

Is there a bully in your life?

Whether the victim is you or your child, help is out there.

MADONNA BEHEN • February 6, 2011

What is a bully? Aggressive behavior that is intentional, repeated over time and involves an imbalance of power or strength. Bullying can take many forms, such as hitting or punching, teasing or name-calling, intimidation through gestures, social exclusion and sending or posting insulting messages or pictures by cellphone or online (also known as cyberbullying).

We now know that whether it is online, in the hallway at school or even at the office, bullies are everywhere.

We see heart-wrenching stories of children and teenagers who have committed suicide after cruel bullying by peers. The painful truth is that 15% to 25% of students in the USA are bullied with some frequency, recent studies suggest. And more than one-third of the American workforce will experience some form of bullying during the course of their lives, according to the Workplace Bullying Institute.

The news has served as a painful call to action for Americans about the devastating consequences of bullying. Still, the victims — be they children or adults — often don't seek help or even speak up. Kids, who may think it's just part of growing up, are too afraid. Adults whose bosses are bullies can fear retribution in the form of losing their job.

"Our society is more aggressive, more warlike, more combative, while traits like empathy and compassion are downplayed," says Gary Namie, director of the Workplace Bullying Institute in Bellingham, Wash., and coauthor of *The Bully at Work*.

So what exactly can you do? Here, we offer advice from the nation's leading bullying experts on the best way to handle the problem if your child is being bullied.

Don't overreact.

The first thing to do is sit down with your child and calmly listen to his or her story. "Don't immediately react emotionally and try to solve the problem," says psychiatrist Thomas Tarshis, author of *Living with*

Peer Pressure and Bullying. "Any reaction you have will make it harder for your kid to open up to you."

Keep a precise, specific log.

Record the date, time, circumstances and all relevant information regarding each bullying event, Tarshis recommends. Having documented episodes to describe to school staff members, teachers, administrators and police will help you be taken seriously and track the pattern of bullying behavior.

"Walk your child through the whole story so that you get a detailed run-down of exactly what happened, who else was there, and if there were any adults there, how they responded," says psychologist Elizabeth Englander, director of the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center at Bridgewater State University. Plus, she says, "you also need to be prepared for the possibility that your child may be less than completely innocent."

Consider contacting the parents first.

If your child is in elementary school and bullying occurs, Tarshis says, the problem can often be solved by having the parents and the children sit down together to discuss the incident. "Ninety percent of the time, it's very effective to have everyone meet and talk about why the behavior is not acceptable, that it won't be tolerated and that it will be met with severe consequences in the future."

For older kids, contact the school.

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Many students in middle or high school who are being bullied fear that contacting school authorities will make the abuse worse, but Tarshis says that's often not the case. "In our studies, teens say that after they told, things did get better," Englander says.

Attorney Rana Sampson, a San Diego-based policing consultant and former police officer, recommends writing a letter to the school principal.

"A letter puts the principal on notice that you are serious and that you expect the school to create a safe environment for your child to learn," she says. In the letter, be highly specific about the instances of bullying and the harm it has caused, such as sleeplessness, lack of interest in school, crying or anxiety. Ask the principal to put in writing the steps the school will take to keep your child safe from the bully.

Take it higher.

Go up the chain of command if you feel your concerns are not taken seriously enough. "Any teacher or administrator who minimizes bullying by saying things such as 'it's part of growing up' or 'kids need to learn to deal with this' needs to be re-educated on the devastating mental health and academic difficulties that arise from bullying," Tarshis says.

Parents need to keep in mind that because of federal and state confidentiality laws, the school can't tell the parents of the bullied child what action they're going to take against someone else's child. If the bullying continues, contact the police. Adds Tarshis, "Ultimately, some families have had to use lawyers to threaten legal action, which usually gets the school on board."

Educate children about the Web.

You want your kid to be safe, but don't threaten to take away his computer or monitor his Internet use. "For better or worse, electronic communication has become a set part of American teen culture, and the fear of losing their ability to communicate electronically with privacy may be more traumatic to them than dealing with the cyberbullying they experience," Tarshis says. Instead, make sure he knows about using good passwords that other people aren't able to guess and changing his privacy settings on social networking websites so that only friends can see his information.

Images (from the top) by C.J. Burton for USA WEEKEND; Ariel Skelley, Getty Images; Andersen Ross, Getty Images.



Share your story with us

The number of bullying victims at schools and workplaces across the USA is frightening, and we want our readers to know there's help and they're not alone. We hope you will share your story with us by either leaving a comment below or, if you have a longer story, [posting to our blog](#).

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Develop a safety plan with your children, such as where they should sit on the bus.



If you're the target of a bully at work ...

Recognize the problem. Understand that you don't have to put up with the abuse just because you're an employee.

Keep records. Keep a log and make copies of threatening e-mail so you can prove your case.

Don't rely on HR to help. Most companies don't have bullying policies and may side with the boss.

Report the problem to a manager. Find someone higher up who doesn't know the bully well and can be objective.

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