

PRESCHOOL BULLYING

(3-5 YEARS OF AGE)



It is important to be aware and intervene with your preschool child's aggression because physical (e.g., biting, hitting) and relational (hurting others by damaging or harming their friendships or social status, e.g., teasing, name calling) aggression can develop into bullying behaviour. Aggression is considered bullying when it is repeated over time and is intended to hurt another person. In Canada, bullying has become a social problem for our youth and is associated with negative outcomes (e.g., depression, anxiety) as children grow. Canada ranked a dismal 26th and 27th out of 35 countries on measures of bullying and victimization, according to a recent World Health Organization Survey (PREVNet, 2013).



Bullying can happen in a number of different places including preschool classrooms, playgrounds, or on sports teams. Even in preschoolers, bullying is used for a purpose (e.g., to gain another's friendship, to exclude another, to hurt another). Young children have been observed to pick on peers, exclude them from a peer group, hit or bite their peers, in order to get what they want.

Children who bully do not necessarily have poor social skills and they may not have emotional problems. Rather, they may be popular, bright, and socially skilled. As parents it is important to be aware that any child can bully or become a victim of bullying, and as early as the preschool years. Children can be bullied for a number of reasons such as being in the wrong place at the wrong time, because they might be shy, or even because they are different (e.g., wear glasses, have exceptionalities like physical or behavioural challenges). Children who are bullied often go unnoticed because they are scared to tell anyone they are being bullied out of fear of making their situation worse. Some children can also engage in bullying and be bullied; they can alternate between being a bully and being a victim of bullying. Children who are bullied are at risk for developing negative behaviours that may lead to, for example, low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression.

SIGNS YOUR CHILD IS BEING BULLIED

Spotting the signs of bullying can be difficult.

Here are some red flags to look out for:

- Frequently "losing" or "damaging" things
- Has few, if any friends, with whom he or she spends time
- Frequently gets teased, but 'laughs it off'
- Complains frequently of headaches, stomach aches, or other physical ailments and physical symptoms
- Seems afraid or does not want to go to daycare, school, or take part in organized activities
- Difficulty sleeping, nightmares, cries self to sleep, bed wetting
- Is being left out on the playground
- Is not invited to birthday parties or play dates
- Does not want to have play dates
- 'Giving away' toys or belonging

SIGNS YOUR CHILD MAY BE BULLYING OTHERS

- Begins bullying siblings or younger children
- Repeatedly teases, imitates, or makes fun of the same targets
- Repeatedly excludes or ignores the same target
- Feels the need to dominate or control others
- Shows a lack of compassion for an individual who is experiencing bullying
- Blames others for bad behaviour or does not take responsibility for actions
- If your child is frequently getting into trouble regularly for things such as biting, fighting, or disrespecting friends or siblings, these could be signs for later bullying

PARENTING TIPS: HOW TO DEAL WITH BULLYING IN PRESCHOOLERS AND HOW TO PREVENT BULLYING?

If you think your child might be bullying or bullied by other children, there are things that you can do. Many parents are hesitant to address the problem because they are unsure of what to do, do not want to make it worse, or want to encourage social independence. However, if your preschool aged child is involved in bullying, the earlier you intervene, the better. Bullying is a learned behaviour and it can be “unlearned.” It is important to realize that by talking with your child and/or seeking help, you can teach your child more appropriate ways of handling feelings, peer pressure, and conflicts.

HERE ARE A FEW THINGS YOU CAN DO TO ADDRESS BULLYING:

Talk with your child.

Explain what bullying is. Then find out the reasons he or she is bullying others or why she/he thinks they are being bullied. You might explore how your child is feeling about him or herself. It is also important to play with your preschooler so you can listen for messages about how they feel. Sometimes children communicate very important messages through their play.

Model and teach empathy, respect, and kindness.

Children who bully often lack awareness of how others feel. Try to help your child understand how others may feel when they are being bullied. Explain to your child that everyone has feelings and that feelings are important. Reading books about emotions and role-playing with your child can be particularly useful in helping your child understand what it is like to be in the other person's shoes.

Illustrative example

When inviting other children to a birthday party, ask your child how they would feel if his/her classmates were given an invitation but he/she was not. Explain to your child that it would likely hurt someone's feelings to be left out. Understandably, not every child can always be invited to birthday parties. However, you can use this kind of scenario to teach your child about being sensitive to other's feelings. Explaining this will help them understand why they should not hand out invitations in front of children who have not been invited or use an invitation to their birthday party as a tool for manipulation (e.g., making someone feel bad or making themselves feel good).

Teach by example.

Examine behaviour and interactions in your own home. Is there something at home that is encouraging this type of behaviour? It is important to model appropriate social behaviour, encourage cooperative play, and eliminate aggressive behaviours.

Illustrative example

Children learn from watching their parents. When speaking on the telephone with a friend or family member, pay attention to any negative gossip, or relational aggression you may be using. Your children may be internalizing your behaviour and applying them in their own relationships.

Praise, focus on and reinforce positive behaviour/skills.

When your child handles conflict well or shows compassion for others, acknowledge this and provide them with positive feedback (e.g. say “it was nice of you to share your toy”, or give a ‘high-five’ and tell them what they did well).

Make your expectations clear.

Let your child know that bullying is unacceptable and that you will not tolerate it.

Establish clear, consistent consequences for bullying.

Be specific about what will happen if the bullying continues. Try to find meaningful consequences, such as taking away privileges and allowing your child to earn them back with appropriate behaviour. Consequences need to be immediate and being consistent (responding the same way each time) is critical.

Be realistic.

Your child’s behaviour will not change overnight - it takes time to change behaviour. Be patient as your child learns new ways of handling emotions and conflict.

Talk to someone.

Teachers, coaches, etc., should be aware of the situation so that they can help resolve it. Regular communication between parents and teachers is key and actively encouraged. Consider asking school officials what they plan to do and when you can expect to hear more details. Keep checking back to discuss whether any steps have been taken.

Get involved!

Get involved in the bullying-prevention program at your child’s school. If your child’s school does not have one, help by taking a leadership position in efforts to prevent bullying, for example with a bullying-prevention program.

TAKE HOME MESSAGE

Parents play an influential role in aggression and bullying by:

- Being aware, involved, and taking action
- Communicating and listening

This role is important for early prevention and intervention

GUIDELINES FOR PARENT ACTION

GREEN LIGHT

Proceed as normal, typical behaviour

If you recognize aggression in your child, for example, if your child is excluding one of their playmates from playing - explain that this behaviour is wrong and then continue to monitor the behaviour. Similarly, if you recognize that something is different about your child (e.g., see above under “signs your child is being bullied”) or your child’s daily routine, talk with your child and continue to monitor the changes.

YELLOW LIGHT

Proceed with caution, at-risk behaviour

If the behaviour begins to concern you (e.g., becomes more frequent), if controlling your child’s aggressive behaviour is difficult, or the targeting of your child by others does not appear to be an isolated incident and is not stopping, and if it is beginning to interfere with daily functioning (e.g., something is different about your child’s daily routine or different about how your child is behaving), parent action should be taken. Try some of the techniques described above or seek help.

RED LIGHT

Stop, problematic behaviour

If your child’s aggression persists or has become bullying behaviour, or if your child is being bullied, and it is interfering with daily functioning — seek help from professionals (e.g., pediatrician, psychologist, mental health professionals at your community health centre).

For similar and more detailed information see The Hincks Dellcrest Centre website:

<http://www.hincksdellcrest.org/ABC/Parent-Resource/The-Angry-and-Aggressive-Child/Anger-and-Aggression>

<http://www.hincksdellcrest.org/ABC/Parent-Resource/The-Angry-and-Aggressive-Child/Bullying>

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Books for Children

Enemy Pie by Derek Munson. *Age Range: 3-9.*

Have the Right to Be a Child by Alain Serres. *Age Range: 4-7.*

Leave Me Alone: A Tale of What Happens When You Stand Up to a Bully by Kes Gray. *Age Range: 4-7.*

Stop Picking on Me: A First Look at Bullying by Pat Thomas. *Age Range: 4-7.*

Everyone Matters: A First Look at Respect for Others by Pat Thomas. *Age Range: 4-8.*

We’re All Different but We’re All Kitty Cats by Peter J. Goodman. *Ages 4-8.*

Only One You by Linda Kranz. *Age Range: 4+*

Stop Bullying Bobby: Helping Children Cope with Teasing and Bullying by Danna Smith Mansell. *Age Range: 4-7.*

Further reading for parents

No Place for Bullying: Leadership in Schools That Care for Every Student by Jim Dillon.

Bully: An Action Plan for Teachers, Parents and Communities to Combat the Bullying Crisis, edited by Lee Hirsch and Cynthia Lowen, with Dina Santorelli.

The Essential Guide to Bullying: Prevention and Intervention by Cindy Miller and Cynthia Lowen.

Websites and additional resources:

The Society for Safe and Caring Schools and Communities (SACSC)
<http://www.sacsc.ca>

Alberta’s Education Act – Putting Students First
<http://education.alberta.ca/teachers/safeschools/bullying-prevention.aspx>
<http://www.b-free.ca/>

National Educational Association
www.nea.org/home/neabullyfree.html

Invest in Kids
http://www.beststart.org/invest_in_kids/parenting_resources.html

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning
<http://casel.org/in-schools/bullying/>

Education website
<http://www.education.com/topic/school-bullying-teasing/>

Strengthening children’s skills
<http://www.wingspanworks.com/>

Visit your local community centre to get information on the services available to you and your child

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