

Parent *pages*

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Best Parent!

Resources for Christian parents in the 21st Century

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Is Your Child a Bully?

Learn the signs he or she just might be domineering . . . and how to combat it

Is there a bully in your house? If your child is physically hurting people, you may or may not know it by his or her behavior at home. Bullying takes many forms and most of them are not obvious to parents. Bullies are covert and very good manipulators. They are strong and confident with at least average intelligence. They don't often fit the profile of the playground bully that everyone fears. Instead, they create a new profile of the lunchroom bully that everyone follows out of fear.

Bullies are all about control. They have 101 ways to get friends to do what they want in just the way they want. If your child displays control tactics at home—excessive whining, a lack of personal accountability or constantly testing limits—he or she is a prime candidate for bully behaviors at school.

Bullies thrive on the imbalance of power. A child who repeatedly takes advantage of a younger sibling or delights in teasing the family pet is giving indications of bully behavior. Bullies also feel justified in what they do.

■ Does your child give indications that children at school get what they deserve? Does he or she seem to always have an excuse for misbehavior?

■ If these things are true, it may be time to evaluate whether or not your child is a bully.

Divide and conquer

A primary way that children bully is through exclusion. If the children in a bully's group are just like him, then

he has a better chance to control them. If the leader of the group sets the standards (what skill the children must have, what clothes to wear, what team to root for), that ensures that the leader will always be in the group and have control.

A healthy child has many different friends. A healthy child can tolerate a friend rooting for a different team, being good at a skill that eludes him or her, or who has a different taste in clothing. If your child's friends are all alike and if you find your child showing contempt for those outside the group, take this as a warning.

Be careful not to inadvertently teach this kind of intolerance. Make a distinction between people and sinful behaviors. Public sins do not justify the mistreatment of people.

We must strive to always practice the proper distinction between God's Law and His Gospel. Be careful how you treat people. Does your child see you "excluding" the handicapped because you walk past the wheelchair-bound member of your congregation without stopping to visit? Or does your child hear you complain to a neighbor who is a foreigner and has different landscaping tastes?



Teachers . . . be careful!

Humiliation is commonly used by bullies as a form of control. They take delight in another child's suffering and teach the others in the group that this is entertainment. Teachers unwittingly reinforce and even teach humiliation.

When a teacher makes a disparaging remark about a child in front of the class, or disciplines publicly with a goal of punishment instead of correction, the teacher gives the class permission to humiliate each other and especially that student. A child who is a manipulator will be able to stay on the "good" side of a teacher and avoid this. He or she will feel a sense of power when mistreating classmates. Does your child bring home gossip from school? Gossip is a classic form of humiliation. Bullies will use gossip as a form of justification for their feelings and actions; fooling themselves into believing that the offending child deserved to be brought "down a peg or two."

Teasing is another form of humiliation. With humiliation, the goal is to

make the child feel shame. In teasing, the bully simply enjoys watching someone squirm. Teasing is baiting a child to get a reaction that can then be used to get a child in trouble. Teasing is about testing the limits of friendship. Most friends tease each other, but teasing moves into bullying when it is no longer enjoyable for the child being teased.

Teasers typically refuse to accept the consequences of their teasing. They lack empathy and do not recognize that their words or actions caused distress. They do not see the connection between what they said or did, and the victim's reaction. If your child lacks empathy for family members or pets, then he or she may be a candidate for this type of bullying.

Infant behavior

All bullying behaviors come down to the need to control. In its simplest form, this is seen in the behaviors of infants. Babies soon learn that crying brings relief from the pangs of hunger. They develop a sense of control over their environment. As they grow older, babies delight in dropping toys off the edge of the high-chair in order to watch mom or dad bend over and pick it up. Control becomes a problem if a child develops the idea that he needs to control his life to guarantee things go his way.

The issue of control is not a minor issue. It is one that needs to be dealt with consistently. Sometimes Law is needed—children need to learn to accept “no” and that other people have feelings. Word and actions that show “contempt” cannot be overlooked. Our children need to understand and live the Christian example that other people can be different but are still children of God. If another child likes a different team, is good at something I can't do, behaves differently or looks different, I can and should love and accept that child.

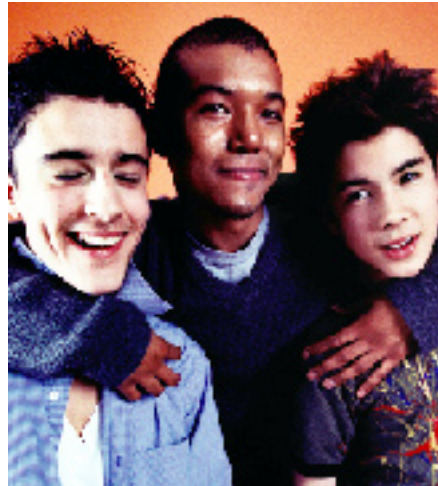
Set an example

One important way we can ameliorate bully behaviors in our children is something that is easily overlooked: model taking a stand when confronted with injustice. Bullies are successful when bystanders tolerate the mistreatment of victims. Bullies would no longer practice control behaviors if other children kept those behaviors from being successful.

Do your children see you standing up for those who are being victimized? What about in your own family? Do you expect both siblings in an argument to accept responsibility for actions? Do your children ever hear you say, “I am sorry but this feels like gossip and I would prefer a different conversation?” Do they see you showing empathy for a neighbor who lost a spouse by going over to visit to see if they might be lonely? Do not be a bystander to mistreatment or to any kind of suffering.

Encouraging empathy is a very im-

portant life skill that does not necessarily come naturally to children. Early childhood age children rarely have empathy. They are ego-centric, which in essence means that they believe everyone else is thinking the same thing they are thinking.



When working with young children, we have to point out empathy, model it, and ask children to practice empathy even before they can completely understand the action.

It is harmful to the child's development to overlook empathy as a life skill. This is the Gospel side of dealing with bully

behaviors. We learn to love and care for each other no matter what. We model, as best we can, God's love for us. The Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37) is an excellent example of empathy.

It is especially appropriate when understood that the Jewish man and the Samaritan were enemies who had different beliefs. They would not have been in the same “clique.”

Questions for discussion

1. How were you teased as a child? What do you remember of others being teased? Did you engage in bully behaviors?
2. Do your children show any evidence at home of bullying? Contempt? Manipulation? Teasing? Unwillingness to accept responsibility for actions? Finding problems or faults where there are none?
3. How can you model anti-bully behaviors?

Recommended reading:

- The Free Spirit “Learning to Get Along” available free to Thrivent members.
- “Growing Good Kids,” by Deb Delisle and Jim Delisle.

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