

Problem Behaviors

A Parent's Guide by SchwabLearning.org





Problem Behavior: A Parent's Guide by SchwabLearning.org

Whether you and your child are just starting out on the LD journey, or you've hit a new roadblock, our E-ssential Guide to Problem Behavior will help you understand and manage your child's most challenging behaviors. This collection includes articles by experts in the field — all written especially for SchwabLearning.org. You'll also find a list of suggested resources on this topic.

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A Parent's Guide to Problem Behavior

Dealing with Your Child's Frustrating Behavior

Are there times when your child seems to willfully defy you? Do you receive frequent notes or phone calls from school about those same behaviors? Out of frustration, do you find yourself raising your voice or saying things you later regret?

Understanding Your Child's Behavior

Behavior is a way of communicating with others. It can be aimed at getting something, such as your attention or a snack. You may have experienced this when you're talking on the phone and your child just has to speak to you. Behavior may also be designed to help him escape doing something that's really hard or would keep him from having fun. You may have noticed this when you ask him to do his chores, but he'd rather play computer games.

As a parent, you may think you understand what your child's behavior is telling you. But even though you know him well, there will be times when the message isn't clear.

Strategies for Managing Frustrating Behavior

- **Following Directions**

If your child doesn't follow directions, it's easy to believe he's being stubborn or ignoring you on purpose. But his behavior may be covering up problems remembering or understanding directions. Perhaps you're talking too much — giving him more than he can handle verbally.

Next time, see if these strategies help him:

- o Get his attention and eye contact before giving directions.
- o Show him what you want him to do.
- o Make a picture chart or list to serve as a reminder. Ask him to explain directions or show you what's he's supposed to do before he gets started.
- o Reduce the amount of talking (lecturing) you do to him.

- **Tackling Homework**

If your child doesn't start homework until the last minute, you may think he's being lazy or defiant. But maybe he doesn't know how to get started. Perhaps he has problems with the concept of time or can't decide when his work is good enough. Some kids think the "due date" is the day they're supposed to "do" the project.

These ideas may help to make homework time a little less frustrating:

- o Have him set a goal for quality and amount to do on an assignment before he begins.



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- o Get him started on his homework to make sure he understands what's expected.
- o Set a timer for a certain amount of time to help him get a sense of how long things take.
- o Teach him to use a daily, weekly, or monthly planner so he can plan assignments and their due dates.
- o Help him break long term assignments into smaller parts so he has less to do at deadline time.

- **Sitting Still**

If your child just can't seem to sit still to get anything done, it's easy to believe he's just being difficult. But he may physically need to move more than his brothers or sisters because that's who he is.

Here are some ways to help:

- o Make sure the chair and desk heights are right for him —feet flat on the floor and writing arm supported by the desk surface — when he's doing homework.
- o Be sure all necessary supplies are handy for him so he doesn't have to jump up and down to get things he needs.
- o Make sure he knows what he's supposed to do and when he's supposed to do it.
- o Build in opportunities to move — get a drink of water between activities or show you the project when it's finished.

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- **Working On His Own**

If he never seems to get anything done unless you're sitting right next to him, it's easy to believe he wants all your attention. But maybe he's unsure of himself and doesn't want to make a mistake. Or he might need a little extra help keeping his attention focused.

These may build confidence and increase independence:

- o Ask him to tell you what he thinks will be easy and what will be hard before starting to work.
- o Do the first sentence or problem together to give him an example to look at.
- o Watch him do the next part of the assignment to make sure he really understands what to do.
- o Check his work at regular intervals so he can't get too far off track or become distracted.

- **Talking Together**

Depending on what else is going on in your life, you may feel you can't cope with your child's frustrating behaviors another moment. But that's when you most need to remain calm and avoid power struggles.

Dealing with Your Child's Frustrating Behavior

Here are some tips for communicating:

- o Set aside plenty of time to talk, and listen to him when he tells his side of the story.
- o Ask him, "What's going on?" rather than "Why are you acting that way?"
- o Mention the reward he'll get when he finishes rather than what will happen to him if he doesn't.
- o Write down two or three ideas you both agree would help him do better next time and put them in a place you can refer to easily.

Try to keep feelings separate from problem-solving. If tempers get heated, agree to stop for awhile, but set another time to continue. By involving your child in this process, you'll be teaching him skills necessary for his future success.

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About the Author

Jan Baumel, M.S., Licensed Educational Psychologist, spent 35 years in education as a teacher, school psychologist, and special education administrator before joining Schwab Learning. She currently serves as a consultant to local school districts and university field supervisor for student teachers.



A Parent's Guide to Problem Behavior

Reinforcing Small Changes in Behavior

"Doo-doo diaper head!" That was the name Michael, age 5, called me in my first interview with his mother and him. Frustrated, and not wanting to be in a psychologist's office, Michael was angry and showed it the only way he knew how. Embarrassed, his mother calmly scolded him, "Don't say that, Michael. That's not nice." Not knowing what else to do with her misbehaving son, she soon directed her attention back to me.

As a psychologist, I want to see the behavior in my office that parents often have trouble with at home. While Michael's outburst was helpful for me to see, I knew that his mother was disturbed by it. During the third session, Michael again became upset, but instead of resorting to calling me names, he took on a sour face, stared for a moment at me, turned abruptly away from me, and faced the window. "Michael, that's rude! Now turn around and stop that pouting." Again his mother was upset by his inappropriate behavior.

"I know you get frustrated with him, Mom," I responded, "but he's showing better behavior and doing a child's version of a self-imposed timeout. Actually, it's better than calling me names."

"I guess so," his mother replied hesitantly, "but he can be so rude. How do I stop him from being so rude and mean?"

While Michael's mother is at a loss about how to handle her difficult child, she is also somewhat hesitant to reinforce a small but positive change in his behavior. "But it's still inappropriate," his mother commented when I noted the change from the first to the third session.

How Children and Adolescents Learn

Children and adolescents with learning disabilities (LD) and Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD) often have social and behavior problems along with their learning and attention problems. Rarely do their difficulties occur in isolation of other manifestations. Many parents, teachers, and therapists try rewards or punishments to change much of their defiance or inappropriate behavior. **All too often we excuse these children because we believe the myth that they "can't" behave and that it is not within their capabilities.** As a result, many grow up thinking the world will tolerate their unruly or just plain "rude" behavior.

As children grow, most children "get it" or seem to incorporate the subtle nuances of our social dance. They understand that when another child rolls his eyes, it is usually a sign that he has had enough of your behavior, or that a sigh means move on to another topic. While these subtleties are often naturally intuited, when a child doesn't easily pick up on them, we often become frustrated and try to teach these skills with our endless lecturing, scolding, and comparison to another sibling or another child. All of our attempts usually fall on deaf ears. Our children's

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“deaf ears” are not out of defiance, although it often looks like that, but due to a disability. **These disabilities are similar to a math or a reading disability and should be handled accordingly.**

The problem with our approach is two-fold: first, we don't reinforce small changes, and second, we tend not to teach skills but use punishment instead. This article will deal with the first problem.

When students fail a subject, say math, we don't expect them to immediately make an 'A.' Instead, we look for slight improvements like a 'D-' with our tutoring. This signifies they are moving in the right direction. From a 'D' we look for them to improve their grade up to a 'C' and so forth. If I asked any teachers of a student who was failing what the first sign of change would be, they would all indicate a 'D' or thereabouts. Yet when it comes to behavior, we expect children and adolescents who misbehave to immediately right their wrongs and exhibit perfect behavior, hence, go from an 'F' to an 'A.'

One Cause of Misbehavior

One such patient, Ryan, an oppositional 16-year-old, was continually late on weekends, violating his curfew. His mother would ground him but first engage in a lengthy lecture that usually ended up in a screaming match between the two. Later, to cut down on her worry, she purchased a cell phone for him and instructed him to call her if he was going to be late, hoping the cell phone remedied the situation. The following weekend Ryan took the phone as instructed but didn't turn it on. Again, on returning home late, he was grounded along with a lecture on how insensitive and selfish he was. Several weekends later, he was permitted to go out again. Ryan took his cell phone, turned it on, and when his mother called, had his girlfriend answer it. Ready to pull her hair out, his mother later consulted me on why he does this and why he just can't follow the rules. “Doesn't he see how much easier life would be if he just followed the rules?”

One reason Ryan wasn't following the rules is that he felt whatever he did wouldn't be good enough for his mother. His exact words were, “What's the use?” He was not only dejected but demoralized. He demonstrated his demoralization in even more defiant behavior. “It doesn't matter what I do,” Ryan retorted. “Mom will find something wrong with everything I do.”

I've heard this cry of demoralization over and over again in my practice from kids 3 years old to late adolescence. **In their attempt to get better and improve their behavior, they often move up a step or two on 'the ladder of better behavior' only to have their improvement not acknowledged but criticized.** Children with AD/HD and LD especially need to know what behaviors we want to see instead, not just what not to do, as we so often let them know through our punishment. Being specific about expected behaviors and movement in the right direction is vitally important and essential to kids with LD. If we are not clear with our expectations and simple encouragement, they relapse to their original poor behavior.

Small Steps to Help Your Child

An easy and extremely effective way to change a child's behavior is to note the small improvements or steps that he takes. The psychological term for this is 'successive approximations.' Successive approximation, or Reinforcing Small Changes, as we refer to it in my practice, involves picking a single misbehavior, determining the smallest sign of change, and then noting when the child has displayed that behavior. For many inappropriate behaviors, or misbehaviors, this is an effective tool to instigate change.

Reinforcing Small Changes in Behavior

For instance, many parents hate the insolent and disrespectful tone with which their adolescent often talks to them. “How do I make him stop talking to me like that?” is often the response of a parent. Instead of just telling your sullen adolescent not to talk to you that way, find a time he is talking to you with a respectful and appropriate tone, and then say, “Jeff, see how you’re talking to me now? That’s how I want you to talk to me when you are angry or upset with me. I can hear you much better. Please do more of that.” Even if your teenager is talking to you about new computer games or a sports event, he is less defensive and better able to register what he is doing and how he is communicating with you so he can replicate it.

Now just commenting on better behavior once will not ensure that all future problems are solved. **Remember, kids don’t go from F’s to A’s in one quick motion but rather with persistence, encouragement, and over time.** Hence, you will have to find several times over the course of many days that your adolescent is talking in a respectful tone. Also, the next time he is upset, note after the argument any slight changes you may have perceived; i.e., “Brett, I noticed earlier today when you were upset with me, you didn’t use any cuss words. Keep going on that track. You are in the right direction.” Your adolescent not only hears what you want him to do more of, but he doesn’t get discouraged.

“Remember, big behavior changes are a conglomeration of smaller changes and don’t occur without those building blocks.”

How to Reinforce a Small Change

1. **Decide what behavior you would like to change**, e.g., child has awful table manners, including wiping his mouth on his sleeve and using his hands instead of utensils.
2. **Determine the smallest sign of change**, e.g, using his napkin or fork once or twice. (Note: Here is where most parents and teachers fail. They set the bar too high and look for a moderate, not small change, such as, good table manners most of the time. In effect, this is expecting your child to go from F to B+. Not looking for smaller changes will be a guaranteed lesson in demoralization for your child.) Also remember, that a ‘sign of change’ doesn’t necessarily have to be a behavior your child has never exhibited before. Your child may have used his napkin or fork. You just want to increase the likelihood that he will do it more.
3. **Let your child know what the problem is and what behavior you eventually want to see.** “Cory, your father and I would like to see your table manners improve. We would like to see you use your napkin and your fork and chew with your mouth closed.” (Tell your child what you want to see, not what you don’t want to see. Be specific.)
4. **Then notice the smallest sign of change that you can comment on.** “Thank you, Cory. I noticed that you used your napkin” (even though he only used it twice the entire meal).
5. **At a later date, let your child know the positive behavior change you observed with a message that you want him to continue** and you want to see more of it. “Cory, again I noticed that you were trying to use your napkin more. Also, there were several times that you were chewing with your mouth closed. You are on the right track; do more of that!”

Reinforcing Small Changes in Behavior

Small Changes Become Big Changes

Remember, big behavior changes are a conglomeration of smaller changes and don't occur without those building blocks. In the earlier example of Ryan violating his curfew, what could his mother have done differently? First, she should continue to ground him for violating curfew. **Reinforcing small changes does not mean allowing misbehavior to slide.** Second, she could have noted the small changes that he exhibited, such as, taking the cell phone with him, having his girlfriend answer it, or coming in 1½ hours late instead of his usual 2½ hours late. Acknowledging any or all of these steps towards better behavior would have amounted in continued, but slow, improvement with Ryan instead of his abject resentment and demoralization.

While improved behavior doesn't occur instantly, we often inadvertently discourage it by not noting small changes. By setting the bar lower, and raising it consistently over time, we are much more likely to get better behavior from our obstinate youngsters.

Finally, as far as Michael calling me a "diaper-head," I've been called worse.

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About the Author

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Words Can Hurt: Teaching Kids Better Ways to Express Anger

Kids with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD) or learning disabilities (LD) may verbalize angry feelings inappropriately, resorting to swear words, name-calling, and hurtful remarks. This doesn't necessarily mean they're "bad" kids. Consider what the child may be struggling with:

- Tim, who has AD/HD, is easily frustrated and has poor impulse control. He often blurts out an angry retort before he can stop and think about what he's about to say.
- Pam has LD involving language difficulties. She may struggle to find and express the words she needs to communicate. She grows more frustrated and lashes out with whatever words she can spit out. Some of those words may be hurtful.

It's helpful for parents to view such outbursts as behaviors that can be changed. There are steps you can take to coach your child to express himself appropriately. Understanding your child's individual challenges and focusing on positive behaviors are the keys.

Understanding Replacement Behaviors

Like most adults, you probably know what it's like to break your own unhealthy habits (behaviors). Have you noticed that it's easier to squelch an unhealthy habit when you substitute it with a healthier alternative that gives you similar satisfaction? For example, someone who wants to quit smoking might find it easier to resist the urge to smoke if he chews sugarless gum instead. This is the essence of behavior management training. And the same technique can work for kids.

Buying into Behavior Change

The most successful behavior change occurs when the child has input and understands the benefits of learning more positive behaviors. Here are some tips to help your child "buy into" the process:

- If your child struggles with more than one unacceptable behavior, you and he should decide which one to tackle first. Will you focus on the most offensive behavior — the one that gets him into the most trouble (such as swearing at adults)? Or will you zoom in on a behavior that's easier to change (such as calling the dog "stupid"). Keep in mind that his success in changing one behavior may motivate him to improve in other areas.
- Help him understand the benefits of changing his behavior. He's probably well aware of why his outbursts are a problem. Instead, tell him how expressing his feelings in a less offensive way will improve his relationships with other people.
- Assure him there's no need to ignore or repress his angry feelings; the goal is simply to express his feelings in a more acceptable way.

Knowing What Triggers the Behavior

An important step in changing behavior is figuring out what situations precede your child's inappropriate behavior. By observing your child just before an outburst and talking with him after the "offense," you can pick up clues. Ask him who or what he's angry with — You? Someone else? Homework? Loss of a privilege? Himself? Make sure you intervene as soon as he calms down after the outburst so the feelings are fresh in his mind.

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Invent hand signals (such as a “time out” signal) or verbal cues and use them to help your child realize he’s getting wound up. In time, he’ll learn to recognize when he’s getting upset.

Finding Replacement Behaviors

It’s best to help your child replace the unacceptable behavior with a more desirable one that still allows him to let off steam. For example, he might substitute swear words with a silly-but-angry retort, like, “Balderdash!” One boy who did this found he couldn’t say the word without laughing, so the replacement behavior diffused his anger as well!

Other replacement behaviors to express anger include punching a pillow, kicking a punching bag, or repeatedly bouncing a ball against an outside wall. Such activities are safe and appropriate and help kids express frustration and anger in a physical way.

Let your child experiment with different replacement behaviors. Make suggestions, but encourage him to come up with his own ideas. Each time he uses a replacement behavior, ask if it made him feel better. He may need to try different methods before finding the solution that works.

Reinforcing Positive Behavior

Give your child an age-appropriate reward (sticker, privilege, or praise) each time he uses effective replacement language or behavior. Point out how his relationships with others are improving because of his new behavior. Specifically, help him see how his new behavior helps him get what he needs, including having others understand him.

Taking Techniques to School

If your child’s outbursts are a problem at school, clue his teacher into the technique you’re using at home. She may be able to employ it (or some version of it) with your child at school. Consistency between home and school leads to greater reinforcement of the desired behavior.

Practicing... with Patience

Be patient as your child practices changing his behavior. It’s normal for kids to backslide from time to time. When he does, don’t overreact; simply intervene and help him get back on track. And as always, help him celebrate — and focus on — his successes.

When to Get Professional Help

If your child’s expression of anger frequently turns into aggression toward people or destruction of property, or if your ongoing attempts to help him control his anger don’t seem to be working, it may be time to get some help from a therapist or counselor. For some children, the common approaches to behavior management are not effective. When this is the case, the sooner you get help to figure out an effective approach, the better. Ask your pediatrician or school psychologist to recommend a therapist.

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About the Author

In her role as Writer/Editor for Schwab Learning, **Kristin Stanberry** provides information, insight, strategies, and support for parents whose children have LD and AD/HD. She combines a professional background developing consumer health and wellness publications with her personal experience of coaching family members with learning and behavior problems.



A Parent's Guide to Problem Behavior

Understanding Bullying and Kids with Learning Disabilities or AD/HD

Bullies! Every classroom has at least one. Whose name comes to mind when you hear the word “bully”? Who was the kid who could upset your day with his verbal, physical, or emotional insults? Most adults who were bullied remember such childhood events vividly.

Bullying among elementary school children and teenagers is a growing problem in many schools in the United States. It's happening in urban, suburban, and rural schools. Kids who have learning disabilities (LD) or Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD) are especially vulnerable to bullying problems.

While bullying isn't new, professionals today have a new level of understanding of the problem.

Bullying is a learned behavior that can be prevented! Effective bullying prevention programs are being used in progressive school systems throughout the country. It's important for parents, students, teachers, and school administrators to understand and learn to manage bullying that occurs at school and elsewhere.

What is Bullying?

“A student is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative acts on the part of one or more other students. It is a negative action when someone intentionally inflicts, or attempts to inflict, injury or discomfort upon another,” says Dan Olweus, a prominent researcher on bullying behaviors. **Bullying may involve physical aggression such as fighting, shoving, or kicking; verbal aggression such as name calling; or more subtle acts such as socially isolating another child.** With the increase in numbers of personal computers at home, youth have also learned to use email and Websites to bully or harass others.

It is important for adults and youth to understand the difference* between bullying and normal conflict.

Normal Conflict	Bullying
Happens occasionally	Happens repeatedly
Accidental	Done on purpose
Not serious	Serious — threat of physical harm or emotional or psychological hurt
Equal emotional reaction	Strong emotional reaction on part of the victim
Not seeking power or attention	Seeking power or control
Not trying to get something	Trying to gain material things or power
Remorseful — takes responsibility	No remorse — blames victim
Effort to solve the problem	No effort to solve the problem

*Summarized from *Bullying at School*

Why Focus on Bullying?

Given the rising concern about violent crime among youth, parents, schools, and communities are concerned about reducing “bullying” behaviors because:

- **Persistent bullying can leave long-term scars** (e.g., low self-esteem, depression) **on victims.** Some victims of bullying may turn to violent means of retaliation. Some severely bullied victims have tried suicide as a means to escape their tormentors.

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- **Students who bully others are especially likely to engage in other antisocial and delinquent behaviors** such as vandalism, shoplifting, truancy, and illicit drug use. This antisocial behavior pattern often will continue into young adulthood.
- **Bullying may contribute to a negative school social climate** that is not conducive to good social relationships or learning. Everyone is affected by bullying, even those not directly involved in the conflict. Youth who are “bystanders” often watch bullying but don’t intervene, because they don’t know what to do and may fear retaliation from the bully.
- **Bullying is a widespread problem among school children.** Surveys of 4th-6th graders in several states indicate that 25 percent of all children had been bullied at least “several times” within a two-month period; about 10 percent had been bullied at least once per week. One in five (20 percent) children reported having taken part in bullying other students at least “several times” within the last two months.

“While bullying isn’t new, professionals today have a new level of understanding of the problem.”

Profile of a Bully

Boys and girls who bully **do not** have low self-esteem as was once thought. Bullies, in fact, may be average students or even classroom or athletic leaders. At school, bullies typically tease and taunt their victims repeatedly in a nasty way. They intimidate, make fun of, and ridicule other students. They shove, hit, kick, and push their victims around, often damaging the victim’s belongings. It is common for some bullies to manipulate other kids to do their “dirty work” for them while they stay in the background and watch. Youth who do the bullying for others are referred to as “henchmen.” In such cases, it can be difficult to see who the bully really is.

Bullies usually select weaker and relatively defenseless students as their targets. They have a strong need to dominate and subdue other students, to assert themselves with power and threat, and to get their own way. They may brag about their actual or imagined superiority over other students. They may be hot-tempered, easily angered, impulsive, and have low frustration tolerance. Bullies are seen as being tough, hardened, and having little empathy with students who are victimized. When confronted about their behavior, they are likely to try to talk themselves out of situation by denying they did anything wrong. **Bullies often try to place blame on their victims**, saying something like, “They deserved it.”

Profile of a Victim

Typical victims are children who can be overpowered (physically, mentally, or emotionally) by the bully. They are usually more anxious and unsure of themselves than other students. These children often have a negative attitude toward violence and the use of violence in dealing with others. **Victims usually suffer from low self-esteem and view themselves negatively.** They often consider themselves failures and feel stupid, ashamed, and unattractive. They may come to believe that they “deserve” to be bullied. They are often lonely, friendless, and abandoned at school.

In his pioneering research on bullying behaviors, Dr. Dan Olweus has described two types of victims:

The Passive or Submissive Victim

- Is nonassertive and through his actions may signal to others that he is insecure and won't retaliate if attacked or insulted
- Is cautious, quiet, or anxious
- Cries easily and collapses quickly when bullied

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- Has few friends and isn't connected to a social network
- Lacks humor and pro-social skills
- May be physically weak

The Provocative Victim

- Is both anxious and aggressive
- May cause irritation and disruption around him
- Is easily emotionally aroused
- Prolongs the conflict even when losing

**The above profiles have been adapted from *Bullying at School*.

“Kids who are victimized often learn to get what they need by becoming bullies themselves.”

How Bullying Affects Kids with Learning Disabilities and AD/HD

If your child has a learning or attention problem, he may easily become involved in bullying situations. Let's take a look at some of the reasons for this:

- People often assume that kids with AD/HD are bullies because of their hyperactive, impulsive, aggressive, or demanding nature. According to a national survey on school discipline conducted by Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (CHADD), about 32 percent of kids with AD/HD are “egged on” by their peers to act out and get into trouble. The study found that many youth with AD/HD were victims of bullies, but when they reacted to the bully, they were punished for poor behavior and the bully was not. **Without understanding the dynamics of a bullying situation, adults can further “victimize” the victims of bullying.**
- Victims of bullies (especially boys) are often physically weak, over-sensitive, and have poor social skills and low self-esteem. This describes many kids with LD or AD/HD.
- Many kids with hyperactive/impulsive AD/HD are provocative victims because they annoy and over-react to bullies.
- Kids who are victimized often learn to get what they need by becoming bullies themselves. In fact, about 16 percent of kids will act as both a bully and a victim at one time or another.

Gender Differences in Bullying

Most scientific research on bullying has focused on boys. Books that address bullying in girls are starting to appear, but most are written from the personal experience of the authors rather than from scientific research projects. **New studies are underway that will help us better understand the dynamics of gender differences in bullying.** This is what is currently understood about gender differences in bullying:

- Boys tend to bully with direct physical or verbal aggression.
- Bullying by girls is more difficult to observe. Girls tend to bully with indirect or “sneaky” means of harassment such as social isolation or covert aggression such as spreading rumors or manipulating the friendship relations within the class (e.g., depriving a girl of her “best friend”).
- Boys who bully tend to be older than their victims (whether the victims are boys or girls).

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- Girl bullies tend to target other girls who are the same age.
- Girls are more likely to be bullied by a group, which is emotionally devastating.
- Girls are more likely to involve both boys and girls in their bullying pursuits against a victim.
- Boys identify their aggressive behaviors against victims as “bullying” more often than girls.

Adult Intervention is Key

For most children, bullying experiences will be nothing more than an unpleasant childhood memory. **But for those who are more severely bullied, the pain runs deep.** Because their days and weeks are filled with fear, humiliation, and pain inflicted by bullies, they find it difficult to concentrate and participate in class. Kids who are bullied are often absent from school. They are lonely and may become depressed or lash out at their bullies in violent ways.

Bullies who are not stopped are more likely to have criminal records in young adulthood than youth who don't bully. **Bullying, therefore, is a serious problem for both the bully and the victim.** Both bullies and victims need positive adult intervention to make the bullying stop. Remember that bullying is a learned behavior that can — with adult intervention — be prevented or stopped!

Whether your child is a bully, victim, or bystander, there are steps you can take to coach him toward more positive behavior.

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About the Author

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What Parents Can Do About Childhood Bullying

If you're a parent concerned about bullying, it's important to recognize the signs that a child is a bully as well as the signs of one who is being victimized. This is especially true if your child has a learning disability (LD) or Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD), conditions which make kids more vulnerable to bullying. **Being alert and observant is critical, since victims are often reluctant to report bullying.** Many victims don't report it to their parents or teachers because they're embarrassed or humiliated by the bullying. They may assume that adults will accuse them of tattling or will tell them to deal with it themselves. Some victims believe there is nothing adults can do to get the bully to stop. Naturally, bullies don't discuss their misdeeds with their parents or teachers. If their bullying behavior is reported and their parents confront them, bullies usually deny their involvement.

The Victim: Signs and Symptoms

A child who is a victim of bullying may display one or more of the following behaviors at home*:

- Comes home from school with clothing that's torn or in disarray, or with damaged books.
- Has bruises, cuts, and scratches, but can't give a logical explanation for how he got them.
- Appears afraid or reluctant to go to school in the morning, complaining repeatedly of headaches or stomach pains.
- Chooses an "illogical" route for going to and from school.
- Has bad dreams or cries in his sleep.
- Loses interest in school work, and his grades suffer. If your child normally struggles in school because of a learning disability and is teased about having LD, school may become unbearable for him.
- Appears sad or depressed, or shows unexpected mood shifts, irritability, and sudden outbursts of temper.
- Requests money from you to meet the bully's demands and might even resort to stealing money from you or other family members.
- Seems socially isolated, with few — if any — real friends; is rarely invited to parties or to the homes of other kids. His fear of rejection may lead him to shun others.

The Bully: Signs and Symptoms

A youngster who is bullying other kids may display one or more of the following behaviors at home*:

- Has a strong need to dominate and subdue others; asserts himself with power and threats to get his own way.

What Parents Can Do About Childhood Bullying

- Intimidates his siblings or kids in the neighborhood.
- Brags about his actual or imagined superiority over other kids.
- Is hot-tempered, easily angered, impulsive, and has low frustration tolerance. Has difficulty conforming to rules and tolerating adversities and delays. If he has the impulsive/hyperactive type of AD/HD, that could explain some of these behaviors; if so, it's important to work with his doctor and teachers to address and manage such behaviors.
- Cheating
- Oppositional, defiant, and aggressive behavior toward adults, including teachers and parents.
- Antisocial or criminal behavior (such as stealing or vandalism), often at a relatively early age. He may hang out with the "wrong crowd."

* Adapted from *Bullying at School*

What can Parents of the Victim Do?

If you know or suspect your child is being bullied, but his school hasn't communicated with you about the situation, you should contact your child's teacher(s) right away. Keep in mind that your primary goal should be to get the school's cooperation to get the bullying to stop. **Knowing your own child is being victimized can evoke strong feelings, but you'll get much more cooperation from school personnel if you can stick to the facts without becoming overly emotional.** While you may want assurance that everyone involved is punished severely, try to focus on putting an end to the bullying!

If your child is a victim of bullying, try helping him with the following strategies:

Your Attitude and Actions

- Listen carefully to your child's reports of being bullied. Be sympathetic and take the problem seriously. Be careful not to overreact or under-react.
- Do not blame the victim. When a child finally works up the courage to report bullying, it isn't appropriate to criticize him for causing it or not handling the situation correctly. For example, don't ask, "Well, what did you do to bring it on?"
- Realize that for a child who is being bullied, home is his refuge. Expect him to have some difficult times in dealing with victimization. Get professional help if you think your child needs it.
- Encourage your child to keep talking to you. Spend extra time with him. Provide constant support and encouragement, and tell him that you love him often!

Teaching Your Child Safety Strategies

- Remember that hitting back is not a choice at school and shouldn't be encouraged. In a school with a "zero tolerance policy" for physical aggression, encouraging your child to hit back may just get him expelled.
- Encourage your child to walk away and tell an adult if he feels someone is about to hurt him.

What Parents Can Do About Childhood Bullying

- Talk about safe ways to act in situations that might be dangerous. For example, identify a “safe house” or store or where he can find sanctuary if pursued by bullies. Encourage him to walk with an adult or older child. Give him a telephone number of an available adult to call if he’s afraid and needs help dealing with a bullying situation.
- Teach your child how to report bullying incidents to adults in an effective way. Adults are less likely to discount a child’s report as “tattling” if the report includes:
 - What is being done to him that makes him fearful or uncomfortable
 - Who is doing it
 - What he has done to try to resolve the problem or to get the bully to quit
 - A clear explanation of what he needs from the adult (or what he wants the adult to do) to get the bully to quit.
- Brainstorm and practice strategies with your child to avoid further victimization.

“Many victims don’t report it to their parents or teachers because they’re embarrassed or humiliated by the bullying.”

Nurturing your child’s self-esteem

- Educate your child about bullying and bullies. Help him put the problem in perspective and not take it personally.
- Teach your child how to walk in a confident manner.
- If needed, help him pay particular attention to personal grooming and social skills.
- Identify and encourage your child’s talents and positive attributes; doing so may help him better assert himself among his peers.
- Encourage your child to make new friends. A new environment can provide a “new chance” for a victimized student, as he won’t be subjected to the negative stereotype other classmates have of him. **Encourage him to make contact with calm and friendly students in his school.** Such action may require some assistance on your part, or perhaps a school mental health professional, to develop the child’s skills at initiating contact and maintaining a friendship relationship. This is especially true if your child’s learning problem makes his social interactions difficult. Be sure to provide ongoing support and encouragement, because your child, due to earlier failures, will tend to give up in the face of even slight adversities.
- Encourage your child to participate in physical training or sports, even if he’s reluctant. Physical exercise can result in better physical coordination and less body anxiety, which, in turn, is likely to increase self-confidence and improve peer relationships.

When Should the Victim’s Parents Contact School Authorities?

If the bullying occurs at school, then the main responsibility for achieving this goal lies with the school officials. It’s important, however, that the parents of the victim collaborate with the school to implement an agreed-upon plan for solving the problem.

What Parents Can Do About Childhood Bullying

If your child has been the victim of bullying at school, here are some suggestions for reporting the problem to school authorities:

- After talking to your child, but before contacting school personnel, write down the details of the bullying situations reported to you by your child. Note the dates and the names of the kids involved. Try to view the situation objectively and determine how serious it is.
- Your child may resist your involvement if he fears retaliation by the bully. If so, explain to your child that most bullying situations require adult intervention to resolve the problem. Let him know exactly who you plan to talk to.
- Contact school personnel for assistance in ending the bullying. First share the problem with your child's teacher(s), and work together to decide how to approach the problem. If the teacher isn't able to get the bullying under control, go to the principal and make a formal request in writing that he get the bullying to stop.
- Do not contact the bully or the bully's family directly.
- Keep an ongoing log of the dates of any further bullying incidents and the actions you take to help your child deal with the bullying. Inform the school of ongoing bullying incidents.

What Can the parents of the Bully Do?

Parents of bullies should understand that children who aggressively bully peers are at increased risk for engaging in antisocial or criminal behavior in the future. It is therefore important to try to help bullies change their negative attitudes and behavior toward others.

Your Attitude and Actions

- Take the problem seriously. Resist a tendency to deny the problem or to discount the seriousness of it. Avoid denial thinking such as "Boys will be boys," or "Bullying is just a natural part of growing up."
- Listen carefully and check out the facts. Do not believe everything your child tells you. Children who bully are good at manipulating adults and can be very artful at weaving a story that makes them look innocent.
- The school or the victim's parents may be documenting reports of your child's bullying behaviors. It doesn't serve your child well to deny his involvement if there is evidence to the contrary. Check out the dates and the activities and determine if there is a pattern in his bullying behavior.
- Explore the reasons for your child's negative behavior. Get professional help if necessary for your child and/or your family.

Holding the Bully Accountable

- Resist the tendency to blame yourself. Hold your child responsible for his own choices.
- Make it clear to your child that you take bullying seriously, and that you will not tolerate such behavior in the future. Make it clear that you expect all bullying activities to stop immediately.

What Parents Can Do About Childhood Bullying

- The issue of bullying should be monitored for some time through questioning your child and regularly contacting the school to determine if his bullying behavior has stopped.

Helping a Bully Change Behavior

- Develop a clear and simple system of family rules. Offer frequent praise and reinforcement. Use non-hostile, negative consequences for violations of rule-following behavior. Consistently enforce the rules. Appropriate consequences for bullying might include the loss of privileges (e.g., television or computer game time).
- Follow through with appropriate consequences for your child's misbehavior. Do not use physical punishment, as doing so will only reinforce your child's mistaken belief that it's acceptable to bully those who are weaker to get what one wants. If both you and the school are consistent in applying negative consequences for bullying, the chances he will change his behavior are considerably increased.
- Spend more time with your child and monitor his activities closely. Find out who his friends are, where they spend their leisure time, and what activities they usually engage in. Is your child in "bad company"? **If so, limit his exposure to the negative peer group and provide opportunities to become involved with more pro-social peers.**
- Build on your child's talents and strengths, and help him develop less aggressive and more empathetic reaction patterns.
- Reward your child for positive, caring actions and for peaceful problem solving.

“Keep in mind that your primary goal should be to get the school's cooperation to get the bullying to stop.”

What Can — and Should — Parents Expect the School to Do?

Whether your child is a bully, victim, or bystander, you should expect the following from his school:

- School administrators, teachers, and staff should take bullying problems seriously. The school should investigate the situation and let you know what steps they're taking to help stop the bullying.
- Written school policies and rules against bullying, harassment, and intimidation should be in place — and be enforced.
- Teachers and administrators should speak to the bully and his parents. They should also tell him what the consequences will be if he doesn't stop bullying others. If the bullying continues, the school should enforce the pre-determined consequences immediately.
- Teachers and administrators should increase adult supervision in the areas of the school campus where bullying incidents are most likely to occur.
- School personnel should be well-informed about the children who are being victimized by bullies so they can monitor and provide support to the victims as needed. They should also communicate often with the victims' parents to tell them how the situation is being handled at school.

What Parents Can Do About Childhood Bullying

Finally, be aware that bullying prevention programs in schools are often a very effective way to stop bullying.

Building a Bully-free Future

Even though bullying has existed in schools for decades, that is no excuse to continue to allow children to be bullied. Researchers have gained new understanding of the dynamics of bullying and the roles of all those involved. **The long-term negative outcomes of children who are bullied are too serious to ignore.** For example, the CIA has reported that fully two-thirds of recent school shooting incidents in the United States were committed by youth who had experienced severe bullying by their classmates.

Parents and teachers hold the power to work together to put an end to bullying and provide a safe learning environment for all children. **In many cases, it will be the parent who must take charge of bringing the bullying incidents to the attention of school authorities.** Parents should expect full cooperation from the school to resolve the problem. The result of reducing bullying in our schools is an improved school environment that is friendly and welcoming to all students. In schools where children feel protected from bullying, they are free to spend their days learning, building friendships, and dreaming about all the possibilities for their lives.

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About the Author

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Resources

Managing Problem Behavior at Home

Books

1-2-3 Magic

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0963386190/schwabfoundation/>

by Thomas W. Phelan

Behavior Management at Home; A Token Economy Program for Children and Teens

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0962162930/SchwabFoundation/>

by Harvey C. Parker

The Explosive Child

www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/0060931027/schwabfoundation/

By Ross W. Greene, PhD.

Parenting without Punishment: Making Problem Behavior Work for You

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0914783785/schwabfoundation/>

by John W. Maag

SOS! Help for Parents: A Practical Guide for Handling Common Everyday Behavior Problems

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0935111204/qid=1028073648/schwabfoundation/>

by Lynn Clark, Ph.D.

Try and Make Me! Simple Strategies that Turn off the Tantrums and Create Cooperation

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/157954553X/schwabfoundation/>

by Ray Levy and Bill O'Hanlon with Tyler Norris Goode

Win the Whining War & Other Skirmishes: A Family Peace Plan

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0962203637/schwabfoundation/>

by Cynthia Whitham, MSW

On the Web

Dr. Robert Brooks on Negative Scripts

<http://www.schwablearning.org/articles.asp?r=397&g=3&d=8>

Try and Make Me! website

<http://www.tryandmakeme.com>

Managing Problem Behavior Away From Home

Books

Bullying at School: What We Know and What We can Do

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/0631192417/schwabfoundation/>

by Dan Olweus, Ph.D.

Bully-Proofing Your Child: A Parent's Guide

<http://www.sopriswest.com/swstore/product.asp?sku=573>

by Carla Garrity, Ph.D., Mitchell Baris, Ph.D., and William Porter, Ph.D.

Resources

Managing Problem Behavior Away From Home

On the Web

American Medical Association

Violence and Bullying Resource Links

<http://www.ama-assn.org/ama/pub/category/2285.html>

Clemson University Institute on Family and Neighborhood Life:

The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program

<http://www.clemson.edu/olweus/>

NYU Child Study Center:

Social Life in Middle and High School: dealing with clicks and bullies (pdf)

http://www.aboutourkids.org/aboutour/letter/2005/sept_oct.pdf

National Crime Prevention Council:

Delete Cyberbullying

<http://www.ncpc.org/newsroom/current-campaigns/cyberbullying>

Stop Bullying Now website

<http://www.stopbullyingnow.com/>

Visit Schwab Learning's Online Resources

 SchwabLearning.org is a parent's guide to helping kids with learning difficulties.

We'll help you understand how to:

- **Identify** your child's problem by working with teachers, doctors, and other professionals.
- **Manage** your child's challenges at school and home by collaborating with teachers to obtain educational and behavioral support, and by using effective parenting strategies.
- **Connect** with other parents who know what you are going through. You'll find support and inspiration in their personal stories and on our Parent-to-Parent message boards.
- Locate **resources** including Schwab Learning publications, plus additional books and websites.

SchwabLearning.org—free and reliable information at your fingertips, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.



Sparktop.org™ is a one-of-a-kind website created expressly for kids ages 8-12 with learning difficulties including learning disabilities (LD) and Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD). Through games, activities, and creativity tools, kids at SparkTop.org can:

- Find information about how their brain works, and get tips on how to succeed in school and life.
- Showcase their creativity and be recognized for their strengths.
- Safely connect with other kids who know what they are going through.

SparkTop.org is free, carries no advertising, and is fully compliant with the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA).

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