

SCHOOL BULLIES – NAMES CAN REALLY HURT

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Whoever coined the phrase, "sticks and stones may break my bones, but names can never hurt me," may not have had all the facts. Name-calling can have a major effect on physical and mental health, according to a recent report in *Current Opinions in Psychiatry* (July, 2000).

Child victims of all ages have more physical complaints such as headaches, stomachaches, and mouth sores. This study also found that victims and bullies are both more likely to be depressed or have thoughts of suicide. Any child can be bullied, but there are risk factors that make some kids more vulnerable, such as:

- ◆ Shy demeanor or lacking close friends
- ◆ Overprotective parents or family in crisis
- ◆ Different racial or ethnic background than the other kids
- ◆ Physical disabilities or special educational needs
- ◆ Provocative or inappropriate behavior

It is recommended that the following steps are avenues that a parent can take:

- ◆ Ask your child about unusual behavior, bruises, or torn clothing
- ◆ Let them know that you're concerned and want to help
- ◆ Encourage discussion by sharing your own experiences
- ◆ Explain that ignoring the problem won't make it go away
- ◆ Brainstorm together about a plan of action
- ◆ Find out how the school protects students from bullies
- ◆ Learn more about your child's social network

Here are other suggestions for parents:

- ◆ Work on building a warm relationship with your child
- ◆ Spend more time together that's noninstructional
- ◆ Encourage participation in structured activities such as scouting
- ◆ Invite friends to the house or take them on fun outings
- ◆ Build their confidence through after-school sports
- ◆ Role-play appropriate responses to bullies

Unfortunately, it is usually harder for parents to intervene if it's their child who is the bully. That is because aggressive behavior is often learned at home. But school staff can refer you for special training to help restructure family interactions.

In the meantime, here are steps a parent can take to deal with their child who may be a bully:

- ◆ Listen when teachers say your child is aggressive
- ◆ Compare school reports to their behavior with siblings
- ◆ Limit their exposure to violent media messages
- ◆ Make it clear that hurting people is not OK
- ◆ Increase your recreational time as a family

Whether the parent of a victim or bully, it is important to realize that you are not alone and that your child probably is not psychologically disturbed. But it is important to get help early, particularly if you observe any of the following warning signs:

Your child has difficulty concentrating or is listless
Seems depressed or isn't sleeping well
Acts sullen, moody, or withdrawn
Doesn't want to go to school anymore
No longer wants to play in the neighborhood
Is physically abusive to siblings or pets