

**Advice for Parents from  
The Northern Ireland Anti- Bullying Forum**



# What is bullying?

The Northern Ireland Anti-Bullying Forum (NIABF) defines bullying as the repeated use of power by one or more persons intentionally to hurt, harm or adversely affect the rights and needs of another or others.

Bullying is a form of unacceptable behaviour, but not all unacceptable behaviour can be considered bullying. Bullying usually has three key elements:

- It is repeated behaviour that happens over a period of time
- It involves an imbalance of power
- It is intentionally hurtful behaviour

All unacceptable behaviour must be challenged, whether it is bullying or not.

There are many different ways that bullying behaviour can be displayed. This could include:

- Being called nasty names, teased, made fun of, threatened or put down
- Being hit, kicked, punched, tripped up or knocked over
- Having belongings stolen or damaged
- Having rumours or gossip spread about you or people talking about you behind your back
- Being left-out, excluded or isolated
- Being forced to do something you don't want to do or know that is wrong

It is also important to know that bullying **is not**:

- A disagreement or 'falling-out'
- A one-off fight or argument
- Someone being 'nasty' through an ill thought through word or action
- A 'relationship' issue where pupils just need to learn how to get along better

## Cyber bullying

Cyber bullying is bullying behaviour that is displayed through mobile/smart phones or the internet. This could include:

- Hurtful, embarrassing or threatening material posted online (eg. on social network websites)
- Nasty messages sent as texts, emails or other websites or apps
- Being excluded from an online game
- Fake profiles on a social network to make fun of others

## Avoid Labels

The term bullying is highly emotive, often causing great anxiety, fear and shame to both the children involved and their families. None of us wants to hear that our child has been bullying others, however if this is the case it is important that we concentrate our disapproval on the behaviour, not the child.

For that reason, we should avoid using the word 'bully' to describe a child. To call a child a bully is to label the child, not his or her behaviour. It suggests that it is something that they are, as opposed to reflecting the unacceptable behaviour that they have engaged in. Our problem is not with the child, but rather with his or her behaviour.

We must help them to understand why their behaviour is unacceptable, recognise the impact that it is having on another or others and support them to identify ways that they can rectify the situation.

# How to spot signs a child is being bullied

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You may be unsure if your child is involved in a bullying incident. He or she could be displaying bullying behaviour, being bullied or upset because they have seen others behaving badly. If you suspect that your child is involved in bullying then look out for these signs:

- Becoming withdrawn
- Coming home with cuts and bruises
- 'Losing' belongings
- Reluctant to go to school or a youth club - anywhere where the person(s) displaying bullying behaviour are
- Doing less well at their schoolwork
- Changes in their mood - becoming depressed, angry, unhappy
- Changes in their behaviour, for example wetting the bed
- Showing aggression at home with siblings and other family members
- Feeling anxious
- Difficulties sleeping
- Wanting to change their journey or time of their journey to school.

But there could be other reasons for these signs, so try to avoid jumping to conclusions. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Is there anything else bothering my child?
- Have there been changes at home like a new baby, or divorce or separation?

If there has not been any other changes and you suspect bullying may be the cause of the distress and anxiety, it is important to try and act as early as you can.

# Coping with the effects of bullying and developing strategies to stop it

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No parent likes to think about their child being bullied or displaying bullying behaviour but the fact is, more than half of all children are involved - either as a perpetrator, target or witness. So, there's a good chance you'll have to deal with it at some point. If your child is being bullied there are things you can do to help them.

## Tips to help your child

- "Listen without getting angry or upset," says Sandra Hiller, Family Lives. "Put your own feelings aside, sit down and actually listen to what your child is telling you - then show you have done so by 'playing back' to them what you hear. Ask your child: "How do you want me to take this forward?" rather than just taking over so they don't feel excluded from deciding what to do or end up even more stressed/worried than they were already."
- Reassure your child it's not their fault. There's still a stigma attached to bullying and some children feel they've brought it upon themselves. Remind them that many celebrities have been bullied too. Being bullied isn't about being weak and displaying bullying behaviour isn't about being strong.
- Encourage your child to try to appear confident - even if they don't feel it. Body language and tone of voice speak volumes.
- Sometimes people say nasty things because they want a certain reaction or to cause upset, so if your child gives them the impression they're not bothered, the person(s) displaying bullying behaviour are more likely to stop. Role-play bullying scenarios and practise your child's responses. Talk about how our voices, bodies and faces send messages just the same way our words do.
- A process for helping children to develop more appropriate responses to a range of situations through reflecting is called 'Worth a Re-Think'. This structure is excellent at reflecting on what happened, the resulting feeling and the outcome. Then repeating this with alternative choices of actions and feelings and how this may change the outcome. It is important to validate all suggestions including more angry responses and to discuss the outcomes if this action was chosen. During this time you can practice various scripts to equip your child with resources for managing challenging situations which they may face.



1. Talk with your child using the 5 questions below. You may need to simplify the language to suit your child's age and understanding.

| Happenings → Thoughts → Feelings → Behaviour → Consequence |                                      |                       |                              |  |
|--|--------------------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------------|--|
| What happened?   | What did you think?                  | How did you feel?     | What did you do?             | Consequences   |
| Sarah said I couldn't play with her                        | I had no friends and no one likes me | I felt sad and lonely | I sat on my own on the bench | Didn't enjoy lunchtime and didn't take part in my afternoon lesson because I felt sick |

2. "Next time someone says that you can't play with them, what could you do differently to have a fun dinner time (consequence) and feel good"?

| Happenings → Thoughts → Feelings → Behaviour → Consequence |  |                                  |  |   |
|--|--|----------------------------------|--|---|
| What happened?   | What did you think?  | How did you feel?                | What did you do?   | Consequences                                    |
| Sarah said I couldn't play with her                        | She is wanting to play with Amanda today and that's ok. I have other friends I like to play with. I can play with Sarah tomorrow | A bit sad not to play with Sarah | Go and play with Cora. She is good fun and likes to play with me | Had fun at lunch time and enjoyed the afternoon |

- Don't let the bullying dominate their life. Help your child develop new skills in a new area. This might mean encouraging them to join a club or activity like drama or self-defence. This builds confidence, helps keep the problem in perspective and offers a chance to make new friends. Ease up on pressure in other less-important areas like nagging about an untidy bedroom.
- Drawing pictures of the bullying and some different ways your child could deal with it. You could draw pictures in the style of a cartoon strip which show your child walking away from the bullying or telling someone. Then talk about the different responses, what might not work and which is best for your child.
- Using 'social stories' to help your child understand what bullying is and learn skills to cope with what's happening. Social stories describe a situation and focus on a few key points, such as what will happen and how people might react. The goal of social stories is to increase a child's understanding and make them more comfortable in different situations. You can use social stories to explain times and places where bullying might happen, like break times, assemblies, or queuing for lunch. The National Autistic Society has further information about social stories, see [www.autism.org.uk](http://www.autism.org.uk)
- Talk about bullying with your child at home, when appropriate. It is very tempting to ask your child as soon as they get home "what did she do today?" or "did they leave you alone today?" Try to avoid this. Seek out the positives of the day and assess their mood from their responses and behaviour. Continue to keep the lines of communication open and encourage your child to talk about anything if they are concerned.