

Bully Basics: Avoid Raising a Bully or a Bully's Victim

Vivacious Jennifer spreads rumors about her third-grade "ex-" friends, convinces her little clique to shun them, and rudely slights them in front of her peers.

In the classroom Jimmy quietly does his schoolwork. On the playground, he embarrasses his new Latino classmates, making fun of their clothes and families, where they live, and how they talk.

Kimberly, a big fourth-grader, is her dad's "right hand man." At school she hits classmates who annoy her and damages their books. She even extorts payments from a younger neighbor.

"Darling" Jennifer, "cooperative" Jimmy, and "helpful" Kimberly are bullies. As many as a third of children punch, tease, or intimidate their way through school, according to a report of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

If no one intervenes to change their behavior, many will continue their bullying behavior as adults. They might become road ragers, office rumor mongers, or spouse and child abusers.

Up to 60 percent of persistent grade school bullies will have at least one criminal conviction by age 24, says the activist group Bully B'ware of British Columbia.

What about their victims? The National Education Association estimates that every day 160,000 kids skip school because they're afraid of being attacked, intimidated, or shunned.

Who becomes a bully?

What distinguishes bullying from friendly teasing or physical horseplay among friends is

the bully's power over his victim. Bullies are often bigger, tougher, or older. They seek more power by hurting others.

Bullies come in all personalities and sizes but generally have some common traits. According to a study by Ohio University, bullies often have family problems (inconsistent discipline, abuse, loss of a parent, or families that support bullying). Some bullies are outwardly aggressive, others are quietly manipulative; but a common factor is the desire to dominate.

Perhaps most important, bullies generally lack the ability to empathize with others' feelings, and have little sense of remorse or responsibility when they hurt someone.

Who's likely to be bullied?

The Ohio study found that youngsters who fear school and lack social skills are likely targets. Anyone who's different—race, body size, clothing, hygiene, family/home—is also at risk. Children with physical or mental disabilities are common targets.

Don't raise a bully!

Almost every child demonstrates some bullying behavior at some time or another, but parents can make sure it doesn't become a way of life.

Teach and demonstrate empathy for others—on the freeway, with other adults, with people over whom you have some power (like your children!).

Don't laugh at cruelties or put-downs on TV. Speak and act openly against racism and other prejudices.

Talk to your children about alternatives to violence and intimidation.

If your child hurts someone, make him apologize. If he damages a classmate's property, make sure he replaces or pays for it. If the behavior continues, counseling may be the next step.

Don't raise a victim!

Reinforce your child's self-esteem. Introduce him to playmates at an early age. Seek opportunities for him to get to know children of different backgrounds.

Let your child know it's OK to be afraid, but teach him ways to feel more confident: holding himself and speaking confidently, using eye contact, etc.

Rehearse some helpful responses to bullies: agreeing with the tormenter ("That shirt is butt-ugly." "Yeah, I must be color blind."), or asking a question ("Why do you want to hurt me?"), can diffuse aggression. Above all, your child should try to stay calm and in control.

Lobby your school to develop and enforce an antibullying policy that includes punishments for bullies, teacher training in identifying and dealing with bullies, and student training in conflict management.

Kid troubles?

Are you eligible for SAP Services?
If you are a student in a primary or secondary school district or college in Polk County, Iowa or surrounding area, you might be eligible to receive SAP services at no cost to you. To find out, contact us at the following phone number or email address and tell us where you go to school. Call (515) 244-6090 or email to counsel@efr.org