.

5 Validate and show support. Tell your child her emotions, whether anger or fear or embarrassment, are all OK to have. Emphasize that the bullying is not her fault and she did not deserve to be victimized. Don't try to minimize it or ask what the child did to bring on the abuse.

6 Create a plan together. The plan should not be to fight back, ignore it, silently walk away from it or avoid being around the bully. None of these approaches have been found to reduce bullying, and several actually increase the victim's own adjustment problems. Telling a teacher or principal about it should be a part of the plan. Coach your child on how to respond assertively, not passively and not aggressively. An assertive response tells bullies in direct terms that what they are doing is not working: "That's not going to work on me. I'm outta here."

7 Learn more. Ask your child's teacher, school counselor and principal what they are doing to prevent and respond to bullying. Read a book such as Barbara Coloroso's "The Bully, the Bullied, and the Bystander."

A black and white photograph of a person's legs in denim jeans and sneakers, sitting on a white plastic bag. The image is framed by a thick black border.

Lies:

You can't be beside your child at all times to protect her, nor should you be. But you can help your child develop the skills needed to prevent and withstand bullying.