

# Take the Bully by the Horns



It's common for children of any age to encounter a bully — the playground pest who intentionally uses power to be cruel and hurtful. This aggressive behavior can start early and often peaks in junior high. Boys usually intimidate by threatening and using physical force, while girls engage in taunting, spreading rumors, and exclusion. For targets of bullying — who are often smaller, shy, or “different” — the constant intimidation can lead to feelings of isolation, depression, and even suicide, says Janet Snower, M.C.S.W., clinician at Saint Luke's South Outpatient Behavioral Health Clinic.

## “Not My Kid”

Bullied children sometimes ask for help, but adults may not realize the seriousness of the problem. Other kids, ashamed or afraid, hide the situation, making it difficult for parents and teachers to help.

“Parents should watch for excessive physical complaints and requests to stay home from school, bruises, and ‘lost’ money or possessions,” says Snower.

## When to Intervene

Learning to resolve conflict is an important part of a child's psychological growth. But if bullying continues or a child feels physically threatened, this is a parent's cue to intervene.

Encourage your child to talk to a school counselor and speak to your child's teachers or principal. School personnel should be made aware of a bullying situation — and can provide support and supervision to help a child resolve the situation.

Check to see if your child's school offers peer mediation. Under the guidance of a counselor or teacher, students can then resolve conflicts amongst themselves. A counselor can guide the child in participating in these programs. In addition, Codes of Conduct, which are signed by each student, help to dictate acceptable behavior. Role-playing can help a child become sensitive to the effect he or she has on others and explore alternatives.

Along with seeking help at school, you can help build your child's confidence by reassuring him that reporting a bully isn't tattling and stressing that it is not his fault he is being bullied — and that it *is* a situation that can be resolved.

Unfortunately, many parents of bullies are also duped into believing their child is not the problem. They may defend their child's behavior, but it's important to have a serious discussion with a child who is accused of being a bully.

Children need to know that learning to resolve conflict is an important part of growing up, and bullying behavior rarely gains a bully the power he or she seeks.

Bullies can grow into adults who act out their aggressive behavior with their children, spouses, or co-workers. In the long run, bullying can be as hurtful to a bully as to the victim.

## Keeping Your Child Bully-Free

Good communication is the first step in resolving such conflicts — and also a sign of courage. First, a child should tell the bully to stop. If the situation continues, the child, with a fearless front, should try to talk it out. If that doesn't work, the child should walk away without looking back.

Snower says these tactics can help a child avoid being the target of or stop bullying behavior:

- **Don't gossip.** Being the subject of a rumor can cause kids to retaliate.
- **Use humor.** An amusing comeback can diffuse aggressive behavior.
- **Respond to threats with a shout.** The attention may scare away the bully.
- **Travel in groups.** Bullies may seek out a child who is alone.
- **Report stolen possessions right away.**
- **Learn self-defense.**
- **Report bullies to parents and teachers.**

Sometimes standing up to a bully has no impact, but a child shouldn't ignore the problem. Urge your child to get an adult's help if bullying continues. And if a child ever feels physically threatened, he or she should give the bully a requested possession, make noise, or quickly walk away, to avoid being cornered.

For more information on helping your child cope with a bully or another challenging social situation, call NurseLine at (816) 932-6220. Or go to [saintlukeshhealthsystem.org](http://saintlukeshhealthsystem.org) and type “bullying” in the search box.