

Tips to Help the Bullying Bystander

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By Dr. Amanda Nickerson and Jenny Paradise
Bullying Special Edition Contributor

Bullying incidents from around the country have dominated news headlines in recent years, sparking a national debate about how to empower children victimized by bullies, and how to help kids who bully change their aggressive ways. But there's one person missing that appears in a whopping 60 to 80 percent of bullying situations: the bystander (1, 12).

Despite not being the primary target, a bystander who witnesses one child bully another still suffers negative effects from the incident, such as anxiety, depression, guilt, or helplessness (12). Even if your child hasn't bullied others or been the target of bullying, it's likely she'll witness a bullying incident—and it's up to you to give her the skills she needs to recognize that it's wrong, decide to help and do so in a way that keeps both your kid and the child being victimized safe. "Children need to understand what bullying is and that different situations may require different kind of actions," explains Dr. Amanda Nickerson, Director of the Dr. Jean M. Alberti Center for the Prevention of Bullying Abuse and School Violence at the University at Buffalo, SUNY. "And the most effective action may not be directly confronting the person bullying."

When witnessing an incident, your child may experience the "bystander effect," described by social psychologists as a diffusion of responsibility—or the idea that when surrounded by people, one person is less likely to take responsibility during a negative situation. The bystander intervention model, outlined by Latané and Darley in 1970, outlines five things a person considers before intervening:

- Notice the event.
- Interpret the situation as one that requires help.
- Accept responsibility for intervening.
- Know how to help.
- Implement the decision made about intervening.

Research has shown there are multiple reasons your child may not stand up to a child that's picking on a fellow classmate. She may think the harassment is none of her business (11), fear retaliation by the bully or other peers (6, 10, 11), feel helpless to stop the situation (6, 10, 11), or may simply think that the child being targeted deserves how the bully is treating him (6).

As a parent, you can help your kid to take a stand against a bully at school or online. Empower her with these tips:

- **Start early.** Research suggests that the more open, supportive and trustworthy relationships between parent and child are critical (9). In fact, children who defend their peers that are bullied are more likely to describe having an open, supportive relationship with their mothers (8). Establish a routine of talking about her school day in detail, avoiding yes or no questions. The more comfortable she is chatting with you, the more likely she'll share if she witnesses bullying.
- **Bullying 101.** Help your child recognize the difference between bullying, playful teasing and everyday conflicts. Bullying, by definition, is the repeated harassment of one child by a more "powerful" peer. Power can be anything from physical dominance to popularity.

- **Clear message.** Talk about bullying and relationships frequently with your kid, and include your expectations for how she treats other children. Give explicit advice—instead of simply saying, “be nice,” encourage her to eat lunch with and organize recess games with everyone.
- **Avoid joining in.** Many witnesses opt to avoid becoming the group’s next target by chiming in with the ridicule. Convey that while you expect your child to be brave enough not to cave to peer pressure, that doesn’t mean she has to confront someone who’s being physically aggressive or violent. Instead, focus on other things she can do (see suggestions under “Do something”).
- **Do something.** Simply standing by doesn’t help anyone, so tell your kid to step in if she witnesses bullying. Studies have revealed that when bystanders intervene, bullying behavior stops more than half of the time (2). Getting involved doesn’t have to mean signing your child up for boxing lessons. Instead, teach her to tell a trusted adult, say something to the bully (if she feels safe doing so), band together with a group of others to say it is no OK, recruit other children for a playground game to divert attention away from the incident, or reach out to the child who has been bullied.
- **Role-play.** Brainstorm different bullying situations with your child, and help her act them out.
- **Cyber awareness.** Your child doesn’t have to be physically present to be effected by bullying. If she sees a classmate being targeted online, encourage her to save the message and report the cyberbullying to an adult. Many social media sites have mechanisms for reporting abuse, so if your kid’s a Facebook fanatic, help her become familiar with how to report harassment on the world wide web.
- **Inspire empathy.** Bullying often has devastating consequences for victimized children later in life, so teach your child to ask the child targeted if he’s okay, offer to spend time together, or to simply say sorry that it happened.

Taking a stand against a bully—especially one with social or physical clout—is never easy. Help by giving your child the knowledge, skills, and support she needs to appropriately intervene when she witnesses bullying behavior. Your kid will not only learn tolerance and respect in the process, she’ll become part of a larger solution to the bullying epidemic today—and quite possibly inspire her peers to take action too.

This article is based on the following research:

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