


# Parenting Positively



## Coping with **Bullying**

# For parents

of children between 6 and 12



This booklet is one in a series on **Parenting Positively**. Parenting is a very rewarding job but one which can be difficult at times, especially when parents are faced with challenging situations. The aim of this series is to provide information and guidance to parents of children between the ages of 6 and 12 to help create a positive, loving and supportive relationship between you and your child.

The series covers general parenting skills as well as complex life issues such as bullying, bereavement, separation and domestic abuse. There are booklets for parents outlining children's understanding of a particular issue and how you can support them. There are also booklets for parents to read with their children, which may help your child to better understand what is happening and help you as a parent to answer any questions he or she might have.

Each booklet also gives further resources that you can follow up for more information and help on the issue covered.

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Barnardos supports children whose well-being is under threat, by working with them, their families and communities and by campaigning for the rights of children. Barnardos was established in Ireland in 1962 and is Ireland's leading independent children's charity.

Compiled by Elaine Guiney.

# Introduction

This booklet is for parents of children aged 6 to 12 years who are being bullied and for parents of children who are bullying others. It gives information on the reasons behind bullying and how you can help your child if they are being bullied or are bullying other children.

## What is Bullying?

Bullying is an anti-social behavioural problem affecting the lives of many children and families in Ireland today. It is when a person or group of people take advantage of or make fun of another. It may involve emotional or physical abuse and causes feelings of hurt, rejection, isolation and fear.

**Bullying is always wrong and is an unacceptable behaviour which should never be overlooked or ignored.**



# Does Bullying Happen A Lot?

Bullying among children can happen at home among siblings or friends, in school or at the local playground. Quite often, it occurs in situations where there is little or no adult supervision. While squabbles, teasing or changing friendships are an inevitable part of childhood, if they occur on a daily basis they become stressful experiences affecting social and psychological development or causing physical harm.

While some children can bully short-term, for others bullying becomes a habit and a difficult one to break. In all cases of bullying, adult help and support is a must, for both the child being bullied and the child who bullies.

Occasionally, bullying can occur between an adult or adolescent and a child. This may involve excluding the child from an activity or forcing the child to participate in a task against his or her will. An adult may make fun of or humiliate the child in front of others or treat one child differently within a group. This type of bullying can be particularly distressing or confusing for a child and is poor role-modelling for all children.

## Why do children bully?


The reasons behind bullying can be complex. Children can bully due to a number of factors:

- Watching aggressive TV programmes or playing violent video games.
- Feelings of insecurity, low self esteem or feeling unloved.
- Being used to having their own way at home but not in school.
- Changes or disruptions at home such as parental separation, a new sibling or the death of a loved one.
- Acting out of frustration, having poor communication skills or impulse control.
- Feeling like they are not getting enough attention due to family circumstances, for example, living with a sibling with special needs.
- Wanting to show off among peers and feel like the leader in a group.
- Poor understanding of the feelings of others or an inability to see things from another's perspective.

- Having little understanding of the consequences of their actions.
- Experiencing inappropriate or aggressive family discipline.
- For some children, bullying is about having a sense of control or power. It may be that other aspects of their lives feel out of control and the bullying is a way of controlling a situation or feeling a sense of power.
- The child who bullies may be bullied themselves.
- The child who bullies may be unaware of why they bully and that what they are doing is wrong.

## What about adults who bully children?

- An adult may bully a child due to conflict or issues between parents – targeting a child as a way of getting back at a parent within the same family or between parents within the community.
- If a child has challenging behaviour, the adult may have difficulty managing this and use bullying tactics



instead such as using harsh discipline, excluding the child from activities on a regular basis, shouting at the child or being short tempered.

- When an adult is managing a large group of children, he or she may use bullying tactics as a control mechanism.
- The adult may have his or her own individual values and beliefs whereby bullying behaviours are accepted as the norm.
- An adult may be physically or sexually abusing a child and use bullying tactics to instil fear in the child – threatening the child to keep quiet about a situation.
- Adults may unknowingly take out their own feelings of anger/stress on a child.
- If a parent is bullying his or her own child, it may be because of limited parental capacity due to factors such as addiction, intellectual disability, domestic violence or lack of support in parenting. (See list of Useful Resources if you feel your partner is bullying your child.)

Adults can bully children in a number of ways including emotional abuse where the adult may humiliate a child in front of others, drawing attention to some aspect of their behaviour or ridiculing a child for not being successful at an activity. Name calling or labelling is also a form of bullying, for example, teasing a child in front of others with terms such as ‘cry baby’.

## Why are children bullied?

Any child can be bullied. A child may be bullied for no particular reason... simply because they are in the wrong place at the wrong time. Children who bully may well invent a reason for their bullying behaviour in an attempt to justify their actions.

- Some children are bullied because they look like they can't stand up for themselves.
- Perhaps one thing sets the child apart in the eyes of the child who bullies such as wearing the ‘wrong’ shoes, having a disability or speaking with a different accent.

- Children can be bullied about their families, for example, if they live in foster care or having an over-protective parent.
- A child can innocently provoke bullying. The child showing pride in school achievements may be targeted by the child who is not doing so well in school.
- Children may be bullied or taunted about their race, religion, gender, physical attributes or mental abilities.

## In what ways do children bully?

Girls and boys can bully in different ways. Boys may use physical strength while girls may exclude another from a group. In all cases though, the intimidating behaviour experienced can be stressful and hurtful.

Bullying behaviour can include the following:

- Name calling, taunting or belittling.
- Excluding a child from a group or activity.

- Physically targeting, from poking and hair pulling to physical attack.
- Making fun of appearance or clothing.
- Taunting a child for succeeding in class or for falling behind.
- Making up stories to get a child into trouble.
- Forcing or daring a child to do something that he or she doesn't want to do.
- Damaging, taking or hiding belongings.
- Indulging in rough and tumble play which another child is not enjoying.
- Blackmailing or threatening behaviour.
- Writing notes or sending text messages to or about a child.
- Harassing a child when he or she is vulnerable such as in a changing room or alone at a bus stop.
- Making non-verbal intimidating gestures, for example, signalling slitting throat.
- Making hurtful comments about family members such as an overprotective mother or a sibling with a disability.

- Taunting a child about where he or she lives or the family car.

Some children with low confidence may tag along with a child who bullies in an effort to boost their own self esteem. They may be aware that the bullying is wrong but not be strong enough to step away or speak up.

As young people embrace the internet and other mobile communication technologies, cyber bullying is an issue that older children may face. It involves sending or posting harmful or cruel text or images using the internet or other digital communication devices.

## How does bullying affect children?

### The child being bullied

- Bullied children experience a range of emotions. They can be angry, fearful, powerless, isolated or anxious. Without opportunities to talk, children may become withdrawn or angry. Feelings of anger may in turn lead to the child adopting bullying behaviour themselves.

- Victims may mistakenly feel it is their own fault and develop low self esteem and poor self confidence.
- Everyday childhood experiences can be hindered by stress, anxiety and fear.
- Schoolwork may deteriorate due to difficulty concentrating or feeling physically ill. This may show itself through stomach aches or difficulty sleeping.
- Instead of developing social skills, children who are being bullied may spend their time developing survival strategies such as avoiding situations in school, pretending to be feeling ill (or actually feeling ill due to stress) or dropping out of after-school activities.

### The child who is bullying

While some children who bully are unaware of their actions and the effects they have, others may be aware of the effects of their behaviour but feel trapped or caught up in this behaviour. These children may be labelled as 'the bully' in social settings and find it difficult to step out of this role. Feelings of aggression may be due to unhappiness at home or in school. Children can be confused about their actions and



feelings and may not have the emotional skills or adult support needed to change.

Children who bully consistently over long periods are more likely to engage in anti-social behaviour through the school years and beyond. They may have difficulty developing healthy relationships as aggressive behaviour may stunt their social skills. Bullying may become a long-term way of life in personal, social and work relationships.

Despite their personal situation or reasons for bullying, children should be made aware that bullying is an unacceptable behaviour which is always wrong and harmful. Family support and help from school may be all that is needed to put an end to bullying.

Maybe you have been told that your child is bullying? Spend one to one time together. You may be the only person your child trusts enough to talk about what he or she has been doing and why.

## Is my child being bullied? What do I need to look out for?

Many children are good at hiding their feelings, particularly if they are afraid to talk. If you suspect your child is being bullied, watch out for the following tell-tale signs.

- Unexplained bruising or physical injury.
- A change in behaviour, your child becoming moody or appearing withdrawn, anxious, aggressive or clingy.
- Loss of confidence and low self esteem.
- Sudden disinterest in attending groups such as soccer club or girl guides.
- Falling out with previous good friends.
- Bed-wetting, nightmares or inability to sleep.
- Falling behind in school work, sudden anger at teachers, refusing to go to school.
- Regularly asking about school holidays and becoming overly upset when it is time to go back to school.

- Loss of or damage to personal items and constant requests for pocket money or new school items.
- Complaining of stomach ache, headache or other physical ailments.
- Displaying aggression through imaginative play/ role play, for example with dolls or puppets.
- Loss of appetite.
- Drawing pictures which express anger or hurt.
- Coming home from group activities earlier or later than usual.

Have you noticed your child is hungrier than usual after particular activities or after school? Maybe he or she is being bullied into giving away the lunch or snack you provided.

Be alert and observant. You may notice a pattern. Does your 12 year old refuse to go to the shop next door? Does the topic of a book or TV programme trigger emotion?

## I'm worried my child is being bullied, but I'm not quite sure.

You may be concerned about changes in behaviour, but your child may be unwilling to talk. This could be due to threats made during bullying.

Try some of the following:

- Spend quality time alone together doing things that your child likes to do. He or she may be more likely to talk when there are no distractions like a younger sibling.
- Ask about school but don't expect answers straight away. Choose a time when you are both relaxed and free to talk such as when homework is done or when driving in the car. Choose a time and place that is best for your own family.
- Instead of general questions like '*How was your day?*' ask open ended questions that focus on specific parts of the day to help/support your child in communicating with you.
  - Tell me about yard time/soccer club.
  - Who did you sit with on the bus?
  - How is your friend *such and such*?

- What did you like about your day?
- Was there anything you didn't like?
- Comment that he or she sometimes '*looks worried*' or '*thoughtful*', but avoid adding pressure. Too many questions may have the opposite effect and prevent your child from opening up.
- If you or your family have been through changes, talk about your feelings, '*Sometimes I miss our old house*' or '*When we all lived together...*' etc. By sharing your own feelings, your child may feel like opening up. Remember, however, to always talk at an emotional level that your child is able to manage.

If you are concerned that your child is doing the bullying, some of the above strategies may help you to get to the route of the problem and support your child in changing behaviour.

## My child is being bullied. What next?

- Remain calm. Displaying anger or upset may distress your child further. Listen and be supportive.
- Take what your child says seriously and give praise for the courage shown in talking about the problem.
- Don't blame either yourself or your child. Reassure your child that it's not his or her fault.
- Calmly explain that what is happening is wrong and needs to stop.
- Openly discuss with your child what you plan to do next. Your child may panic now that things are out in the open and fear that the situation may get worse. He or she will need regular reassurance that the situation needs to be dealt with.
- If the bullying occurs in school, contact your child's teacher as soon as possible.
- If the bullying is of a serious nature, your child may need professional help. Refer to the list of useful contacts at the back of this book or seek advice from your child's school or your GP.

The accompanying guide to this booklet for children may help you to discuss the issues in a child friendly way.

Keep a diary of dates, exact locations and the names of the children involved. If your child is old enough, he or she may want to write a diary expressing his or her feelings. This could have therapeutic benefits for your child.

By coming up with ideas of what to do next, the older child will feel a sense of control in the situation.

*Do not promise to keep the bullying a secret.*

However, reassure your child that you will keep him or her informed as to what will happen next.

## How do I help my child who is being bullied?

- Help to build your child's confidence. Ask what he or she could say when bullied and (if appropriate) have your child practice this.
- Maybe you and your child can come up with some clever responses together; being funny could put the other child off. Again, practise this through role play or using a mirror. Remember though, make sure your child is not hurtful to others.
- Tell your child not to fight back as he or she could get hurt or be blamed for the fighting.
- Have your child practise appearing calm. Explain that by not reacting, the child who bullies may get bored.
- Encourage your child to stay in a group and avoid situations where he or she may be alone and targeted.
- Encourage your child to talk about his or her feelings, write about it or draw a picture. Explain that it is important not to bottle things up.
- Educate your child about bullying, placing the responsibility for the behaviour on the person

who is bullying. This helps your child not to take it personally. Regularly reassure that no one deserves to be bullied.

- Help to equip your child with the tools needed in resolving conflict. Encourage him or her to express feelings and ideas confidently and to listen to and negotiate with others in problem solving. This work can begin at home, between you and your child and between siblings. You as parents can role model how to resolve conflict appropriately – your child will observe how you solve problems and negotiate with each other as parents.
- If bullying has been going on long term or has been very stressful for your child, you may need extra family support. Your child may need a more therapeutic intervention such as play therapy or one-to-one work. Peer groups such as after-school clubs, friendship groups and activity clubs may be an additional support.
- Listen to your child. The younger child may need your support in recognising or naming their feelings, for example, *'Are you feeling unhappy, upset, hurt about what has been happening?'*
- Spend quality time together as often as you can, giving your child undivided attention.

- By engaging in physical activities your child will develop physical coordination and become less physically tense. This will result in increased self confidence and improved peer relationships.
- Maybe your child needs to work on social skills or how he or she relates to other children. (This can be challenging for the child with specific learning needs.) Ask your school or other professionals for support or advice.
- Nurturing self esteem is a key factor in dealing with and overcoming bullying. Identify and encourage your child's positive attributes. In turn, this will build self confidence.
- Encourage your child to make new friends. A fresh start in a new setting will be a positive experience so look into other activities your child could attend such as a drama class or a local youth group.

The most important thing you can do is to be there to listen to and support your child.

## How can I link with my child's school?

- Remember, if you were unaware of the bullying, the chances are that your child's school is too.
- Explain the situation calmly and clearly, giving as much information as possible including times, dates, nature of bullying etc.
- Ask for the teacher's suggestions as to the best solution to the problem.
- Ask for monitoring of the situation and make arrangements for an update meeting.
- Remember, the school will have to take into account the child who bullies, other students, the school policy and management issues as well as your child so solving the problem may be a slow process.
- If your child is being bullied by a teacher, this should be brought to the attention of the school principal.
- If your concerns continue, put them in writing to the school principal or the school's Board of Management.

- Your school may implement a programme on bullying such as Stay Safe, which addresses issues in a child-friendly way in the classroom setting.
- Ask what information the school can give you about bullying. Look for books, agencies or services that can help.

All schools should implement recommendations put in place by the Department of Education's 'Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools'. Ask to see your schools anti-bullying policy document.

It is important that you inform the school as soon as possible to ensure your child's safety and the safety of others. When teachers are made aware of the situation, supervision will be increased.

## My child is bullying. What should I do next?

You may be shocked. Expect that your child could deny it at first, blame someone else or try to make light of the situation, claiming '*I'm only teasing*'. You may need to explain the differences between teasing and taunting to your child.

- Never ignore the situation. It won't go away by itself and may get worse. Take what the school says seriously. Your child needs your help and the help of the school to change his or her behaviour.
- Try to get to the root of the problem by talking with your child. Explain that you want to help. Spend one to one time together discussing the problem.
- Ask your child if he or she understands the harm being caused and what the consequences may be for everyone involved.
- Ask the older child if he or she can think of ways to stop what is happening. Praise your child when he or she plays cooperatively.
- Explain to the younger child what bullying is, give examples. Talk about its effects on others.
- Avoid using terms like 'a bully' or 'the bully'. It is important not to 'shame' your child by labelling in this way as it may result in withdrawal or telling lies to hide what has been happening. Instead, refer to the specific actions like name calling or hurting others. This will help your child see that it is the behaviour that is unacceptable, not the child themselves.
- Think about your own home. Is there often conflict? Does your child always get his or her own way? Does your child understand that there may be consequences to actions? Have there been recent changes? What does your child watch on TV? (See the booklet entitled Parenting Skills in this series.)
- As a parent you are your child's most important teacher. Be a model of appropriate behaviour for your child by displaying respect for others, open communication and appropriately managing your own anger.
- Direct your child's behaviour into positive pursuits such as sports or joining a youth group. This will offer him or her a fresh start and opportunities to channel leadership skills in a positive manner. In turn, it will build your child's self esteem and foster a sense of pride in activities.

- Encourage your child to take on responsibility or 'caring activities' such as looking after a pet or doing household jobs. Such activities encourage independence, develop self esteem and will help your child to think about the needs of others. Positive experiences instilled at home will carry over into your child's wider social settings.
- Find out if there are others involved. Explain that he or she should never join in when someone else is being bullied and should help by always reporting incidents of bullying.
- Ask the school to keep you informed of further complaints.

Quite often, the child with behaviour problems is the child with unmet needs. Ensure that you spend some time every day giving your child undivided attention. Spend quality time listening to and talking with your child, learning about what's important for him or her, what has been happening in his or her life and developing communication between you. If you have a busy schedule or more than one child, develop a routine whereby each child gets to spend quality time alone with you regularly throughout each week. For

example, the older child has one to one time with you when a younger sibling has gone to bed.

Encourage your child by giving positive attention and feedback when he or she behaves appropriately. This can help change your child's behaviour and build self esteem. Be specific when you praise your child's behaviour, for example, *'You worked really hard at sharing with your little brother and played nicely today. You should feel good about yourself.'*

### Bullying between siblings

It may be that the bullying is occurring in your own home between siblings. Again, look at your family situation. If there have been recent changes, think about how they may impact on each of your children.

- Is the older child expected to 'get on with things' or take on more responsibility?
- Are you spending equal amounts of time with each of your children?
- How do you communicate within your family?
- Is there time in your busy day for talking about problems, sharing daily experiences?



You can use many of the points above to manage bullying between siblings. Discuss the problem openly and try to be as fair as possible. Explain why bullying is wrong without making the children feel like you are 'taking sides'. Encourage positive behaviour and set aside quality time as a family and individually with each child. When you look at the bigger picture, the reasons for bullying behaviour may become apparent. It may be that you need to adjust your family routine or simply take time out together.

With adult help and support, the child who has been bullying can learn about the effects of bullying on others. Parents, carers and teachers can support the child in changing his or her behaviour and learning to communicate effectively with others.

Children who are bullied or who have been bullying will have difficulty in overcoming this problem alone and will need your reassurance and encouragement in tackling it. For your child, the most important thing is knowing that you are there to listen and that you are available to help.

# Sources of Further Information

## Useful Publications

### For Parents

**Cyberbullying: Activities to Help Children and Teens to Stay Safe in a Texting, Twittering, Social Networking World**

Vanessa Rogers, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2010

**Friendship and Other Weapons: Group Activities to Help Young Girls Aged 5-11 to Cope with Bullying**

Signe Whitson, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2012

**Preventing Bullying! : a parent's guide**

Kidscape, 2012 [Online Resource]

**Bullying and Young Children**

Christine MacIntyre, Routledge, 2009

### For Children

**A Bully Picked on Me**

Elizabeth O'Loughlin, Pangolin Books, 2005

**Bullies, bigmouths and so-called friends**

J. Alexander, Hodder Children's Books, 2006

**The Resolving Bullying Book**

Fiona McAusian, Veritas, 2010

## Useful Contacts

Here are the names of other places you can contact when you want information or want help to find someone to talk to:

### **Barnardos**

Christchurch Square, Dublin 8  
Tel: 01 453 0355  
Email: [info@barnardos.ie](mailto:info@barnardos.ie)  
[www.barnardos.ie](http://www.barnardos.ie)

### **Tusla – Child and Family Agency**

Brunel Building, Heuston South Quarter,  
Dublin 8  
Tel: 01 771 8500  
Email: [info@tusla.ie](mailto:info@tusla.ie)  
[www.tusla.ie](http://www.tusla.ie) or [www.tusla.ie/parenting-24-seven](http://www.tusla.ie/parenting-24-seven)

### **Anti-Bullying Centre (ABC)**

Dublin City University, Dublin 9  
[www.dcu.ie/abc](http://www.dcu.ie/abc)

### **Childline**

Tel: 1800 666 666  
[www.childline.ie](http://www.childline.ie)

### **Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (ISPCC)**

29 Lower Baggot Street, Dublin 2  
Telephone: 01 676 7960  
Email: [ispcc@ispcc.ie](mailto:ispcc@ispcc.ie)  
[www.ispcc.ie](http://www.ispcc.ie)

### **Irish Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy**

1st Floor, Marina House, 11-13 Clarence St,  
Dun Laoghaire, Dublin  
Tel: (01) 230 3536  
Email: [iacp@irish-counselling.ie](mailto:iacp@irish-counselling.ie)  
[www.irish-counselling.ie](http://www.irish-counselling.ie)

### **National Association for Victims of Bullying**

Frederick St, Clara, Co Offaly  
Tel: 0506 31590

### **National Parents Council – Primary**

Tel: 01 887 4477  
Email: [helpline@npc.ie](mailto:helpline@npc.ie)  
[www.npc.ie](http://www.npc.ie)

### **National Parents Council – Post Primary**

[www.npcpp.ie](http://www.npcpp.ie)

### **Parentline**

Carmichael House, North Brunswick Street, Dublin 7  
Tel: 1890 927 277  
Email: [info@parentline.ie](mailto:info@parentline.ie)  
[www.parentline.ie](http://www.parentline.ie)

### **Useful Websites**

[www.staysafe.ie](http://www.staysafe.ie)  
[www.bully4u.ie](http://www.bully4u.ie)  
[www.kidscape.org.uk](http://www.kidscape.org.uk)

Tusla - Child and Family Agency, Brunel Building, Heuston South Quarter, Dublin 8

T: 01 771 8500 E: [info@tusla.ie](mailto:info@tusla.ie) [www.tusla.ie](http://www.tusla.ie)

Barnardos, Christchurch Square, Dublin 8

T: 01 454 9699 E: [resources@barnardos.ie](mailto:resources@barnardos.ie) or [training@barnardos.ie](mailto:training@barnardos.ie) [www.barnardos.ie](http://www.barnardos.ie)

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