

Emerging Minds Families

FACT SHEET

Helping your child to stop their bullying behaviour

Definition

Emerging Minds acknowledges that families come in many forms. For the purposes of easy reading, the term 'parent' encompasses the biological, adoptive, foster and kinship carers of a child, as well as individuals who have chosen to take up primary or shared responsibility in raising that child.

Everyone makes mistakes and poor choices sometimes, and for various reasons children may not always realise when their actions or words cause harm to someone else. By supporting your child through the experience you're helping them to develop important skills they can use in the future.

It's important that children know bullying is serious and bullying behaviours are unacceptable. But it's also important as a parent to be curious about the thoughts or feelings that might be behind the bullying behaviour.

If your child has engaged in bullying behaviour there are steps you can take to help ensure it doesn't continue.

- Focus on connection
- Help your child think about the kind of person they want to be
- Build up their social networks
- Support their mental health



Focus on connection

It's normal to feel shocked, disappointed or even angry when you find out your child has engaged in bullying behaviour towards another child. After you've taken a moment to process your own feelings (see our resource about [Finding out your child is experiencing or engaging in bullying](#)), it's important to spend time with your child to understand together what might be behind the behaviour. Often when a child engages in bullying it's because they're dealing with difficult feelings or experiences on their own and are using behaviours to communicate what they're struggling to say out loud or isn't being heard.

Children thrive on positive connection and quality time with you and other significant adults in their life. Making time to play, chat or just hang out together reminds your child they're loved and you enjoy their company – and also creates opportunities to talk about what's going on in their life.

Other things you can do at home, and talk about as a family, to help prevent future bullying behaviour include:

- Talk regularly about behaviours that are acceptable – and those that aren't. You can do this when you're watching a movie or TV together – point out examples of when someone manages a situation well or when they make a choice that is harmful to others. Look for examples from the media (even school newsletters) to start conversations about things people say and do that are kind and those that might hurt or upset someone.

- Children learn how to manage their emotions by noticing how you deal with yours in challenging situations. Talk about how you react to 'big' emotions and what you do to cope with stresses. For example, walking away to cool down, talking with someone you trust, or taking some deep breaths.
- Be mindful of the ways you deal with conflict or anger (e.g. while driving). You might suggest that you listen to a meditation app together or take the dog for a walk every afternoon after school.
- If your child has an emotional outburst or gets upset, debrief afterwards. When you're both calm, you might talk through: *What happened or what was the main trigger? What else might be going on (what's under the anger)? Could we have done anything differently? What do we do differently next time?*
- Keep an eye on your child's activities (online and in real life) and ask questions about their social world – like who their friends are and what they like to do during breaks at school.
- Regularly remind your child to think about the possible impacts on someone else of what they say and do, both online and in person.
- Notice and praise your child when they show self-control or do something kind.
- Teach and model empathy (understanding and sharing the feelings of another person), respect and kindness. Often children find it hard to see the line between joking about someone and being mean, especially online. Help your child understand that everyone reacts in different ways; other children might feel upset by things that might not bother them. You might be able to highlight examples from your own family or a movie to explain how two people can react very differently to a situation.
- Think about others who can reinforce and praise your child's efforts. For example, you might ask their teacher or coach to check in with your child regularly, give them a special job or responsibility, or look for opportunities to notice something they've done well.



Encourage your child to think about the kind of person they want to be

Helping your child see how bullying behaviours don't 'fit' with their values or how they want to be seen by others supports them to want to stop those behaviours.

Make some time to spend with your child exploring what's important to them and the kind of person they want to be.

You could start by talking together about what your family values. It might be things like being kind, honesty, not hurting animals, recycling or helping others in your community.

To get your child thinking about their own values, try asking questions like these:

- 'What sorts of things are really important to you?'
- 'What kind of person do you want to be? How do you want to be seen at school (or at the footy club or other setting)? How would you like people to think of you (e.g. as kind, caring or supportive)?'
- 'So when you talk about X like that, that doesn't sound like the way you think people should be treated. How do you think that behaviour kind of crept in?'
- 'Do you think it's OK for people to be treated that way? How do you think people should be treated?'
- Ask your child to think about somebody that they look up to or admire, someone they want to be like, and ask: 'What values do you think X has? How do they behave?'

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Help your child reflect on their behaviours: Am I heading in the right direction in terms of where I want to go? Or actually is this a behaviour that maybe is not aligned with my core values? Help them to do a bit of a brainstorm around that.

JESSICA STANILAND, CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST AND SCHOOL COUNSELLOR

Then you can talk about the kind of behaviours that are in line with how they want others to see them.

Build up their social networks

Children who engage in bullying behaviour are at higher risk of mental health difficulties at the time and later in life. It can be upsetting and embarrassing for a child to be called a bully or called out for their behaviour. Some children are socially excluded after a bullying incident.

Positive connections with their peers (children around their age) both at school and in other places – like sporting teams or other hobbies – buffer children from negative impacts of being involved in bullying. Healthy friendships help children develop positive social skills and boost their overall wellbeing.

Help your child to think about which of their connections are positive and supportive.

You might need to encourage and support them to build new friendships. Some ways to do that include:

- Spend time with extended family and/or family friends who have children of a similar age.
- Organise after school play dates at your home or in the park.
- Ask your child to think about other children at school they have noticed have similar interests or think they might like to be friends with – and brainstorm ways they could spend time getting to know them a bit better, like working on an assignment together.
- Find out if there are clubs or activities at school they might be interested in.
- Encourage your child to play a team sport or join in a group activity, e.g. choir or art class.
- Get the whole family involved in neighbourhood/ community groups or events.

Support your child's mental health

It can be difficult to know how to support a child who has been involved in bullying. Ask for advice from school or your family doctor/GP – if the bullying behaviour has been going on for a long time, or it's difficult to change, they can support you in getting further professional help from a counsellor or psychologist.

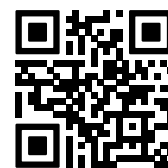
It can be really helpful for children to talk to a confidential counselling service:

- Kids Helpline offers free 24/7 support for both parents and children – [call 1800 55 1800](tel:1800551800), [chat with a counsellor online](#), or [send Kids Helpline an email](#).
- headspace has a range of [free online and phone support services](#) to help young people.

It's important to seek help if you notice changes in your child's mood, behaviour or appetite, or if they stop wanting to do things they used to enjoy or are refusing to go to school. Again, speaking to your family doctor/GP or another health professional is a great place to start.

Immediate support and advice

If you are worried your child might harm themselves, [contact a mental health crisis service](#).



Helping your child if they have been engaging in bullying can be difficult and emotional for both of you. It's important to remember that a lot of a child's behaviour is communication, and to stay curious about what might be going on for your child or their emotions that might be causing the bullying behaviour.

Focusing on your connection with your child and helping them to understand and stop the bullying behaviour, will lessen any negative impact of being involved in childhood bullying on them. Helping children develop empathy, kindness and positive connections with their peers boosts their mental health and wellbeing and supports them to be the best version of themselves.