

# So you think your child might be being bullied.

## "Let's Talk"

Bullying is totally unacceptable – there are no circumstances in which it should be tolerated because nobody has the right to hurt others by hitting them, excluding them from friendship groups, calling them names, spreading rumours or doing anything that is deliberately intended to hurt or upset them.

Having said this, sometimes a child may think that they are being bullied when, for example, another child does not want to play with them or perhaps because their own behaviour is provocative or unhelpful and so causes a negative response from others. If your child complains about being bullied it is important to ask what s/he means and to understand what has happened – it may be that you need to support your child to behave differently in future! However, whatever the cause, problems with friends etc can be very hurtful and must not be ignored, even if your child begs you not to do anything!

Bullying is an abuse of power and takes place repeatedly and in a way that the victim cannot do anything about it. It is usually deliberately hurtful and generally takes place between people who are not friends, though there can be some very subtle forms of bullying occurring within friendship groups as well – these are often very difficult to identify and resolve but, once again, should not be ignored.

### **What to look out for**

Some children seem to attract the attention of bullies. They may be “different in some way, perhaps because they are physically small or large for their age, maybe because they speak or look differently or because they are more or less able. In reality all children may be vulnerable to bullying at some time. Also there are children who seem to actively “set themselves up” to be bullied. These children are known as “provocative victims” and need help and support in order to change the way they relate to other children.

### **Hot Tips for Parents**

**Listen to your child** – but do not always assume s/he is telling the truth! Children who are victims of bullying will often minimise what has happened in the hope that, by ignoring it, it will go away. They may also dramatise the situation in the hope that parent will over-react and “wreak vengeance” on their behalf. The research into bullying does suggest that meeting force with force is the very worst way of dealing with the situation – when an adult threatens a child bully, it merely reinforces the fact that people with power can apparently do what they like to those without.

**Encourage your children to help themselves** – try not responding to taunts, walking or play with friends, avoid unsupervised areas of the playground, tell an adult

**Teach coping strategies** – practice “response phrases” when a bully is being provocative, as far as possible eliminate “differences” in dress, hairstyle etc. Research into street crime suggests that simply the way people can walk can identify them as potential victims. Teaching a child to fit in may seem like giving in to the bullies – in reality it may be an important life skill.

## **But my child is a bully!**

Sometimes a child exerts “power” over another without realising. If the victim feels powerless to respond, then bullying is taking place. Often the bully will believe that they are “only messing” or that the victim “doesn’t seem to mind.” If school suggests that your child is involved in bullying it is important to stay calm and ask for details from the school and your child – resist the temptation at this stage to gather witnesses for the defence and just find out the circumstances. Also beware of taking sides until all the facts are known. Parents have often been embarrassed when, having leapt to a spirited defence of their child based on the version of the story that came home, they later find that s/he acted in a way that is indefensible!

The bottom line is that, if a child thinks they are being bullied, then bullying is taking place! It may be persistent teasing/comments about clothes, favourite group/football team, accent, body shape, home circumstance etc, etc. While the victim may need support to be less sensitive, the “bully” needs support to realise the effect their behaviour has on others. This sort of unthinking, insensitive behaviour can lead to problems at work and in relationships so it is as well to address it now.

If your child is physically aggressive towards others and/or has an aggressive, uncontrolled response to frustration then you may need to seek help from experts in anger management.