Identifying and Documenting Bullying

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When Your Child Is Bullied: Real Solutions for Families

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Executive summary

This document is one in a series that focuses on the challenges parents, schools and the community face in tackling the growing problem of bullying. This paper focuses on the specific area of identifying if a child is being bullied and the importance of documenting the incident(s).

Signals a Child Is Being Bullied

It is not always easy to determine if a child is being bullied or just going through normal emotions associated with growing up. Below is a list of possible signals.

Potential Behavior Changes in Children That Are Bullied:

- Acting differently in general
- General anxiety about school and school events
- Shifts in online activity (large increases or reductions)
- Frequent complaints of sicknesses such as stomach aches and headaches
- Looking down frequently
- Avoiding eye contact
- More somber moods
- School work/grades are negatively affected
- Eating more or less than usual
- Difficulty sleeping, or sleeping more hours
- Agitated and jumpy
- Paranoid
- Asking what if questions, such as “What if I were home schooled?”

- Spending many hours reading or studying–even when other kids are around and being social
- Quieter in class, lunch, and recess
- Skipping school and social events
- Increased isolation in his room, or alone more frequently
- Not wanting to participate in any sports or activities outside of school
- Crying, moody, depressed, angry
- Increased fighting with siblings and parents
- Nightmares

These are just some of the many signs a child might be exhibiting if he is being bullied. The important thing to look for is a difference in typical behavior. Many signs could be easily ignored and explained away by hormonal changes or typical childhood phases.

Understanding the Situation:

Getting to the bottom of the situation sometimes is no easy task. Some kids will come right out and tell you everything, and others might take a little bit more investigating. Opening the lines of communication between you and your child during this very stressful time in a family's life can actually be an unexpected silver lining in this entire unfortunate situation.

Who, What, Where, Why and When?

If you suspect your child is being bullied at school, you will need to get the facts. It is important to act quickly so that you can help your child resolve the situation as soon as possible and to prevent any long-term repercussions. Sometimes you have an hour or more to plan for a

conversation with your child, but often you need to fly by the seat of your pants and hope for the best. If you have time to plan, or can plan a follow up conversation with your child, getting to the facts is a bit easier if you know what you need to accomplish. You need to know *who* is involved, *what* happened and *where* it happened. And, of course, *why* it took place, and then, *when* to help.

Formal vs. Informal Conversations

A formal, sit-down family meeting works for many families. Sometimes, it is just necessary to sit down and discuss things openly. This may be the only way to get children to focus on a particular situation and to get the facts. It is not necessary to set a time to talk; just let it happen when the time is right and other children, television, and texts will not disturb your discussion.

Informality is best for some families. Sometimes the easiest way to get a child to talk is to do a physical activity with him that he thoroughly enjoys. If he likes the outdoors, enjoys walks the dog, fishing, hikes or bike rides, choose one and set up a time for that activity or do it spontaneously. On the flip side, if he really enjoys video games, play games with him to initiate conversations during those activities. It is also helpful to have conversations during long car rides. Just be careful not to embarrass the child in front of other siblings or adults.

Be Patient, Skip the Interrogation

It is best to be patient and let a child dictate the amount and pace of details. One or two open-ended questions seem to work best. After asking one question and your child begins to answer, do not ask another question, immediately. Allow your child to take his time. Your body language

can show that you are very much engaged–a touch on the shoulder, a hug, or eye contact. Ask your child a follow up question, as necessary, to get him to continue to talk openly about the situation. Assure him you need to know the specifics, so you can protect him and stop the bullying.

Examples of Effective Questions:

- Can you tell me what happened?
- How did it start? How did it end?
- Who else was there?
- Were there any adults nearby?
- What did the bystanders say or do?
- What was said?
- Were you physically touched or harmed?
- How did this make you feel?
- What did you say or do?
- Did you tell anyone this happened?
- How long ago did it start?
- Who else is involved?

Obviously, you don't have to ask every single one of these questions, but use the questions as a guide to initiate a conversation. It sometimes takes several conversations to get all of the details.

Document Everything!

Document all of the details of any bullying situation, even if it is for only your own records. Explain to your child why you are documenting this information. It might be needed in the future to bring the situation to the attention of the school or other authorities. After documenting the child's circumstances, review the documentation with the child to make sure that all the facts are correct, including everyone involved. Sometimes waiting a couple of hours allowing things to settle down a bit will bring out more details. Also, make sure your child is not embellishing the facts and is providing accurate details. You don't want to falsely accuse any other family. You might want to reach out to parents of children (bystanders) who were involved to see if they would talk to their child about it, or to see if their child said anything to them about the situation. If you know the bystander child well, you might want to talk to them personally. Follow the same line of questioning–open ended, non-threatening.

The longer you wait, the worse the situation will get. The longer your child does not advocate for himself or request the bullying be stopped, the longer the humiliation will continue, often getting worse or escalating. As others witness the bullying, it will become viral and it will become socially acceptable to bully your child. The longer your child is isolated by this situation, the longer it will take him to get back to his old self and feel healthy again.

Why me?

Your child might have a few questions for you. One of the questions parents are often asked by their child is, “Why me?” To be clear, there is never a “reason” why the bully targets your child. Bullies tend to pick on children who typically do not defend themselves. Alternately, they may have capriciously chosen your child to act out against. Quiet, unassuming children seem to be a good target because they *look* like they will not fight back. However, and this is an important *however*, all types of children are targeted. They can be average to very smart, possess a life challenge, are disabled or not, be average in attractiveness or very beautiful, or thin to overweight. Frequently, it is simply random selection. Bullies do not always have a criteria; it is merely impulsive.

Your child needs to be reassured that there is nothing wrong with him. The bully is the one with many problems, and unfortunately, he is taking it out on your child. Let your child know that together you will solve this problem and stop the bullying.

Some Facts about Bullies to Share with Your Child

Many children feel that their parents just will not understand. Explain to your child that this unattractive behavior has been around for decades, if not centuries. If you were ever bullied, or know someone who was, let your child know. This demonstrates you can relate to this issue. Explain to your child why bullies sometimes bully. Perhaps they are looking for attention. They might be bullied by others and are acting out. They might see bullying in their own home. Frequently, they are trying to be popular or funny. Oddly, by putting somebody else down, it makes them feel better about themselves. There are endless reasons why a bully may bully, but

make it clear that your child understands the problem is not his fault. The problem is clearly with the bully.

The bully will continue to bully unless he is stopped. Bullying is a forced imbalance of power and the bully wants your child to feel powerless or helpless. Ignoring the situation often fuels the fire of the bully. The more isolated the victim, the more powerful the bully feels.

But the good news is that the bully can be stopped. In some cases, once bullies realize that the victim is strong enough to stand up to them by telling them to knock it off, or by telling a trusted adult, they often move on to someone else or hopefully stop all together.

Where to Go For Help at School

Should another situation arise, your child needs some ideas of where to go for help. Discuss with your child who he trusts at school–a teacher, principal, nurse, coach or social worker, even the school secretary. Pick a person or two that your child could go to, and make them aware, with just a few details, of what is happening so they keep an extra eye out if your child is looking for help.

Follow-Up Questioning

After the initial onset of bullying, it is so important to keep the conversations ongoing. Hopefully, it does not have to be part of a conversation every day, but by keeping the lines of communication open with your child you will be aware of any incident no matter how small. When your child gets home from school or from a social event, watch his behavior, facial expressions, and mood. You can follow up with some more open-ended questions.

Some Questions You Might Consider Asking To Monitor Bullying Flare Ups:

- Who did you eat lunch with today? What did you talk about?
- Did you do anything special at recess?
- How was your walk home? Did you see anybody interesting?
- How was your bus ride home? Is there anybody on the bus you don't particularly care for? Why not?
- Do you want to have friends over this weekend? Anybody new?

Depending on the answer, you can pretty much figure out if your child is still being bullied. Remember, often after a bully is reprimanded, he stops for a few months and might even go out of his way to be exceptionally, but insincerely, nice to your child. He may or may not start up again. Be watchful for reoccurrences. Some bullies are so bold that they find any opportunity to start up again, but on the second round of bullying, they become cleverer and have developed a covert way of operating. They bully when adults are not watching. Then they try a different bullying tactic such as recruiting others to bully the child or spreading rumors across a grade level.

Conclusion

It is not always easy to tell if a child is being bullied but do not ignore any behaviors that are different than usual. Be patient as you are asking your child questions. Try not to make your

child feel quizzed, and do more listening than talking. Reassure the child that he did nothing wrong, and that he has nothing to be ashamed of because the bully is the one with the problem. Document all facts. Act quickly and professionally. The longer you wait, the worse the situation will become. Finally, once you have identified it is bullying and have begun documentation, start your plan to getting it stopped. Your first call should be leader of the location where the bullying is occurring.

About the Authors:

J.E. DiMarco and M.K. Newman are two mothers and business professionals that have suffered the heartbreak of bullying in their families. Together they developed a process and manual. dedicated to helping parents, educators and the community find solutions to bullying. They have co-authored a book, When Your Child Is Being Bullied: Real Solutions For Families, that is a step-by step guide to stopping the torment and getting beyond it, due to be released in August, 2011.

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References

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