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Protecting God's Children For Parents

How to Determine Whether Your Child is Being Bullied

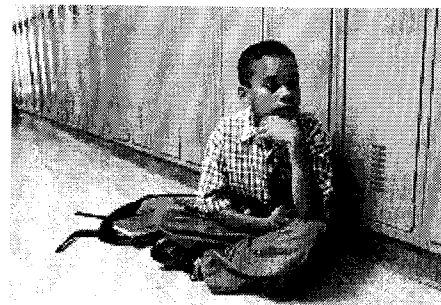
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When a child becomes a victim of bullying, his or her first instinct is usually to try to handle the situation *alone*. A youngster may rightfully fear retaliation if they tell an adult, or may not want to be known as a "snitch" who cannot handle his or her own problems. Also if a child is very young, he or she may not be able to communicate their experiences in a way that you as a parent can understand.

Peter Sheras, author of, *Your child: Bully or Victim—Understanding and Ending School Yard Tyranny* has listed a number of signs to look for if you suspect your child is being victimized. These warning signs may include:



- Acts reluctant to go to school.
- Complains of feeling sick; frequently visits the school nurse's office.
- Comes home hungry (because bullies have stolen his or her lunch money).
- Often arrives at home with possessions missing.
- Experiences frequent nightmares, bedwetting, or insomnia.
- Refuses to leave the house.
- Waits to get home to use the restroom.
- Acts nervous when certain children approach.
- Shows increased anger with no obvious cause.
- Shows a sudden drop in grades.
- Makes comments about feeling lonely.
- Has difficulty making friends.

- Acts reluctant to defend himself when teased or criticized by others.
- Has physical marks—such as bruises or cuts—which may have been inflicted by others.

If your child exhibits some of these signs, he or she needs your help. The best way you can provide the needed assistance is by figuring out exactly what is happening. The way to approach this problem is to ask your child's teachers, bus driver, neighbors, other adults, and children in the neighborhood if they have noticed any incidents involving your child. Ask your child's teachers if anyone has been disciplined for harassing your son or daughter. Try to determine if your child is being teased or taunted *on the way to school* or *on the school bus*. You may ask teachers or other school children if they see your child sitting alone in the lunchroom or playing alone during recess.

You need to be sensitive to the effects of your questioning on others. Use an information-gathering approach and avoid overreacting or blaming others as you sort through the details. Peter Sheras recommends that you keep the subject matter general when talking to your child's peers. For example, you may ask, "Does Roger seem to get along okay with other kids at school?" Also avoid naming any culprits who may hear about your questioning and retaliate against your child.

Another way to determine if your child is being bullied is to observe your child interacting with other children. When you watch your child in a social context (e.g., at soccer practice, at a scout meeting, playing on the street) see if he or she behaves in a way that makes your son or daughter vulnerable to bullying. When "picked on," some children don't know how to defend themselves—through their actions or words. Therefore, they are likely targets of bullies.

If you suspect that your child is being victimized, the best thing to do is to talk about it with him or her. Use specific questions to get to the truth. Your questions will depend on the age of your child. Here are a few questions that may be helpful:

- How has the ride on the bus been lately? Who do you sit with? Are you ever scared on the bus?
- I noticed that you don't want to go to school. When I was your age I felt that way too because other kids pushed me around or teased me. Has that ever happened to you?
- Do you ever get in fights at school?
- Are there some places on the school grounds that you do not want to go to because there are bullies there?
- Have other kids ever teased you or made fun of you? What do they say?
- Have you ever felt so mad that you wanted to hurt somebody at school?
- Have other kids at school ever called you bad names? If so, what do you do when this happens?

When discussing the issue of bullying with your child, let your son or daughter know that you are in their corner, and that you will help them find a way to handle a very troublesome situation. It is imperative that you just *listen* and not try to come up with all the answers. In order to maintain open lines of communication, it is most important not to become judgmental or critical. Knowing that your child is being bullied can bring up all kinds of painful feelings and, consequently, it is easy to get *too* emotional.

Prior to starting a conversation with your child about this issue, remind yourself to "Listen, listen, listen." If you find yourself getting too upset or critical, or wanting to provide *the* solution during the conversation, again remind yourself to simply listen and provide support while reassuring your child that the two of you will get through this together.

In my practice I have counseled a number of children—both males and females—who have been bullied and tormented at school. Most often, school personnel are unaware that this is occurring. This is consistent with a recent study conducted by Dorothy Espelage in several midwestern schools. She found that teachers were only able to identify 10 percent of bullying victims and that classmates were equally or less accurate than teachers in determining which children were victimized. Most often the energy of the staff—when they do notice and react—gets focused on the bully, and the victim suffers alone.

Because teachers are often not aware when a child is being bullied, it becomes the responsibility of the parents to determine if their child is being victimized. If you suspect your child is being bullied, investigate the circumstances, and *listen* to your child with an open and non-judgmental attitude. It may take time, patience, and persistence to get your child to open up to you.

If you discover that your child is being bullied, there is some good news. With appropriate interventions and training, a child can learn empowerment strategies and no longer be a victim.

