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BULLYING IN THE ELEMENTARY YEARS

Early childhood is a vulnerable period for many young children because it can be the first time they are with other kids their own age and they are still learning to how make friends. These children may not be mature enough to “use their words” and they don’t always understand the consequences of aggressive behavior. Still, the main reason children misbehave in the elementary years is because it works; it tends to get them what they want. Young victims, however, may not be able to verbalize what is happening if they are being bullied at school.

According to SAMHSA, signs indicating that an elementary school student may be a victim of bullying:

- Student has continued and excessive withdrawal or depressed mood.
- Student refuses to engage even after repeated attempts to involve him/her.
- Student has regressive and/or anxious behaviors over an extended period of time.

Power and popularity for boys is commonly based on being tough, confident and/or athletic. For girls, it is mainly her looks that will determine her social status. In addition, this is when parents and teachers first see the behavioral patterns of girls excluding, manipulating and spreading rumors. According to a study published in *Child Development* by Dr. James Snyder, Wichita State University, kindergarten students verbally and physically harass each other once every three to six months. When bullying starts at such a young age, it is harder for children to overcome once they are older. We need to teach even young children what bullying is and why it is unacceptable.

What you can teach elementary-age children about bullying:

- **The bully’s goal is isolation.** Bullying isn’t just physical aggression; it is often exclusion. It may also show up as constantly making fun of another child or not allowing him/her to join a group of friends.
- **The bully’s power is secrecy.** When a victim or bystander keeps the bullying a secret, it makes the situation worse. Encourage children to break the silence and let them know that adults will protect their privacy.
- **Even very young victims of bullying can learn to confront aggression.** Studies show that more confident children are less likely to be victims. Parents can help increase self-confidence through role-playing, behavior training and classes such as gymnastics, theater and karate.

WHAT PARENTS CAN DO

Parents are a vital part of a school's efforts to create a safe and healthy learning environment. Parents can help in the anti-bullying movement by following these suggestions:

- Set expectations for your child's behavior, in and out of school.
- Provide a trusting and loving environment at home.
- Give your child positive, supportive feedback.
- Monitor your own behavior and demonstrate assertiveness (not aggression) and kindness at home. Children mimic their parents' behavior.
- Teach your children healthy conflict-resolution behavior.
- Show empathy toward your child and people you encounter.
- Give your child non-violent suggestions about how to deal with peers.
- Teach your children how they can stop or try to stop bullying when they witness it. Emphasize your child's safety; encourage him/her to confide in a trusted adult.
- Stay involved in your child's school life by checking homework, meeting teachers, reading with your child, and attending school functions.
- Create a network of other adults, parents and students and stay informed of school safety, anti-bullying programs and other school issues.
- Teach your child the social skills he/she needs to navigate school and social situations. Teach your children to be respectful of people who are different from them.
- Show your children the difference between being assertive and aggressive. Allow your child to practice being assertive with you.
- Be aware of bullying that can occur outside of school; for example, in scouting troops, athletic teams, music and theater programs, and other activities.
- Talk to your child about your own experiences with bullying; listen to his/her concerns.
- If your child is a victim of bullying, you may want to talk with a professional healthcare provider. Note that confronting the bully, his/her parents or the school on your child's behalf is not always the best solution.

"WORRYING ABOUT NOT FITTING IN, OR ABOUT WHETHER KIDS ARE GOING TO MAKE FUN OF YOU OR TEASE YOU OR INTIMIDATE YOU OR HARASS YOU PHYSICALLY... THAT'S A MAJOR DIFFICULTY AND A STRESSOR THAT KIDS CARRY AROUND."

SANDRA GRAHAM, PH.D., DEVELOPMENTAL SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGIST
