

Helping your Child to Build Their Resistance to Bullying

In an effort to address the regrettable increase in bullying within our modern day society and at the request of parents, The Federation sought the assistance of Dr Sarah Aldrich, Educational Psychologist with Plymouth City Council in November 2013. What follows is a summary of her presentation to parents.

The subject of bullying is an emotive one for children and adults. The following information has been compiled with the assistance of Dr Sarah Aldrich, Educational Psychologist, Community Psychology Service, Plymouth City Council.

What bullying is, and what it isn't.

Definition: Bullying is negative behaviour which is done on purpose and is repeated over a period of time (deliberate and persistent misuse of power)

- Bullying involves a desire to hurt + hurtful action + a power imbalance + an unjust use of power + evident enjoyment by the aggressor + a sense of being oppressed by the victim (Rigby, 2002)
- It does NOT include occasional meanness or thoughtlessness, or 'falling out' or accidental injury, however distressing these may be.
- It happens everywhere at all ages and stages – we all have to guard against being bullied or bullying

Bullying can be:

- Physical – inflicting injury, forcing others into risky or inappropriate behaviours
- Verbal - name calling, starting rumours/gossip
- Psychological/emotional – intimidation/threats
- Social – exclusion/isolation, social networking (cyber-bullying)
- Sexual – touching, commenting
- Gender/homophobic – commenting on sexual preference
- Racist
- Direct or indirect – inciting others

Cyber-bullying: Bullying can also occur on-line [over the internet, via mobile phone and social networks].

Unkind but not a bully?

- Some children have additional needs that make it very difficult for them to understand social situations, their own emotions and those of others. There are many reasons for this.
- They may say things that others feel are 'unkind' and hurtful
- They may find it difficult to stay calm when playing and hurt others by accident
- They may over-react when others touch them or hurt them accidentally
- You can help by supporting your child to understand these children

Why do children bully?

- They are jealous
- It is fun to feel powerful
- It gets them what they want
- They are victims of bullying themselves
- They have seen bullying behaviour rewarded in adults or siblings
- They increase their social status and can be seen as 'cool'
- They have real problems in their own lives and are showing their distress in the only way they know how

Signs of being bullied:

- School refusal – multiple ‘illnesses’
- Sleep difficulties
- Change of behaviour – withdrawn or ‘difficult’
- Change in performance at school
- Returning home with torn/dirty belongings or injuries
- Asking for lifts to school or home
- Losing belongings
- Hungry
- Self harm

Why do friends stand by and watch, without doing something to help?

- Afraid to be seen as ‘uncool’
- Afraid to become a target themselves
- Following the crowd and sticking with the majority
- They think someone else will do something about it
- They have been asked not to by the child being bullied

Peers may be able to help by befriending, supporting the child to report the bullying and standing up to the bully in a non-confrontational way

Signs that your child may be bullying others:

- Aggressive behaviour towards siblings and friends
- Use of inappropriate and derogatory language – putting others down
- Coming home with new possessions

School Response:

- All schools are required by law to have an anti-bullying policy and to take bullying VERY seriously
- Try to stay calm and stick to the ‘facts’
- Work with parents to develop a plan, incorporate the child’s ideas and include them if possible.
- Arrange for a review after an agreed time period
- The school may also work at a whole class, key stage or school level to address the issue using a much broader approach

Some parents wonder why schools are reluctant to exclude bullies:

- Exclusion is always a last resort and the final step in the process of managing extreme incidents.
- It does not deal with the problem – it may just move it!
- We need to tackle these behaviours because if they become a habit they have long term consequences (children who bully others persistently are significantly more likely to go to prison as adults).

Parent Power!

- As parents and carers you are incredibly powerful in helping your child to develop positive pro-social behaviours and resilience
- Between the ages of 5 – 16, children typically spend only 15% of their time in school. This means that 85% of their time (including sleep) is spent with you. This gives you the opportunity to be the major positive influence on their development.

As adults, what can we do to help?

- Model non-bullying behaviours – be respectful of adults and children, try to avoid running others down, making negative comments about other's characteristics, be authoritative not authoritarian, be assertive not aggressive, do not tolerate bullying behaviours from other adults or children
- Listen – making opportunities, being genuinely curious, asking open-ended questions, asking for clarification, repeating back to make sure you have it right
- Acknowledge the hurt, don't minimize or belittle, but also don't dwell on the negative aspects. Hear the distress and then move on to ask the child for solutions and explore ways to support them to tackle the problem
- They should not have to change... but they may need to do things differently!

Supporting Resilience

- Dealing with bullying behaviours is a life-lesson
- Guard your own reaction – your child needs you to be strong, able to cope and respond with empathy whilst remaining objective
- Praise your child for being brave enough to tell
- Don't take over! Check with your child. With your child's permission, talk with the school staff. Try to stay calm. Ask your child when would be the right time and how they would like to handle things (give them the power!)
- Discourage fighting back. This is likely to escalate the situation putting your child at increased risk and at risk of getting into trouble or labeled themselves!
- Prevention – help your child become more self-assured by supporting them to take (calculated) risks, explore and support their problem-solving rather than sorting it out for them
- Explain de-escalation – encourage your child to tell an adult (teacher, parent or other), tell a friend and not to respond negatively (name calling/hitting out)
- Keeping safe – develop a plan with the school.
- 'Fogging' – non verbal and verbal communication. Practise imagining a 'protective fog' around you, keep an upright and open posture, don't get into a staring contest, look up and away, be aware of personal space, respond neutrally and move on
- Develop (and practise) a 'script' – use some gentle humour

FOR FURTHER ADVICE, SEE PRACTICAL TIPS 1 – 6 BELOW.

And if it is your child who is doing the bullying?

- Take a breath, stay calm and don't over-react
- Understand rather than punish
- Label the behaviour, not them (self-fulfilling prophecy)
- Love them, but not the behaviour
- Help them to explore how the other child/children feel as a result of their behaviour
- Help them to develop a plan to 'make amends'

What might you try?

If bullying behaviours are a problem for you right now, discuss it with school and work together.

PRACTICAL TIPS TO HELP BUILD RESILIENCE IN CHILDREN:

Tip 1.

Building resilience means strengthening our ability to effectively manage and recover from difficult situations; helping our children to prepare for the challenges of life ahead.

Don't Dwell on the Negative - Encourage the child to talk about the experience and how it made him or her feel. Help them to learn from the experience by considering the question 'What can I do about it?'

Do Encourage Problem Solving Skills – by thinking about the different action they could take. If, for example, they feel that they are being teased, what can they do? Is revenge really the best option? Can they joke back and not 'take the bait'? Could ignoring it solve the problem? Should they talk directly to the friend about how the teasing makes them feel? Is it better for an adult to be present in the conversation?

Remember – the more flexible we are in dealing with our own problems, the more flexible they will be with theirs.

Tip 2.

Help your child walk with confidence.

Encourage them to keep their head up, their back straight and to look around them with a relaxed expression. Remind them to move away quietly from people who might cause trouble.

Why not practise at home, in front of a mirror? Or role play some situations together.

Tip 3.

Leaving in a powerful, positive way.

'Target Denial' is a very effective self-defence tactic. This means 'imagining that the person isn't there'.

Role play a scene where your child will encounter a bully; pretend you are that bully saying hurtful things.

Ask your child what these 'mean' things might be; Remember – what's 'mean' or 'hurtful' is different for different people at different times and in different places, so check.

Remind your child to walk calmly and with confidence as they approach and move away.

Help them to practise 'neutral' comments, saying something like 'See you later', or 'Have a nice day' as they go on their way.

Tip 4.

Setting a Boundary.

If your child finds themselves in a difficult situation that they cannot walk away from, it is important for them to be able to 'set a boundary'. By doing this they will be able to take charge of the situation.

Help them to practise this technique at home ~

* Pretend to poke them in the back.

* Encourage them to turn around, stand up tall, put their hands up in front of their body (like a fence), palms out and open, and say 'Stop!'

* Encourage them to use a calm, clear voice with polite, firm words - not aggressive or 'whiney'.

They may not get it right the first time so keep coaching and encouraging.

Tip 5

Filtering Hurtful Words.

Being on the receiving end of name-calling or hurtful words can be distressing but it is important to remind children that saying something mean back, makes the situation bigger not better.

You can teach your child to protect him/herself from insults by taking the power out of the words. Encourage them to say the words out loud and imagine throwing them away or imagine catching the insult, writing it on a piece of paper, tearing it up and physically throwing it in the bin.

By practising doing this out loud and physically at home, you will help them to be able to do it in their imagination at school.

Tip 6

Protecting Feelings.

For some children it is useful to think of having a 'screen' protecting their hearts and minds. This screen lets good words in and keeps hurtful words out.

Remind them how to keep the mean words out by catching them and throwing them away and then practise saying something positive to take in.

If someone says 'You're stupid', throw those words away and say 'I'm clever'.

If they say 'I don't want to play with you', throw those words away and say 'I will find someone else to play with'.

Practise keeping bad words out and letting the good words in.

Use a 10 point scale where 1 is the worst things could be, and 10 is the best. Ask them to rate where they are now and then again after a few weeks trying their chosen experimental approaches. If things are improving carrying on, if not discuss how to change their approach

Places to look:

- <http://www.antibullyingweek.co.uk/>
- <http://www.childline.org.uk/Explore/Bullying/Pages/Bullyinginfo.aspx>
- The Good Gaming Guide on www.askaboutgames.com
- A copy of 'Supporting SEAL: The Parent Pack – Say no to bullying' available from www.futurelinkpublishing.co.uk or Tel: 0800 3345145

Available in school:

- Southernway Federation Anti-Bullying Policy
- A copy of the Bully Busters booklet

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