


# How to Know if Your Child Is Being Bullied

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 [childmind.org/article/how-to-know-if-your-child-is-being-bullied](https://www.childmind.org/article/how-to-know-if-your-child-is-being-bullied)

What are the signs of bullying? When does the teasing become torment?

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We are all aware that being bullied as a child is not a trivial thing. It not only causes acute suffering, it has been linked to long-term emotional problems, and children who lack strong parental support seem to encounter the most lasting damage.

But we also know that it's part of growing up to have painful or embarrassing social experiences, and that learning to rebound from these interactions is an important skill for kids to learn.

If our kids complain about bullying, we want to take their complaints very seriously, give them the support and tools to handle it, and intervene on their behalf when needed. But we don't want to teach them that every negative experience with their peers is a form of bullying.

Kids I'm working with will say, "I was being bullied." And when they describe what happened, sometimes it was really just teasing. Maybe someone was giving them a hard time and it was difficult to deal with. But not every incident of meanness, rejection or hostility is bullying.

## When does teasing or harrassment become bullying?

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- **When there's a power difference:** Bullying is done by someone in a position of power—it might be in the form of physical strength, or popularity—and it is directed at someone who is perceived as less powerful.
- **When there's intention to cause harm.** Bullying can take the form of a physical or verbal attack, making threats, spreading rumors, or excluding someone from a group on purpose. It's not inadvertent.
- **When it's repeated:** Bullying behavior is an ongoing pattern of hostile or abusive actions directed at the child who is the target.
- **When it does cause harm:** Behavior becomes bullying when it impairs the well-being or functioning of the child who's targeted.

If your child reports to you that she has been bullied, my advice is to take it very seriously, because, if nothing else, it really hurt her feelings and she's struggling with it. You want to listen and express empathy without treating her as if she's fragile. You want to model a confident *we-can-solve-this-problem* attitude.

What you don't want to do is express shock and anger and vow immediately to go to the school, or talk to the child's parents. Tempering your response encourages your child to open up.

## Before giving bullying advice, collect the facts

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Your first job is to try to get a detailed picture of what happened. It's hard when you're a parent because your stomach flips, your protective impulses kick in, and you just want to punish the kid that's hurt your child's feelings. But it's more effective to be like a reporter: "Okay, who was there? What was going on? What was said, exactly? What did you do? How did you feel?"

You're gathering all the data, the evidence of what happened. The details are important, not for the purpose of invalidating your child's feelings or minimizing what happened—"Well, that doesn't sound like it was really *that* bad"—but just so that you can tailor your strategies better.

Part of the goal of asking questions is to get a sense of the social hierarchy.

You might say, "Was it a big group of kids? Were lots of kids surrounding him when he said that to you? Is he a really popular kid? What were the other kids doing?" And it also gives you a sense of how embarrassing it might have been.

## Strategies on how to handle bullying

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Once you've asked your child exactly what happened, here's some bullying advice to consider:

- **Practice assertiveness.** That means showing confidence both verbally and nonverbally. Suggest that your child try standing tall and saying, "Don't talk to me like that!" It can help to script some things your child could say and role-play—you do it first, and then let your child try it out.
- **Find allies.** Suggest that your child talk to his friends about ways they might handle it and ways they've handled stuff that's similar. They may have some good ideas and it will make him feel less isolated.
- **Get involved.** Activities that your child is good at, that he enjoys, are very protective. Because if he's doing something he enjoys, and he's thriving, he's not going to care as much. The confidence he feels when he's in his element will carry over to environments in which he's less secure.

- **Enlist adults.** If your child needs an adult advocate, consider contacting a teacher or school administrator. First, try to get your child's permission, telling her, "I really want to call the teacher and ask him to keep an eye on it." If she's adamantly against it, I would keep the option open, saying, "I'm not going to now, and I will tell you before I do." So there's *some* perception of control. But you're also teaching her a lesson: "Listen, yes it might be embarrassing, but you need to stand up for yourself. And self-advocacy is more important."
- **Monitor incidents.** One incident isn't necessarily bullying, but you want to notice if it's becoming a pattern. Tell your child to let you know if it happens again. You might say, "I want to stay on top of this and make sure we solve it."
- **Be prepared.** It's important to talk about bullying even if it hasn't happened, so that if it does your child is better equipped to recognize it and more comfortable telling you about it.
- **Form a partnership with the teacher.** Let your child's teacher know that you hope she'll touch base with you whenever there's something concerning, and that you hope she doesn't mind if you do the same.