

PART 3:

WHAT TO DO ABOUT BULLYING

Just because bullying is common does not mean you must accept it. There are steps you can take to reduce bullying. As key members of a school community, you and your peers have the most to gain from reducing this hurtful behavior. You also share the biggest responsibility for what happens. While you alone can't change the entire climate of your school, you can change how *you* respond.

Part 3 of this book lists practical steps you can take to reduce bullying in your school. These steps are divided into four groups. The first focuses on what you can do if you are targeted by bullies; the second includes strategies for bystanders; the third gives suggestions for those accused of bullying, and the last includes steps to take when dealing with cyberbullying.

What You Can Do When You Are Being Bullied

Anyone who has been the target of a bully knows how lonely and difficult it can be. But people singled out by bullies are not powerless. If a bully's attention is aimed at you, there are actions you can take to prevent or diminish the attack. Some of these strategies are quiet and involve developing a healthy and realistic perspective, a kind of mental shield. Others are more direct and involve responding to your attacker. Not all of the steps described below will work in every situation. However, with patience and practice, you can use these suggestions to help you the next time a bully crosses your path.

1 Remember that bullying is the problem—not you. If you are currently dealing with a bully, don't be ashamed or embarrassed. There's nothing "wrong" with you that makes you deserve such treatment. Even if others target you for being "different" for whatever reason, they do NOT have the right to insult or mistreat you. All of us deserve civility. As human beings, we have a right to be free from threats, cruelty, and violence. Those who attack people for their differences—whether it be based on

appearance, sexual preference, disability, race, or something else—have engaged in unacceptable behavior. They have failed to be civil. They are the source of the problem, not you.

Understand, too, that it is completely normal to feel anger, sadness, fear, and depression because of bullying. You are not "weak" or "soft" or "a sissy" because you have such feelings. Anyone who says otherwise simply doesn't know how tough it is to face such treatment. Each day tens of thousands of your peers in schools throughout the country feel the exact same emotions when faced with bullying. You are not alone.

2 Remember that bullying is not permanent. The awful days will pass. During school, especially in grades 6 through 10, bullying can be so constant that you may feel your life will always be filled with peers who exist just to humiliate you. This is not true. In the adult world, such behavior is unacceptable and even illegal. In the future, you will be free from the hurtful teasing and insults of today. When you are an adult, you will look back, and the bully and his or her friends will be long gone. The torment you endure now will be over. You may even find yourself working in a position where you'll be able to help protect kids from bullies. Keep this in mind at all times, especially when you're sad or hurt. There is a better future waiting for you.

3 Understand several facts about bullies. First, bullies are often (but not always) lonely and insecure people. When they pick on you, they stop others from picking on them. They feel safer, stronger, and in control when they bully—feelings that might be missing in other parts of their lives.

A second fact about bullies is that they often want desperately to be accepted by "the crowd." For this reason, they sometimes intensify their attacks when they have audiences around them. But the truth is that the people in the crowd often care little for the bully. Instead, they "go along" with things because they, too, are afraid. In other words, many who join the bully in teasing you are not necessarily your enemies. Some are simply acting mean so the bully does not turn against them. Many students are guilty of such

“fake” behavior.

A final fact about bullies is that the high status they may enjoy in school does not last. Physical, verbal, or social bullying is not accepted in the adult world. Those who rely on it to deal with their peers risk facing lifelong difficulties in their jobs, their communities, and their personal relationships. In one study, one-third of male bullies between sixth and ninth grades ended up with criminal convictions by age 24. In another study, bullies were shown to be five times more likely than their non-bullying peers to have criminal records by age 30. While not every bully becomes a criminal, there is plenty of evidence that bullying, instead of making a person socially successful, can lead to serious problems and unhappiness.

4 If at all possible, tell someone else about your experience. Embarrassment, shame, and fear cause many who are bullied to hide their experiences from others. This decision only increases the isolation and pain of bullying, and it can lead to depression.

Talking to others eases these negative feelings and allows you to express the anger and hurt building up inside. If you are being bullied, find someone you can trust and tell him or her what you are facing. If you have no one nearby to speak to, consider writing your thoughts in a journal, notebook, or computer. In each case, be careful not to leave your words where your peers or bullies can see them.

While talking and writing are not going to solve your problem, the simple act of expressing your true feelings will allow you to “vent” and help you feel a bit better.

5 Find safety in numbers. Bullies often pick on people who are isolated. Students who walk to school alone, sit by themselves in class, or eat alone at lunch are more likely to get harassed. Because such people are outside “the crowd,” bullies are freer to pick on them.

So, whenever you can, keep people around you. If a bully attacks you in an isolated hallway, try to use a more crowded

hallway next time. If you normally sit alone at lunchtime, take a risk and join a table where you know someone who seems nice. When on a school bus, sit as close to the driver as you can. Instead of walking alone to school, walk in or very close to a larger crowd of students. Remember, there is often safety in numbers.

6 Tell a school official. Very few people who are targeted by bullies feel comfortable telling school officials what is happening. Some fear that telling a teacher, principal, coach, or guidance counselor will make the bully retaliate with even harsher treatment. Others are simply too ashamed to admit the truth. Many think that telling teachers about bullies is “soft” or cowardly. Finally, some do not wish to be “a snitch.” While these reasons are understandable, each is wrong and unhelpful. Here’s why:

First of all, when you tell school officials about a bully, you help other students who are in need. Chances are the bully that picks on you also attacks some of your peers. And like you, those other students may think the best way to respond is to keep quiet. As a result, you and many other students may be enduring daily misery simply because you refuse to speak up. If you’re not willing to talk to a teacher for yourself, try doing it for your peers. Others will be quietly grateful to you for being brave enough to take a stand. And, most likely, you will feel relieved once you are able to tell a trusted official what has been happening.

A second reason to tell a teacher or counselor about a bully’s behavior is that you might protect future students from avoidable suffering; you may even prevent a tragedy. People who endure the harsh treatment of bullies can reach a breaking point, a time when they are so depressed, angry and frustrated that they are ready to hurt themselves or others. If school officials are alerted to what is happening, there is a chance to prevent such moments. Sadly, school shootings and suicides happen each year because people are too scared to speak up. Despite what some say about being a “snitch,” alerting a teacher or principal is not an act of cowardice; it is an act of bravery. Your action may save lives. If more students did it, schools would be safer for everyone.

For all the reasons above, it is important, even critical, that you let school officials know when bullies are acting up. Keep in mind that there are many ways to do this. You don't have to do it publicly in the middle of the school day. You may be able to do it privately after school when you can speak with a teacher one-on-one. Or you can write an anonymous letter, send an e-mail message, or place a phone call (or have a trusted adult in your life do this) so that your classmates don't know what you have done. All this may seem extreme, but remember that lives could be at stake.

7 Get active. School sports, clubs, and organizations can be safe havens from bullies. When you join a group activity, you become part of a community that is likely to watch and protect its members. In addition, school activities are places to make friends as well as meet helpful adults, including coaches, mentors, and faculty advisors. For this reason, getting active can be one of the healthiest and safest steps you can take to reduce bullying in your life.

If traditional school sports make you uncomfortable, find something else that better matches your interests. For example, your school might have a volunteer organization, a marching band, a chess team, a choral group, or an outdoor club that appeals to you. No matter what you choose, your involvement will lead you to new people and new experiences. And while the idea of joining a new activity may be stressful at first, most people feel much better about themselves when they become part of a group. Keep in mind, if you join an activity and discover that you do not like it, don't get discouraged. Just try something else. Sooner or later you will discover something that you like.

Note: If your school has no organizations that appeal to you, find out what's available in your community. The YMCA/YWCA, community centers, libraries, and churches/synagogues/mosques often have activities available for young people. Typically, such organizations are eager for new participants. They want you to join them.

8 Use specific responses to deal with the bully. There is no simple way to deal with bullies when they strike. Each bully is different, and what you do in one situation may not work in another. The tips presented below offer a variety of different ways to react when a bully confronts you. Some of them may work with the bullies in your school; others may not.

■ **Laugh along.** Bullies often take pleasure in upsetting the people they attack. If you laugh along with a bully's insults, you actually take away some of his or her power. The next time a bully teases you, you might laugh as if you are part of the joke. Your response suggests to others that teasing doesn't upset you.

■ **Roll with the punch.** In boxing, a punch can be made less damaging if the target moves in the same direction as the hit. The same idea is true for insults. When a bully teases you, agree with what is said. You may even want to add or expand the bully's insult. For example, a bully might pick on you for wearing glasses. You might say, "Yep, I've got four eyes. That's right, my eyes are just like bug eyes. Thanks for pointing that out."

This tactic steals away the bully's power and control. How can he or she insult you if you have already done it? Because the bully has less to gain from targeting you, he or she may skip you in future verbal attacks.

■ **Change the subject.** When a bully hassles you, point out something that distracts his or her negative attention. You might say something like, "Oh no, that teacher is watching us. You better do this later." Or you might simply look at something around you and use it as a question or distraction: "What's that teacher's problem?" Your effort is likely to confuse the bully and buy you time. Combined with other strategies in this list, distraction can be an effective response to a bully's verbal attack.

■ **Learn verbal self defense.** Some verbal bullies—those who are not physically violent—may be discouraged if you defend yourself verbally. This does not mean you should get into a shouting

match or scream insults in your school hallway; such behavior will get you in trouble and worsen the situation. Instead, it means developing a response to a bully's verbal attack, one which shows bullies there is nothing to be gained from teasing you.

Keep in mind that bullies typically want to see their targets get emotional. For this reason, it is important that you stay calm and deny the bully the pleasure of upsetting you. Having a quick comeback is one way to show a verbal bully you are not an easy target. Below are some responses that can ward off a verbal bully's attack.

- Give the bully permission to tease you.** This gives *you* control and power in the situation, not the bully. *Example:* "Go ahead, Lisa. Say what you want. It's not gonna bother me."
- Act as if you don't care.** This denies bullies the satisfaction of making you upset. Speak calmly to show you're in control. *Example:* "Whatever, Lisa."
- Act as if you have other things to worry about.** This takes away the bully's control and puts you in charge while also deflecting the attack. *Example:* "I'm sorry, Lisa, but I don't have time for this. I need to be home now."
- Address the bully's attack directly.** Done with respect and eye contact, this gesture puts you on equal footing with him or her. It also shows your expectation of civility. It may also win you respect among bystanders. *Example:* "C'mon, Lisa. Let's just stop this. We both have better things to do."
- Reject the bully's insults.** This assertive step declares your power and dignity to everyone that hears you. *Example:* "You have no right to talk to me that way. I have nothing to say to you, Lisa. I'm done."

In each case, the best approach after these suggestions is to walk away and remove yourself from the bullying situation. In time, the bully may decide you are not an easy verbal target and move on.

A Warning About Fighting

Many adults—including some parents—think that the best way to deal with bullies is to stand up and fight them. To be fair, it is true that fighting sometimes works at least temporarily to discourage bullies. However, physical violence is a harmful and unsafe strategy, one that often leads to even more serious problems. For this reason, fighting is an unwise way to deal with a bully. Anyone who tells you otherwise is not being realistic.

First off, most schools have strict "zero-tolerance" policies for fighting. This means that you will be punished for fighting—even if you were provoked or trying to defend yourself from a bully. The punishment may include a suspension or possibly an expulsion from your school, leading you to even bigger troubles.

Second, fights can easily escalate and may not be limited to fists. Knives and guns are far too easy for young people to obtain. If you get into a fight with a bully, it may be impossible for you to know if weapons are present until it is too late. And even if a bully does not have a weapon today, what is to stop him or her from bringing one tomorrow? Each day young people are shot and killed in retaliation for fights that happen in or near school. While there are many reasons fighting is unacceptable, this is the most important.

So if it is at all possible, avoid fighting. Your life is too precious to risk for something that will be just a bad memory in a few years.

ACTIVITY

Your teacher may have you answer the following questions individually or may have you discuss the questions in a small group with other students. In either case, a whole class discussion might follow.

What three steps on pages 44-51 for dealing with bullies are the best ones to use at your school?

Are there other steps you would suggest to deal with bullying? Explain.

What You Can Do If You Witness Bullying

A major reason why bullying is so common is that few witnesses ever stand up against it. Instead, most people who see bullying “laugh along,” an act which actually contributes to the problems caused by bullies.

The steps below describe a different, more productive course of action for those who witness bullying. The simplest actions you can take are presented first. More difficult—and braver—suggestions follow. Of course, not every suggestion works for a given situation. Sometimes only one or two options will be possible. What is important is that taking any step, even a small one, is better than doing nothing.

1 Refuse to join in. Bullies are almost always accompanied by followers who join in their hurtful behavior. Often these people are “going along” with things because they are afraid of the bully. Yet this decision only encourages the bully to continue tormenting people.

Here is what you can do instead: Rather than laughing along or teasing the bully’s target, just stay quiet. If you refuse to participate, the bully has less encouragement to continue his or her behavior. Also, your decision to “stay out of it” means that one less person—you—is hurting the bully’s target.

2 Walk away when bullies are acting up. Most people gather quickly to watch bullying take place. Bullies thrive on this attention, and their targets suffer more because of it. By removing yourself from the mob of onlookers, you reduce the amount of attention the bully is getting. Also, the act of walking away can send a quiet message that you don’t approve of what is happening.

3 Distract the bully. Bullies, like everyone else, can be distracted. Sometimes changing the subject, telling an unrelated story or joke, or just encouraging the bully to do something else (“Let’s go outside / get back to class / head home / get something

to eat”) can prevent a hurtful incident from happening. This is not a permanent solution, but it may be enough to spare one of your classmates from another moment of torment.

4 Report any bullying you see. Many students witness bullying but refuse to tell adults because they don’t want to “rat out” someone. But if you know someone is being hassled or about to do something harmful to another person (or him/herself), alert a trusted teacher or school official to the problem.

Here’s one way to proceed: Instead of “telling on” the bully, you might express concern for the person who is being targeted. You might say, “I’m worried about Eric because people keep teasing him.” If you are afraid of what others might say, you could report what you know anonymously either by writing an unsigned letter or calling the principal but not leaving your name. The important thing is that school officials are made aware of the problem so something can be done about it.

5 Speak out. This step is a bit more difficult and takes courage. If possible, get a friend or two to join you. When you see bullying taking place, speak out against it. Simple phrases like “Leave her alone” or “Stop picking on him” can really undermine the control a bully has. If you and other people protest, the bully will become uncomfortable and is likely to stop the hurtful behavior. Doing so may result in people turning on him or her, and that’s the last thing a bully wants to happen.

6 Stand up. This is a brave and highly effective way to deal with bullies. When someone is being teased or intimidated, walk over and stand with that person. Or simply invite him or her to join your group of friends. Your action will send a message that the target is not alone—and that bullying behavior will not be tolerated. If you manage to gather several people, the bully will probably go away. Keep in mind that your behavior is not intended to insult or harm the bully. Instead, it is meant to prevent or stop another attack.

7 Work with others to reduce bullying. Even schools that have serious problems with bullies can be changed into much safer and friendlier places. To make this happen, you and your classmates must work with other students and teachers to increase the strength of your school’s community.

One way to begin is to set up a meeting in which students and teachers talk openly about bullying. Speak to your principal, teacher, or counselor about reserving a time to discuss concerns about the problem of bullying in your school.

At the meeting, try to come up with specific actions which can be taken to reduce bullying. Maybe you and your peers can discuss ways to resolve conflicts and to better treat isolated or new students. Or perhaps you know of a place in or near the school that is unsafe and could use better security. Prepare specific suggestions for teachers and administrators on how they can support what you’re trying to do. Sometimes simply increasing the amount of adult supervision in the cafeteria and in bathrooms is enough to significantly reduce bullying in school. Whatever actions you suggest will be more effective if everyone—students, teachers, and principals—comes together to support them.

Distributing copies of this booklet to parents and other members of the school community is another way to reduce bullying in your school. Once bullies sense that many eyes are on them—and that their behavior is being observed—they will be less likely to hurt others.