

How to deal with schools when your child is being bullied

One in four children will experience it, some will even cause it and no school is ever completely without it. Bullying rates number one on many young people's list of concerns. Parents of Pupils asks what local schools are doing to respond and how local parents can help.

Mention the word 'bully' and most people would conjure up the image of a menacing older lad pinning an innocent first year against the wall and demanding lunch money. Or maybe the antics of Biff in Back To The Future .

In fact, when you stop to think about it, bullying can be almost anything from physically hitting or pushing to threats and intimidation. It could even be children ignoring another child on purpose.

And forget about the stereotype image of the bully too. Julie Johnson, Consultant to the national bullying charity Kidscape, told POP: "A bully doesn't have to be physically bigger boy: they maybe smaller, a boy or a girl, or maybe in a gang.

"Boys generally tend to be more physically aggressive whilst girls tend, generally at least, to be more devious and manipulative. Having said that, more recently, there is some evidence that girls have become more physically aggressive too"

Around one in four children will fall foul of a bully at some time. The most common age for bullying is late primary school to early secondary: often the age when bullying starts. But of course, it could happen to you when you're older or younger: as anyone with a 'bully' at their place of work will tell you.

Surprisingly, some of the things that make someone a bully are very similar to those which make them a victim. Some bullies are characterised by low self-esteem, anxiety and emotional instability. Often struggling at school and unpopular with other children, they may use bullying to get the attention and success they crave.

Other bullies are referred to as 'passive'. These are children who are the 'hangers-on' in the bullying gang. They may not want to bully themselves but to keep credibility with the group they go along with it.

And then there's the more typical image of course. The bully who is brash, insensitive to the feelings of others and popular with their peers. In other words, someone who likes to throw their weight around.

So what does makes these children bullies? It's not one thing says Julie Johnson, but sometimes it can even be partly caused by their parents. "Some parents can be violent themselves and teach to hit out. How you discipline a child at home will affect how they deal with conflict too...if they are hit every time there is an argument, then that is how they will learn to deal with conflict themselves."

Of course many other factors contribute too: poor discipline at school, watching aggression on TV and family problems can all have an affect. One startling statistic is that 25% of unchallenged bullies will have a criminal conviction by the age of 25.

And what of the victims? "Children most often get bullied about anything that's different. It doesn't have to be major or even important...just different. They may be taller or shorter than average. They may have an unusual feature: protruding ears or large feet. They may come from a different culture or background. Whatever the difference, it simply exists as an excuse for the bully to 'justify' their behaviour to themselves.

And although you can't predict who will or won't be the victim of bullying, there are some factors which certainly make children more vulnerable. Children who have a poor self image will be easy prey for the bully. If a child is especially self-conscious about a physical feature - large feet, for example - they will crumple easily when faced with a bully, giving them the sense of power they are looking for.

Other children may experience bullying at home from brothers and sisters. Although teasing and arguments are common in families (!), it is possible for this to escalate and get out of hand. When you think about it, parents can be guilty of bullying in some situations too. Any young person with special needs will also be an easy target for the bully. They may find it harder to read or write or simply express themselves...all of these can end up being ammunition to be used against them.

Still others may attract bullying because they are rude or difficult. They may be hard to befriend or just not be particularly popular. When this is the case, sadly, it is tempting for adults to be less enthusiastic about dealing with the problem.

A recent study by Kidscape found that chronic victims of bullying were often sensitive, intelligent and creative but they were also lacking in humour. They had good relationships with their family and parents, but tended to be very serious. The every day 'give and take' of life wasn't easy for them. In other words, bullies knew teasing them would have a big effect.

And then, sometimes, there may be no obvious reason at all. Parents shouldn't assume that because their child seems confident and well-adjusted, without any of the factors above, they won't be the target of bullying. They may simply be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Hence some children may have had no problem with bullying at one school, only to move to another and immediately become the victim of bullying.

And, if you're in the wrong place at the wrong time, bullying could be a just a one-off event. On the other hand, it could last for months, even years, for some young people."

How do you know if you're child is being bullied? Julie Johnson warns that you shouldn't be surprised if your child doesn't tell you. They may have been warned by the bully not to say anything or simply be embarrassed by what has happened. But there are tell-tale signs that parents can keep an eye out for. Fear of going to school, if that's where the bullying is taking place, is an obvious one: children may develop mystery illnesses to avoid going or continually disappear off to find the school nurse to get out of classes. Like

anyone under pressure, they may be depressed: becoming withdrawn or difficult and argumentative.

School work could also be affected, dinner money might go missing and bed-wetting or nightmares occur. Any of these factors could be a sign that bullying is taking place. Where bullying is centred on, for example, a physical difference, a child may become focused on dealing with it: like being obsessively clean (when they are called 'dirty' or 'smelly') or stopping eating (when they are being called 'fat').

How do you cope when you do finally find out what's going on? "Many parents actually find it difficult to come to terms with the fact that their child is being bullied. Should you have done things differently? Is it in some way your fault? Sadly some, particularly fathers, may even feel angry towards the child: 'Why didn't you stand up for yourself...why did you let this happen?'"

"These feelings are understandable, but won't help your child" says Penny Rumble, Head of Learning Support at Halyard High School, "You need to make sure your child has your unconditional love, acceptance and support."

Reacting to the discovery that your child is being bullied can be summed up in four simple points

1. Know the signs that tell you bullying may be taking place.
2. Understand that your child may find it difficult to talk about.
3. Listen carefully to what they say and let them know that you will do whatever is necessary to help stop the bullying.
4. Realise that you may need help in coping with your own reactions and don't let them get in the way of helping your child.

So what should parents do once they've discovered their child is being bullied? It may be tempting to tell them to hit back: beat them once at a fight and they'll never bother you again. "Often true" says Julie Johnson, "but what if the violence escalates or others become involved?"

If the bullying takes place at school, the obvious step is to contact their form tutor and ask to have a meeting. They should know your child better than anyone else in the school. It's important to get your facts straight too: names of those concerned, times and places, details of any physical harm that occurred. If things are not dealt with as you would wish, having these records may be a great help.

School policies on bullying do vary enormously. In fact, it should be one of the areas you take a close look at when choosing a school says Penny Rumble. Not only should there be an established written policy on bullying, but there should also be evidence that it works in practice and that the ethos of the school encourages children to talk to someone if they're in trouble. Are there rules about bullying visible on notice boards or in classrooms? What do the school say about bullying in the school at the moment? "Don't be fooled by being

told 'We don't have a problem with that here,' she says, 'it may not be a big problem...or even present at that time...but every school experiences bullying.'" In other words, what marks out a good school is not that it's 'bully-free' but that when it does occur, the school deals with it effectively.

Once you've told someone at the school what has happened, they should immediately take steps to make the victim secure: providing a safe place to sit during breaks and lunchtimes is a good example. "But beware of concentrating on the victim by things like moving them around to different classes" adds Julie Johnson, "It can exacerbate the feeling that it's their fault. Ideally it is the bully who should have to make the relevant changes."

The head should have been made aware of any bullying incident you report to a form tutor, but parents should be prepared to involve the governing body if they feel the situation is not being dealt with adequately.

What about the police? Is bullying a criminal act? Not as a specific offence it turns out. There is no special law defining the crime of 'bullying'. However, it may well constitute an assault even if no physical harm was done. Merely threatening to use violence is still an assault. Of course, if dinner money was stolen, it can be classed as theft even if only small amounts are involved.

What difference will it make taking a bullying incident to police? "You should discuss this option with the school first", advises Penny Rumble, "and you need to remember that the law treats children differently from adults."

In fact, children under ten can't be prosecuted, whilst those between ten and fourteen can be found guilty by a juvenile court providing they knew they were doing wrong. The courts will often make an order to enforce attendance at school or for special supervision for bullies over eleven. Between fourteen and seventeen, the penalties could include detention in a young offender's institution if the crime is serious enough.

"Don't just leave it to the school to sort out either" says Penny Rumble, "Parents have a responsibility to help too." It may be that your child gets bullied because of they are rude or difficult in some way. This doesn't mean the bullying is acceptable but it does mean that you can work to help your child change their behaviour. Learning how to react in bullying situations is also something parents can help their child with.

For example, 'fogging' is the name given to the idea of acknowledging what a bully has said but not rising to the bait. "Yes, I have got bigger feet, so what?" can often leave bullies not knowing what to say next.

Help for the bully is important too. Parents of a child found bullying may feel even more of a sense of failure. A good school should work with the bully and their parents to help deal with the problem. "I remember one lad being brought face to face with one of the children he had been bullying" recalls Julie Johnson, "When he heard the child talk about how his actions had made him feel, you could see the impact straight away. It was a turning point in his own behaviour."

Thanks to Julie Johnson for her help in producing this article.