

# Slate

FAMILY

## Bullies

They can be stopped, but it takes a village.

By Alan E. Kazdin and Carlo Rotella

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Let's say you find out that your child is being bullied by a schoolmate. Naturally, you want to do something right now to make it stop. Depending on your temperament and experience, one or more of four widely attempted common-sense solutions will occur to you: telling your child to stand up to the bully, telling your child to try to ignore and avoid the bully, taking matters into your own hands by calling the bully's parents or confronting the bully yourself, or asking your child's teacher to put a stop to it.

These responses share three features:

- 1) They all express genuine caring, concern, and good intentions.
- 2) You will feel better for taking action.
- 3) They are likely to be ineffective.

In order to understand why, let's focus on two aspects of bullying: It arises from a differential in power, and it's heavily contextual.

Bullying is not just two children arguing or even hitting each other. Rather, one exploits a power differential—in strength or audacity—to repeatedly intimidate the other. Usually that takes the form of repeated attacks that can range from physical assault to verbal insults, threats, social aggression (like excluding the victim from activities), and the newer-order variants grouped under the heading "cyber bullying": offensive and threatening text messages or messages posted on blogs, Twitter, Facebook, and the like. Bullying is fairly common: In one large-scale national study of elementary and middle school students, 17 percent reported having been bullied, 19 percent said they bullied others, and 6 percent reported bullying *and* being bullied.

We know a few things about bullies as a group. They often have an impulsive temperament, don't get enough parental supervision, and have had significant exposure to models of aggressive behavior in the home (harsh punishment, domestic violence) and media (TV and video games that model bullying). Most bullies are boys, and male bullies use physical violence more often than female ones, but girls do it, too. Bullies are often more confident, fearless, and socially astute than we tend to assume (the old notion of a bully as a cowardly cretin with low self-esteem seems to be



inaccurate), and they are often quite popular in the lower grades. But they tend to lose popularity as school progresses, become socially isolated, and have poor academic outcomes. They are more likely to smoke cigarettes and drink alcohol as they enter adolescence and to engage in criminal behavior in later years. But knowing all that has not helped much in coming up with ways to reduce or eliminate bullying.

Context, not the individual attributes of bullies or their victims, is the key to prevention. Bullying between children happens in places where adults cannot easily detect it—in the halls, at recess, at the bus stop, waiting in lines. Adults typically do not know about such bullying unless there are flagrant and very frequent episodes or they happen to see it with their own eyes, which is relatively rare (teachers detect only about 4 percent of all incidents), since a competent bully chooses opportunities precisely to exploit a lack of adult supervision.

When students see bullying, they tend not to report it. Surveys indicate that they usually believe nothing would be done if they did tell about what they saw. Bear in mind that about 85 percent of bullying happens in front of others, usually peers. The event is institutionally invisible, but there are typically witnesses. These peers intervene only about 10 percent to 20 percent of the time, but when they do, they can stop bullying. Even when the child who steps in is considered weak in the group's hierarchy of power, the bullying stops within 10 seconds in more than half the instances of intervention by peers. The [extensive body of research](#) on bullying has led to a new appreciation of the power of bystanders to enable or disable bullying.

Because a bully's success depends heavily on context, attempts to prevent bullying should concentrate primarily on changing the context rather than directly addressing the victim's or the bully's behavior. With that in mind, let's consider why those four common-sense responses won't help much:

**Stand up to a bully.** The time-honored assumption is that if your child cleans a bully's clock once, or merely shows himself willing to try, the display of bravery will activate the bully's innate cowardice or possibly his latent capacity to respect a worthy opponent. Either way, he'll leave your child alone. It would be nice if life worked this way—that is, if it were like a movie starring Harrison Ford as your child—but it usually doesn't. Generally, urging your child to stand up to a bully is not an effective strategy. (Some readers will now be eager to share stirring success stories that prove standing up to a bully really does work—either personal experiences or friend-of-a-friend urban legends or wholly imaginary elegies for a lost golden age of American pluck that is even now receding into the romantic mists of time. Those already getting up steam for such a post in the Fray can [view a handy template](#) to work from.)

One hallmark of a bully is a sophisticated ability to pick victims who won't put up a fight. When you urge your child to stand up to a bully, you're asking him to do something that the bully already figured out he was unlikely to do. That's why the bully picked him in the first place. Bullies tend to choose victims who are socially withdrawn, seem anxious or fearful, are nervous in new situations, or have some physical characteristic that might make them more vulnerable. (But not all victims are physically vulnerable. Some are not likely to resort to physical retaliation for other reasons—because they find violence distasteful, for instance, or regard [Kwai Chang Caine](#) as a role model.) By the time you're finding out about it, the bullying has probably gone on long enough to

reinforce the roles of bully and victim through repetition. You're asking your child to buck very long odds. You might be right—your child might be the exceptional victim who proves the bully's judgment wrong and pushes back against the grain of the reinforced pattern of victimization—but chances are you're not.

**Just ignore it.** Some parents try to impress upon their child that there will always be a bully of one kind or another in life, and one might as well learn to cope with that fact. The best thing one can do, they say, is avoid and ignore him. If it worked, this would be a simple solution, but bullies are hard to avoid. They show a kind of genius for catching their victims in unsupervised settings, and they are at least as clever in seeking and finding their victims as the victims may be in hiding. And bullying should not be ignored. In fact, one condition that allows it to continue is that bystanders ignore it or choose not to report it. In any case, bullies typically don't allow victims to ignore them. The gratification they derive from the victim's submissiveness is so great that they'll escalate their attacks to elicit it. By asking your child to ignore a bully, you're asking her to consent to a lot more reinforcement in the role of being the victim. The research tells us that nothing good can come of that: Victims are lonelier than their peers, have higher anxiety and depression, feel vengeful, have more physical (somatic) symptoms, and are at increased risk for suicide after being bullied.

**Let me take care of it.** Another common and completely understandable parental response is to call the parent of the bully, explain what's going on, and try to get that parent to control the behavior. Predictably, the parent of the bully often becomes defensive and an impasse is soon reached. But even if you did persuade the bully's parent to cooperate, it probably wouldn't make much difference. The research shows that a bully's parent usually can't control their kid. Remember, bullying depends heavily on context, and bullies pick the context by getting the victim alone, or in front of bystanders who won't intervene. So it's hard to work on that context from afar, whether you're the parent of the victim or the parent of the bully.

Some parents are tempted to kick the bully's ass themselves. Taking matters into your own hands might be satisfying while it lasted (to the extent that you find pleasure and honor in beating up kids), but it's illegal and wrong, and it would probably do more harm than good. Mostly you're modeling for the bully yet another example of the strong enforcing their will on the weak in a context where adults can't intervene—because if you do it in front of adults, of course, they'll probably call the cops when you start tuning up the bully. Not only is going vigilante unlikely to work, you're likely to get into expensive trouble with the law and become an unfortunate legend at your son or daughter's school, for which they will be mocked for years to come.

**Let the teacher take care of it.** This is a reasonable, measured response, and involving the school is a necessary piece of a larger comprehensive response that can be effective (see below), but just calling a teacher or two is probably not going to help much. Remember, the definition of bullying is that it's taking place outside adult supervision and that any bystanders are too apathetic or intimidated to come forward—or they're implicated in the bullying themselves. As an institution governed by rules, a school can't control what it can't "see," and bullies usually develop a feel for contexts that remain invisible to the authorities—dead spots in the field of adult supervision. It's also difficult for individual teachers or administrators, busy as they already are with their official duties, to consistently go out of their way to police such dead spots. So talking to a teacher or two and insisting that the school take care of the problem, while it's a step in the right direction,

probably won't solve it.

If those responses won't help, what should you do?

1) Find out what's going on. The first step is to find out whether your child is being bullied. That can be hard to do. Approximately 30 percent of victims tell no one about the bullying, and if the child tells someone it is likely to be a peer rather than you, so it's important to make a habit of asking casually about school, expressing interest in what happened during the day, and asking if anything happened that was particularly unpleasant or pleasant. You need to keep the conversation low-key and resist the standard parental impulse to move quickly to a [SERE interrogation format](#), which will make it less likely that your child will talk about what's going on. Try to ask essay questions to promote elaboration and dialogue ("Tell me what you liked about class today") rather than true/false questions ("Did anything go wrong at school?"). During these chats, if you find yourself saying, "I want to know because I love you," then you're probably pressing too hard.

Chances are that the bullying has been going on for a while before you do find out about it, and chances are that your child will not readily volunteer information about it. There are warning signs to look for. Some are the usual ones that could indicate any of several problems: Your child is moodier and more withdrawn than usual, shows signs of anxiety about school, avoids talking about the day, has sleep problems. Some warning signs will be more specific to being bullied: returning home with cuts and bruises or torn clothes, asking for stolen or lost items to be replaced, reporting losing money you gave him for a special purpose at school.

2) Be careful not to blame the child for being bullied. As obvious as this sounds, both parents and peers are likely to treat the victim as if she brought the bullying upon herself. Yes, it is true that certain psychological characteristics (e.g., shyness), physical characteristics (e.g., something visibly out of the norm), and personality or character traits (e.g., not likely to retaliate with physical aggression) increase the likelihood of being a victim. However, the parental version can be harsh: "If you weren't so mopey all the time, nobody would pick on you." Even if it's true, the characterization is unconstructive and actively harmful. On the positive side of this, hug and comfort your child and convey how great it was for her to talk to you about an important problem.

3) Problem-solve with your child. *Problem solving* is a more precise term than you might think—a procedure in psychology that has been well studied. It consists of first identifying and stating the problem ("So, Jack is picking on you at recess ...") and then prompting and encouraging the identification of potential strategies or solutions ("So, what are some things you/we might do?"). One reasonable goal would be to identify two or three possible ways of handling the situation or general approaches to the problem. Bear in mind that the objective here is to reduce or eliminate the bully's opportunities to intimidate your child in a place where no adults are watching—so you can work on doing more to stay within the range of adult supervision, for instance, or to minimize exposure in unsupervised places. For each strategy, identify what its consequences might be. ("OK, one strategy is to go to the teacher. If you went to the teacher, what would happen?") Talk out each strategy and its potential results. When you have identified two or three, select together which might be the best and discuss why. This trains your child in a critical process as well as helping to identify a realistic solution that your child is likely to buy into, which increases its chance of being effective.

Problem solving with your child is very different from dispensing the solution to him. In a typical conversation about a serious problem, the parent—who has most of the experience, authority, control, and responsibility for the well-being of the family—moves to the solution right away and hands it down to the child. Problem solving teaches a different way of coping with and handling interpersonal problems. The benefits extend across time from one emergent situation to the next. If the child cannot think of a solution at first, you can pose one in an open-ended way: "What do you think about going to the teacher?" With practice, the child will generate more solutions and consequences.

4) Help mobilize an effective strategy for dealing with bullying, which means involving the entire school, including administration, teachers, and peers. There's a history to this finding. Although bullying is an enduring feature of human (and other animal) interactions, effective programs to deal with it have appeared only relatively recently. The current phase of addressing bullying began in Norway in the 1980s with a program devoted to reducing bullying in the entire country. Dan Olweus of the University of Bergen, sometimes called the "father of bullying research," developed a program that involved parents, teachers, and peers throughout Norway. The program was well-conducted, carefully evaluated in research, and significantly reduced bullying. It has been viewed as a model and adopted in other countries—including the United States, where many schools employ variants of it. The original program in Norway and its various extensions and refinements have shown reductions in bullying and anti-social behavior more generally (vandalism, theft, truancy), improved order and discipline and positive social relations at school, improved student satisfaction with school life, and fostered more positive attitudes toward school.

The program is broad in changing the climate of the school as well as carrying out concrete procedures to support elimination of bullying. Key ingredients include:

- Increasing awareness of bullying among parents, teachers, and children—with meetings to disseminate information but also special meetings as needed with parents of bullies and victims.
- Changing the school environment by giving teachers incentive and opportunity to be more supportive and involved with the students.
- Making bullying a key theme—e.g., in explicit policy, in regular class meetings with children.
- Rewriting classroom rules to convey clearly that bullying is not tolerated.
- Having the teacher keep an eye on past victims.
- Administering anonymous student questionnaires and otherwise tracking bullying—ongoing monitoring and evaluation.
- Using buttons, posters, and mailings to keep all involved and to keep the message salient.
- Using interviews with students to continue the educational process and evaluation of the program.

You can't make all that happen, not by yourself. But you can push the school community to make it happen, and schools all across the country have proved to be remarkably responsive to bullying. Sometimes it takes a public incident—a scare or even a tragedy—to mobilize the will to address bullying in a particular school community, but sometimes all it takes is an active parent or two to get the conversation started. So, even while you [learn more about bullying and its prevention](#) and

problem-solve with your child to minimize the bully's effect on daily life, you can urge not only your child's teachers but also guidance counselors, the principal, and other parents to mobilize to deal with bullying on a schoolwide basis, which is the only way to truly deal with it once and for all.

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There are many resources to help in identifying and intervening effectively to stop bullying and its consequences. Here are some.

[Public Safety Canada on bullying](#)

[Centre for Children and Families in the Justice System](#)

[KidsHealth on bullying](#)

[Bullying.org](#)

[The "Code of Silence"](#)

[Psychology Matters on bullying](#)

*Bullying Prevention for Schools: A Step-by-Step Guide to Implementing a Successful Bullying Prevention Program*, by Allan L. Beane.

"Understanding Bullying: From Research to Practice," by W.M Craig and D.J. Pepler. *Canadian Psychology*, Vol 48 (2007), Pages 86-93.

*Bullying Prevention: Creating a Positive School Climate and Developing Social Competence*, by Pamela Orpinas and Arthur M. Horne.

*Children and Bullying: How Parents and Educators Can Reduce Bullying at School*, by Ken Rigby.

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How to properly trash this article in a post in the Fray:

Start with a homespun heading that positions you as an authentic sensible sort who's had it to up to hear with these pencil-neck intellectuals and their wrongheaded notions: "Horse puckey" will do the trick, or "Horse feathers." Referencing a horse identifies you as old school. It doesn't have to make sense, of course. "Horse baloney!" will work fine. Now, on to the body of the post. First, attack the authors in a general sort of way. You can probably just paste in what you posted about the author of the last online article you disagreed with. Here's some handy boilerplate you can

reuse often: "This is terrible advice. You obviously were never a kid and don't have any kids of your own. You should go back to Scandinavia or wherever you're from. It's 'experts' like you who are turning our kids into overprotected weaklings and cowards." Getting down to cases, throw a head-fake toward science—"Studies show that bullies are evil and bad, and evil people are cowards because of their badness"—and then go hard the other way, toward personal anecdote: "When I was a kid we had a foolproof method for dealing with a bully. My dad said, 'Either you go out there and stand up to him or I'll take a belt to your hide,' and I went out there and punched that bully right in the mouth. He never bothered me again. I'm pretty sure that's what happened, or maybe I'm just thinking of that awesome scene from *Witness*." Now, go for the big finish that pulls together all the threads: "That's the obvious and perfect method for dealing with the problem that every single person in the universe employed with complete satisfaction until people like you came along and ruined everything." A coda on the damage to the fiber, fabric, or backbone of our society wrought by seekyuler humaniss with advanced degrees is optional.

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