

Why Do People Bully and Who Gets Bullied?



Founder of Teen Tips and mental health and wellbeing expert, Alicia Drummond, is an adolescent psychotherapist, author and mother. Alicia offers advice on what to do if your child is being bullied or is a bully.

Over the years I have worked with many young people who have been the victim of bullying and I have often wished that bullies could see how devastating the impact of their actions can be. For every ten people who are bullied, three of them will self-harm, one will go on to have a failed suicide attempt and one will develop an eating disorder (DitchtheLabel.org). It is common for victims to experience PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) and being bullied is recognised as one of the ACEs (Adverse Childhood Experiences). PTSD and ACEs can both have a long-term impact on mental health.

Why Bullies Bully

It is easy to be angry with bullies, especially when we see the damage they cause, but research tells us that the majority of people who bully do so because they don't feel okay themselves. Some have experienced trauma, others have been victims of bullying. Having low self-esteem can lead people to bully as a way of feeling more powerful, or perhaps they have poor social skills and use bullying as a way of controlling relationships. If children don't feel okay at home they might bully at school as a way of coping with the difficult feelings they are experiencing. Whatever the reason, more often than not, bullies deserve our empathy too.

Why People are Bullied

Often those who experience bullying are targeted because they are perceived as being different in some way. Being different is not the problem. The problem is the attitude of the bully. Whilst we might think we live in more tolerant times, many people still struggle to accept difference. Most people have learnt to keep their personal biases to themselves, but bullies haven't. Bullying someone because of their appearance, gender identity, sexuality, race, religion and disabilities are all examples of this. However, being different is only part of the picture because not all people who are different from the crowd are bullied. Indeed, many are celebrated – so why are some people bullied and others aren't?

This is complex, but having low self-esteem and poor social skills definitely contribute to the problem. If we don't believe we have self-worth, it becomes hard to understand why others would treat us with respect, and therefore easier for bullies to latch on to that

insecurity. If we can't be assertive, we might also be less likely to be able to stop the bullying at the outset.

Finding Out

If you discover that your child is being bullied, the chances are you will feel angry and upset, which is not surprising. Some children will avoid telling us they have a problem if they think we will become reactive and charge into 'fixing mode'. Children often worry that our actions could make the problem worse. We need to approach the problem calmly. If you need time to gather yourself, you could say something like, "I am so sorry you have been having such a horrible time and it is not okay that you have been bullied. It is absolutely not your fault and we need to find a way to stop it. Right now I feel really upset about this so it is probably better if I calm myself down before we make a plan. What do you need right now?"

When you are calm, try to establish where, when, how and by whom they are being bullied.

Online Bullying

If the bullying is happening online it is helpful to gather evidence. Take screenshots and keep a record of dates. All of the large social media sites and gaming sites (lots of bullying can happen via gaming) have reporting systems and blocking mechanisms to help you get offensive comments removed and stop the bully being in contact. They are all slightly different but a quick internet search will give you all the information.

Bullying in Person

If they are being bullied in person, it is important to find a way to keep them safe. Is there a trusted adult they could approach if they need support? Is there a certain time and place where the bullying happens? Could they take a different route to school or join a different activity at break time? Encourage them to come up with ideas rather than just telling them what to do. This is important because when children are bullied they lose their sense of power and control. It's important to try not to compound this as we seek a solution.

Bullying at School

If your child is being bullied at school, you will need to work with staff to stop it. Rushing in to demand action or retribution is not helpful. Firstly, ask your child which member of staff to approach with the problem - talking to school needs to happen, but this way they can at least take some ownership of the process. When talking to the school, let them know that you want to work collaboratively to tackle the problem.

All schools have a bullying policy which you should be able to access via their website - understanding how they are likely to react is helpful. Since bullying is unfortunately fairly common, most schools will already have experience of dealing with bullying, so ask them for guidance on how to approach the problem. Let the school deal with the problem from their end whilst you help your child process the experience, develop strategies, rebuild their self-esteem, improve their relationship skills and learn to be more assertive, all of which will help them avoid becoming a victim of bullying going forwards. This might be helped by working with an experienced therapist.

If Your Child is Bullying

No matter how ashamed of their behaviour you feel, they need your love, help and support. Blaming and shaming is destructive at a time when we need to be constructive and remember that poor behaviour is often the manifestation of some form of unmet

emotional need. Trying to discover why they felt the need to bully is more likely to lead to a long-term resolution. Use your listening skills to understand what is causing their behaviour. Is it low self-esteem that's driving them to put others down? Have they been bullied? Do they feel powerless? Are they afraid of being rejected by a group if they don't join in with the bullying? Do they actually realise that what they are doing is bullying, and do they appreciate the impact their behaviour has had on their victim?

If you can remain calm and explore gently, you will help your child feel heard and understood which is more likely to lead to productive discussion on what is not working for them, and what they could do to avoid bullying again. If they are doing it for a sense of power and control - explore how they could make themselves feel okay without putting someone else down. If they didn't understand the impact of their actions, what could they do to make it up to their victim? Once again, this work might be helped by working with an experienced therapist.

Key Points

- Bullying is when the perpetrator, once made aware of the impact of their actions, does not stop
- Reassure the victim that it is not their fault
- Try to give the victim as much power and control as possible when dealing with the problem
- If it is cyber bullying, help them block the bully and get content removed
- Do not let your child have phones and tablets overnight - they need sleep and respite
- Work collaboratively with your child's school
- Work with a therapist to address trauma, build self-esteem, social skills and confidence
- Remember that bullies need help too

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