

Help! My Teen is a Bully

Accepting the feedback

Let's face it - receiving feedback that your teen is failing math or being disruptive in class is slightly easier to navigate than being informed they are a bully. As parents our gut instinct is to protect our kids and on that basis we generally go into "my child wouldn't do that" mode.

Being told that your teen is a bully can elicit quite an emotional reaction in parents – everything from anger and denial, to guilt, fear and shame.

However, it is important to acknowledge the feedback and accept that you wouldn't be hearing about it unless there was a real issue.

Even if you don't believe it to be a problem, and that "girls will be girls" or "boys will be boys", and a little conflict and coercion is character building, take any accusation of bullying seriously. What may seem natural or normal to you may be harmful to others...and this is a precarious age!



What can you do?

- **Process your emotions before you have a conversation** – with your own emotions in check, then open the lines of communication with your teen.
- **Get to the root cause of the behavior** – uncover the dynamics of what has been going on. Sometimes they may be the victims of bullying themselves and lashed out as a result. Other times they may not have been aware that their behavior crossed the line. These are not excuses however do provide context.
- **Discuss the importance of empathy** – it is important that regardless of the intent, your teen is aware of the impact of their behavior on others. Help them to understand how their actions affect others and how they would feel if the situation were reversed.
- **Listen** – as bullying is often a cry for attention, it is critical that your teen feels supported at home. Being 'present' and allowing them to share how they are feeling may go a long way to preventing the behavior in future.
- **Encourage them to seek solutions** – invite your teen to think about how they could repair the relationship with those they have bullied. For example writing a letter, or extending a relevant 'olive branch'.
- **Ensure consequences** – your teen must understand that this behavior will not be tolerated. Agree consequences for any future infractions and make sure you stick to them. Consistency in key.
- **Model great behavior as a parent** – set a good example of kindness, empathy and compassion in the home.

Understanding where the behavior comes from

- **Insecurity and power** – picking on others due to a pervasive insecurity and need to exert power and control. Sometimes this is physical control picking on weaker/smaller targets.
- **Problems at home** – those who experience neglect, conflict, abuse, lack of supervision, or absence of love and affection may direct their anger towards others.
- **Stress** – teens may take out their frustration regarding academic performance, a learning disorder, physical appearance, or lack of support network at home or school, on others.
- **Peer pressure** – to fit in with a peer group or to gain popularity and social status, even if this goes against personal values.
- **Payback** – those who are victims of being bullied may look for opportunities to retaliate and seek revenge.
- **Prejudice** – picking on those who are perceived to be different such as special needs, or for race, religion, or sexual orientation.
- **Pleasure** – simply to relieve boredom and provide entertainment – sometimes unaware that this is not being perceived by others as a joke.

References

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