

Bullying Questions and Answers

by Irene van der Zande, Kidpower Founder and Executive Director
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What does bullying look like? How can we recognize and stop bullying in our families, youth organizations, teams, and schools? The following information is from our book *Bullying – What Adults Need to Know and Do to Keep Kids Safe*. Kidpower Teenpower Fullpower International is a global nonprofit leader dedicated to providing effective and empowering child protection, positive communication, and social safety skills for all ages, abilities, cultures, and walks of life. These skills and strategies help to keep people safe from most bullying, abuse, prejudice, and violence. Since 1989, Kidpower has served over 4.5 million children, teenagers, and adults, including those with special needs, through our workshops, partnerships, and educational resources. For more information, please visit our [Bullying Solutions Resources](#) and our [Services for Schools and Organizations](#).

1. What is bullying?

The technical definition of bullying is, “a repeated oppression, psychological or physical, of a less powerful person by a more powerful person or group of persons.” Bullying is different from aggression between people of equal power. However, someone can have less power than others for many reasons – being shy, being different in any way, lacking confidence, having problems at home, having a disability, being of a minority race or religion, being a high achiever, or lacking physical strength. In addition, even one unresolved incident of feeling personally attacked can cause lasting upset even if it does not fit the technical definition of

bullying.

Bullying takes many different forms including physical threats or violence; name-calling and teasing; mocking; shunning and ostracism; and social attacks on someone's reputation. People can bully others directly, in person; indirectly, such as by gossiping or 'badmouthing' by voice to others; or through any form of communication technology including talking on the phone, writing, texting, emailing, recording, and in gaming environments. Bullying behavior occurs in schools, sports, youth groups, work places, social groups, senior centers, and online activities. Bullying can happen anywhere people gather, either in the real world or the virtual world. Bullying takes place between people of all ages, identities, and walks of life. ***Young people who are being bullied are especially likely to feel trapped and alone because they usually don't have a choice about where they live, go to school, or play.***

2. What is the difference between bullying and normal conflict between peers?

Conflict is a normal part of most relationships because people have different perspectives and priorities. While kids need adult supervision so that they learn how to deal with conflict constructively, most upsetting behavior between people is NOT bullying. People can also be hurtful to each other because of thoughtlessness, annoyance, poor boundaries, and experimenting with negative uses of their power without realizing the impact. The good news is that the social-emotional skills that can prevent and stop most bullying and harassment are also important in developing healthy relationships. Learning how to take charge of their own emotional and physical safety, how to act safely and respectfully towards others even if they feel frustrated or upset, how to set boundaries and respect the boundaries of others, and

how to advocate effectively to help others empowers most people and gives them tools to better manage future conflicts and relationship issues. ***The bottom line is that everyone has the right to be treated with respect and the responsibility to act respectfully towards themselves and others.***

3. How do I help protect the young people in my life from bullying?

Children and teens need consistent, repeated messages from their parents, teachers, principals, coaches, recreations leaders, and other caring adults that, “I want you to be and feel safe. Being safe means freedom from harm to your body and your feelings. Your job is to speak up if someone is saying or doing something that is hurtful to you – and to get help from the adults in charge if that doesn’t work. I also want you to act safely and respectfully towards others. Your job is to stay in charge of what you say and do so that you are not being harmful or scary, even if you feel really annoyed, scared, or upset. You can be powerful in protecting yourself and respectful at the same time. If you have trouble at school or anywhere else, I want you to tell me.”

What you **do** is even more important than what you **say**. Model being powerful and respectful while setting boundaries to advocate for and protect the well being of yourself and others – and while noticing and honoring the boundaries of others. Show how some boundaries need to be negotiated. Ask kids to tell you what bullying is – and whether they have ever seen anyone being bullied. Discuss when characters in books or movies are bullying or being victimized by bullying.

Pay attention and intervene when you see kids acting in hurtful or disrespectful ways towards each other with the same intention that you would stop young people from throwing rocks through a window. If we don’t respond when kids are being unkind, we are

not walking our talk. Interrupting and redirecting harmful behavior can be as simple as saying, “Excuse me! That sounds hurtful/doesn’t look safe! What’s doing on?” You can then have kids practice how to communicate in ways that meet your values. Discuss the [Kidpower Protection Promise](#) with every child and teen in your care so that they know that they can come to you for help. ***From time to time, ask the young people in your life, “Is there anything you’ve been wondering or worrying about that you haven’t told me?”***

4. What should children and teens do if someone tries to bully them?

Give young people opportunities to practice being powerful, respectful, and persistent when using these skills:

- Using their awareness to notice a problem situation and move out of reach in either person or online.
- Telling someone to stop hurtful behavior.
- Asking to join a game, conversation, or other activity in a friendly, confident way.
- Leaving and finding someone else to hang out with.
- Protecting their feelings from hurtful words or behaviors.
- Interrupting busy adults and being persistent in asking for help with a safety problem.

Make sure that children know that most adults want them to be safe at school and at recreational activities, and will listen if they understand the problem. See our articles [Face Bullying With Confidence: Eight Skills Kids Can Use Right Away](#) and [Kidpower Strategies For Keeping Young People Safe From Cyberbullying](#). Also see [Kidpower Strategies for Safety Online and Everywhere Else](#).

5. What should children and teens do if they see another kid being bullied?

If young people witness bullying, their wisest choices are going to depend on the situation – *they can speak up, reach out, and/or leave to get help*. Suppose the person doing the bullying is being unkind by leaving another kid out or by calling names. Give kids practice *speaking up* while staying polite and confident with statements like: “Stop! That seems like a hurtful thing to say.” “Wait! The rule here is that everybody gets to play!” “Hi! What’s going on?” “Hey! That’s not cool!” Show how to persist respectfully if someone reacts negatively. Discuss recognizing bullying online and point out that “liking” or sharing hurtful messages is participating in bullying.

If kids don’t feel safe or able to speak up, their wisest choice is usually to *leave and get help*. Suppose someone is being threatening or physically unsafe by hitting, kicking, tripping, or shoving. Give kids practice in how to leave right away and interrupt a busy adult to get help. Encourage kids to *reach out* to someone who has been bullied by offering support, giving an invitation to join an activity, or sitting together.

6. What should I do if I am worried that my child is being bullied?

First, take a breath! *Stay calm no matter how you feel inside*. You will be more successful in dealing with the problem and your child will be more likely to give you accurate information if you sound caring rather than upset or anxious. If your child tells you, thank your child for letting you know. If you’ve noticed something that your child has not mentioned, bring up the subject in a matter-of-fact way.

Most schools and youth groups are doing a tremendous job with limited resources and truly care about their students. Your job is

to advocate for your child in a way that seeks solutions rather than blame. See [Bullying in Schools – Seven Solutions for Parents](#). Encourage adult leaders to apologize to children who have been bullied and to tell them directly that it is always okay to come to them for help. With better skills and strong support, everyone involved can learn what to do, as well as what to not do. *Bullying can cause big problems and can also create a tremendous opportunity to grow.*

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7. What if my child is doing the bullying?

Pushing boundaries and experimenting with negative uses of their power is normal for some young people. With adult guidance, they can learn to redirect this behavior and become positive leaders. Kids who bully need to know that unkind, hurtful behavior is against the rules and to face consistent, age-appropriate consequences. Rather than lecturing, use practice as a management tool to address unsafe, disrespectful behavior. Look for the reasons underneath your child's bullying behavior and practice skills that can help your child deal with these issues in a safer way. *Remember that in a stressful moment, people of any age are more likely to do what they've practiced than what they've been told.* Dealing with the disappointment of not getting what you want, having to wait your turn, feeling upset by what someone else said or did, understanding the other person's point

of view, and calming down instead of exploding in anger are all skills that can be learned and practiced until they become habits. See *Practice as a Management Tool for Unsafe, Disrespectful Behavior*.

For more resources, please visit our page on [Bullying](#) and on services for [Schools](#).

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Kidpower Founder and Executive Irene van der Zande is a master at teaching safety through stories and practices and at inspiring others to do the same. Her child protection and personal safety expertise has been featured by USA Today, CNN, Today Moms, the LA Times, and The Wall Street Journal. Publications include: cartoon-illustrated *Kidpower Safety Comics* and *Kidpower Teaching Books* curriculum; *Bullying: What Adults Need to Know and Do to Keep Kids Safe*; the *Relationship Safety Skills Handbook for Teens and Adults*; *Earliest Teachable Moment: Personal Safety for Babies, Toddlers, and Preschoolers*; and *The Kidpower Book for Caring Adults: Personal Safety, Self-Protection, Confidence, and Advocacy for Young People*.