

## CHILDREN WHO BULLY

### ***From 101 Ways to Deal with Bullying by Michele Elliott***

Darren aged 8 had become the scourge of the neighbourhood. He was bullying children left, right and centre. His parents had been rung by the neighbours so many times that they lost count. They were in despair. They tried hitting Darren, yelling at him, taking away his pocket money, all to no avail. When his parents contacted me, Darren was well on the way to being the child from hell.

Interestingly Darren did not act out at school because the school had strict anti-bullying policies. The first time Darren tried to bully someone else he found out the school wasn't kidding. There were immediate consequences and Darren decided that it wasn't worth the trouble.

So what was the school doing that Darren's parents could learn from? The first thing the school did was to lay down the ground rules and what would happen if you broke the rules. Everyone knew what was what.

Unfortunately, Darren's parents were more erratic. Darren never knew what would happen - he knew something would happen, but it seemed worth the risk. In fact, occasionally his parents ignored his behaviour. After meeting with Darren and his parents, we decided on a course of action. Darren had to learn how to get on with children, so we role played the right way to act and what to do if he was provoked.

The first thing Darren's parents needed to do was to talk to the neighbours and tell them that they were working to ensure that the bullying behaviour stopped. They asked the neighbours to tell them immediately if Darren bullied their children.

Then Darren's parents had a talk with Darren when they were calm and before anything happened again. They told him that they did not expect him to bully people and that if he did, he would be staying at home and not allowed to go out in the neighbourhood for that day. He would be allowed to go out the next day to try to be nice. But every time he bullied he would be back in the house. The hitting as punishment was stopped. It had not helped and probably made it worse since Darren was furious about being hit and took out his anger on the other kids.

Darren's parents also asked him to explain what happened that led up to the bullying. The other kids teased Darren about his ears and when they did, he blew his top. Darren and his parents thought it would be good if Darren could just ignore the taunting and walk away. In the meantime, his parents would let the other parents know about the remarks being made.

They also decided that Darren could try asking one boy, who seemed to like Darren, over to play some games and then bring in the other children little by little.

Eventually Darren stopped bullying because he felt more confident and the other children stopped making fun of him. His parents were better able to cope because they handled the situation when there was no heat or anger. Darren understood exactly where he stood and what would happen if he transgressed.

And Darren's parents were able to help him because they understood his hurt feelings about the taunting.

There are many reasons a child or young person might bully others. Dan Olweus found in his long-term studies that children who bully can be high-spirited, active energetic children. They may be easily bored or envious or insecure. They may also be secure children who just like getting their own way and who may have become 'heroes' with the other children for the way they behave. They may be spoilt brats, over-indulged and undisciplined.

Bullies might also be jealous of another's academic or sporting success or they may be jealous of a sibling or new baby. They may have a learning disability which makes them angry and frustrated (though this may have the opposite effect and make them a target for bullies instead).

As parents we should keep in mind that most children bully others at some time. It is an unacceptable behaviour and we usually nip it in the bud by admonishment or sanctions such as losing privileges, but sometimes it gets out of hand. That is when parents need to take strong and immediate action if we are to prevent our children from becoming unmanageable thugs.

## **OCCASIONAL BULLIES**

Once in a while a child will lash out and suddenly start bullying. It is quite possible that the reason this is happening is because the child was being bullied and could stand it no longer. Unfortunately when this happens, the child is labelled a bully when the child really has been a victim. Be very careful not to start blaming your child until you have all the facts about why he or she has mysteriously turned into a bully. It may also be that the child is having a 'bad day'.

Think about the possible reasons why your child may be behaving this way:

- jealous of brother or sister or other children
- under stress because of school work or exam pressure,
- worried about a problem that's cropped up at home such as a pet dying, parents
- fighting or separating
- a favourite sibling leaving home
- a bereavement or money problems a quarrel with a friend - they might vent their anger on someone else
- boredom
- frustration - learning or language difficulties
- everything gone wrong type of day

Any of these difficulties might trigger bullying behaviour in a child who normally behaves well with other children.

The bottom line is that a child who bullies only once and very occasionally is not difficult to help. Of course, they need firm guidelines and telling off, and they

need to make amends for their behaviour. But we don't need to beat our parental breasts and feel terrible that we have produced a 'bully'.

If you find your child has been in trouble for this kind of bullying and are in despair over what to do, try:

1. to remain calm and in control
2. to find out all the facts, including the actions of the other children involved
3. to discuss the problem with the child - it may help just to talk it over to find out if your child is upset, worried, jealous, unhappy or perhaps has been bullied
4. to find out if your child knows what harm she or he is causing by acting this way
5. to sort things out with the parents of the victim, if so that the bullying does not escalate
6. to see the school staff and to offer your help and support to them.
7. arrange regular reports from them so you all know that your child is back on track.
8. to emphasise that bullying is not acceptable in any circumstances and that you will not be tolerated it
9. to give your child some goals to behave better and then reward good behaviour
10. to help your child learn how to be a friend to others. Perhaps you could invite over some children and make sure the visit is fun for all.
11. to work out some alternative ways the child could react if the situation occurs again: e.g. going to a 'time-out room' in which to cool off, walking away, deep breathing, counting to ten.
12. to give your child plenty of praise and encouragement if they don't repeat the bullying and are able to use some of the alternative responses.
13. to determine if your child needs help coping with a crisis like a parental divorce or the death of someone they loved. He or she may need emotional support, like someone outside the family to talk to or professional counselling.

### **CHRONIC BULLIES**

Some children go from incident to incident, from school to school, bullying and hurting others. These children may eventually end up being excluded from mainstream education if they continue with this behaviour. Many of these children have some characteristics or backgrounds in common. They may:

- act aggressively much of the time
- be unable to control themselves
- have a positive attitude towards violence
- feel insecure
- be disruptive

- blame the victims for the bullying (i.e. 'He looked at me funny - deserved to be thumped')
- have no empathy with anyone
- be bullied by family members
- be scapegoats in the family (i.e. blamed for everything, even if it isn't their fault)
- feel under tremendous pressure to succeed when, in fact, they are failing
- have poor social skills
- feel different, stupid or inadequate
- come from a 'culture of violence' in the home

Chronic bullies may also be over-indulged to the point of being worshipped by their parents and expect that everyone should bow to their wishes. Hopefully your child is not a chronic bully, but if he or she is, there are some things you can do to help.

If we as parents can recognise that these chronic bullies may be victims in many ways (perhaps unloved or mistreated, or covering for a feeling of personal inadequacy by dominating others), then we can begin to undo the damage. In these cases, treating the underlying cause may also eradicate the bullying. For example, a child with an otherwise poor school record who is encouraged to work hard and excel at subject - art, photography, computing - may in the process gain enough approval to stop bullying.

It does help if parents of the bullied children can take a sympathetic approach towards the parents of the bully - acknowledging that any of us could find ourselves a parent of a bully one day - there is more likely to be progress than if the parents of the bully are ostracized and hated. In practice, this sort of bridge-building between the parents of the victims and the parents of bullies is not always possible. But it may work, especially in the case of over-indulged, self-satisfied bullies, if those parents wake up and realise their 'little darlings' are really 'little devils'. But, in general, knowing that bullies may be actually self-hating or unhappy will be of small comfort to the mother of a bullied child.

Keep in mind that reforming the behaviour of a chronic bully is not easy; power may be the only language they understand. Significantly, when schools organise meetings to discuss the problem of bullying, it is usually the parent of the victim who turns up.

## ***CHANGING THE BULLY'S BEHAVIOUR***

Once you have dealt with the immediate fall-out from the latest bullying incident, you are ready to begin on the long-term task of helping your child change so that he or she develops other non-bullying ways of behaving and reacting. This is a lengthy, time-consuming process with no guarantees of success but a committed parent can make all the difference.

Peer pressure is, of course, one of the most effective ways of stamping out bullying but children will only outlaw bullying amongst themselves after long discussions, role-plays, drawing up and signing contracts, and understanding what is and what is not acceptable behaviour between individuals and groups.

This can only happen in the context of the school, so you certainly will want to enlist their help (see chapter xx).

There are no definitive solutions or strategies for changing a bully's behaviour which always work. Each bully is an individual with his or her own problems and there is no general 'cure' for bullying. However guidelines as to what has worked with bullies elsewhere can be helpful.

### **1. Expectations**

Discuss with the child the behaviour which you expect. Give clear guidelines as to their future behaviour. This will help to eliminate any future misunderstandings. (i.e., 'If you do this again, then you will have your pocket money cut' or 'If you behave then you will be allowed more pocket money or a treat of some kind')

### **2. Admit, Atone, Apologise**

Before you can begin to change your child's behaviour, your child has to admit that what they have done is wrong. They must acknowledge that their behaviour has been hurtful and unkind.

They have to realise that they owe the victim an apology and they should try to atone for what they have done. The child may apologize, however grudgingly, and hand back stolen items or money, without feeling any remorse, only anger that they have been 'found out'. This does not mean the apology is meaningless. It is merely a starting point and is one way of bringing home to your child that what they have done is wrong and unacceptable.

### **3. Short-term goals**

Discuss the next steps with your child and set realistic short-term goals. Make sure that these goals are attainable, even if you set something like 'No bullying for the day or morning or even for 30 minutes, if the child has little control.' Work something out with the school, as well as at home. It is better to give a child an easy target, even if you think it ludicrously simple, thus virtually guaranteeing success, rather than set them a hard task which a child might fail and which might be discouraging and unrealistic.

### **4. Break the pattern**

If your child is often involved in bully incidents, find out if there is a pattern to the bullying? It would be helpful to keep a record of every bullying incidents, if possible.

- How long has the bullying been going on?
- Do particular situations provoke your child?
- Is there just one victim or does your child target several children or always the same one?

The answers to these questions will help you identify what triggers bullying in your child. Perhaps the bullying happens at lunch with one child because your child can't stand the fact the victim is more popular than your child is.

In this circumstance you may be able to work with the teachers and lunch room supervisors to either make sure the children are not at the same table or that they don't eat at the same time. Obviously you would also need to work on ensuring that your child overcame his or her jealousy of the other child. That might happen if you start helping your child develop more social skills, perhaps by role-playing how he or she should act. You could also, depending upon the age of your child, arrange for children to come over on an individual basis and ensure that they have a good time and feel kindly towards your child. That might give him or her more people to eat lunch with, thus partly solving that problem.

## **5. Clear guidelines**

Draw up some clear behaviour guidelines on how you expect your child to behave in future. If your child does not seem to know acceptable ways of behaving, he or she may need some very basic information about generally accepted standards of behaviour. (i.e. 'When you talk to other people, you smile, look them in the eyes and act in a pleasant manner. Now let's try it. You pretend that I am someone you have met or want to eat lunch with.' Then act out the parts and praise your child for getting it right.)

## **6. Low self-esteem**

If your child has very low self-esteem, as may be the case with children who are bullies, you need to work on improving their self-image (see chapter xx). Give your child extra responsibilities. Increase responsibility gradually otherwise children might panic because they feel they can't cope. Give them plenty of praise and encouragement when they behave well or complete tasks successfully. Help them build up their self-respect. They won't learn to respect others until they have learned to respect themselves.

## **7. Useful activities**

If your child is active, boisterous, quick-tempered, you need to divert that excess energy into useful activities. Get them to help with physical tasks - fetching and carrying jobs, painting a wall, tidying rooms, cooking, going on errands, planting flowers in the garden or in pots or on the balcony, walking the dog, setting the table - basically anything that gets them moving in a positive way. Give them lots of praise and or rewards. Suggest to the teacher that they may want to do the same at school - ask the child to get equipment ready, putting out chairs, stack books, put up displays etc.. This way you and the teacher might get lots of help and your child is so busy, there is no time to bully! Don't give them sedentary tasks - they'll just get frustrated and perhaps be twice as unruly afterwards.

## **8. Fighting**

If your child is aggressive and often involved in fights at school, ask the teacher to set a short term goal such as 'No fighting this morning'. Suggest that, if they get through the morning without fighting, the teacher could praise them and give them a reward - five minutes extra at break, perhaps. Get them to keep a diary of their progress. Keep reminding them of the goal. Gradually extend the time period ('No fighting today, tomorrow, this week) as the child learns to control his or her actions and learns different ways of reacting to difficult situations.

Be prepared for set-backs and for discouragement. Keeping a child who bullies motivated is often very difficult and you will need all your reserves of patience and persistence!

### **9. Freeze the action**

Discuss with your child what sort of situations make him or her flare up and then help them find other ways of reacting. Make up some simple role-plays based on what the bully has told you. Have your child play him or herself and 'freeze' the action at the point where your child usually lashes out or starts challenging others - think about other ways of behaving: walking away, deep breathing, going to a 'time-out room' to cool off.

### **10. Assertive vs. aggressive**

Teach your child the difference between aggressive and assertive behaviour. Work out verbal responses which are assertive rather than aggressive. For example, "Turn off that horrible music NOW" could be replaced with "Would you mind please turning off that music, it bothers me while I'm working." I am sure most parents would recognise themselves in that quote - at least I have certainly heard myself saying aggressively to my children "TURN THAT BLASTED MUSIC DOWN". Perhaps our children are sometimes repeating what they hear from us?

Anyway, teaching children to be assertive instead of aggressive does help.

### **11. Encouragement**

Encourage your child to persist with 'behaviour changing' programme by giving lots of praise and rewards for good behaviour. It is a lot of work, but it is worth it.

### **12. Spoilt rotten**

If you recognise that your child is a bully because they are 'spoilt' at home, change your behaviour and tell your child why. It will be traumatic, but it has to be done. One way to start is by getting your child to do some sort of community service with you such as helping out in a soup kitchen. The realisation that not everyone has been as indulged as he or she might bring about some enlightenment.

### **13. Unaware**

In the unlikely even that your child does not know or understand about the pain and suffering their actions cause their victims., give them a copy of the Letter from the Bully at the end of this chapter and discuss it with them. Get them to write a similar letter.

You can use role-plays to give your child a chance to empathise with victims. Get your child to play the victim and ask them to discuss how they feel in this role. Of course if your child is a bully because they have been bullied, this would not be appropriate unless it was used to help them get out pent-up feelings. It should be used with care.

#### **14. Frustrated**

If your child is frustrated and angry because of learning difficulties, remedial tuition or extra coaching should be arranged

#### **15. Professional help**

If your child is suffering through a divorce or bereavement, he or she may need emotional support and professional counselling.

#### **16. Medical help**

It may be that your child has a medical condition such as hyperactivity, which could be helped by your GP.

#### **17. Supervision**

Your child may need increased supervision. See if the school can help by assigning a teacher or another staff member to the bully. This could be a pastoral member of staff, or someone the child particularly likes (or who likes your child!). This person will act as a safety-valve for your child - someone they can talk to if they feel a bullying incident 'coming on'. This may be difficult with staff overburdened by work and time pressures, but it can be extremely helpful for your child to have a 'friend' they can approach for support.

One mother decided to supervise her child herself. With the cooperation of the school, she sat in on his classes and watched him on the playground and in the lunchroom. The boy vowed after one day of this that he would never bully anyone again.

Make sure all members of staff including playground supervisors, catering staff, and bus escort know that your child is trying to change their behaviour. Ask them to keep an eye on the child. and to be aware of their activities. They should be ready to step in if the bully becomes embroiled in difficult or hostile situations.

#### **18. Reformed characters**

Sometimes, if children know that a bully is trying to 'reform', they will try to provoke the bully into displaying their old, aggressive behaviour and will tease and taunt the bully until he or she loses control and reacts angrily. Parents and school staff should be on the look out for this sort of baiting. They should also beware of making comments like "Look out, here comes trouble". This sort of remark indicates to those around your child and to your child, that aggressive, bullying behaviour is expected of them and seems to exclude the possibility that they might behave in any other way.

#### **19. Example**

One of the best ways to help children to change their behaviour is by setting an example of the right way to behave towards other people. If your child sees you or members of staff at school shouting, using sarcasm as a weapon, and picking on people, they will assume that, whatever anybody says to them, bullying is OK. Why should they then change their behaviour?



## **20. No instant results**

Do not expect instant results. It can take anything from six months to two years to change a persistent bully's behaviour and there are likely to be many setbacks along the way. The older the child, the harder it is to change ingrained behaviour patterns, but every parent knows you have to try if your child is acting this way because we know that young bullies grow up to be big bullies. And none of us wants that.

### ***I WAS THE SCHOOL BULLY***

I don't really know how to explain things. I never even realised how awful I was at school until I was at least 22. One day one of the managers at work told me that his daughter had been at the same school as me. She used to dread meeting me at school and she said that I was well known as the school bully. I'd never really admitted to myself that what I did was bullying - it was just a bit of fun as far as I was concerned I was embarrassed that the manager talked to me. I wanted to drop through the floor. But it made me think about what I had done all those years ago.

It's not that my childhood was so awful. Yes, my parents were always fighting, and my bother picked on me all the time. But I guess lots of kids have stories like that to tell about their lives. I really didn't have much excuse to do what I did, but I liked the feeling of power that bullying gave me. no one messed with me!

I think the bullying started when somebody upset me in the Infants and some of the boys showed me how to make a fist and 'sort her out'. I suppose I just carried on from there. I never used a gang for support and I picked on boys and girls - it didn't matter who they were. I'd lie in wait for them on the way home. I used to cat call and fight them - not just pulling hair and scratching but real fighting. I even knocked a girl out once. I was never beaten. Perhaps I would have stopped if somebody had been able to beat me.

I always had an excuse for why I bullied. Things like, 'they were snobs' or 'they'd hurt me' but I know they were pathetic excuses. The lads used to egg me on as well but even when we moved to another area, I still carried on. The bullying went on until I left school.

I used to feel a rush whenever I got at someone. I seemed to get satisfaction from knowing that I'd hurt and beaten others. At heart, I was scared. I thought nobody liked me. I thought I was ugly. I had a big nose and the boys all used to tease me. I felt very insecure about how I looked, but then again lots of people feel that way and never bully others.

I am writing to you in the hopes that some young bully might read this and change his or her ways before it is too late. Now I feel really bad about what I did, but I wonder if any of my victims will ever know?

### ***SUMMARY***

If you find out your child has been bullying other children:

1. Ask your child if s/he can explain what has happened and why - try not to be too judgemental at this point

2. Talk with your child and find out if there are ways you can work together to stop his/her behaviour
3. Explain that the bullying must stop and that the situation could become worse if it doesn't (the possibility that the child might be suspended from school or that police action might have to be taken in serious cases should be discussed, if appropriate)
4. Explain how frightening the bullying is for the victim and try to encourage empathy
5. Criticise the bullying behaviour, but don't reject your child or label him/her as a 'bully' ('What you did was wrong' instead of 'You are a terrible person' or 'You're a bully')
6. Look for good behaviour from your child and praise it, even if it is something small like closing the door without slamming it or picking up clothes and putting them away
7. Tell your child you know s/he can change the bullying behaviour - say that you know the child is NOT really a bully. Give your child the confidence to try to change
8. If possible help your child to develop new interests and/or friends away from the 'bully gang'. Work on improving his/her social skills - how to approach people, how to say nice things, how not to react if s/he is angry etc
9. Try to spend as much time with your child as you can, especially listening to his/her concerns. Sometimes children bully other children as a way of getting attention
10. Make it clear that you do not accept bullying behaviour and that there will be consequences at home such as no television or loss of privileges if the bullying does not stop