

Emerging Minds Families

FACT SHEET

Making a plan with your child to address bullying

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.

When you find out your child has been experiencing bullying it's natural to want to protect them and take action immediately to stop it.

However, some actions can be unhelpful and get in the way of your child getting the support they need at this time.

One of the main reasons children don't tell parents about their bullying experience is because they're worried their parents might do something that might embarrass them or make the situation worse.

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Sometimes it's like, "Alright, we're going to talk to that parent right now". And you're like, "No! I don't want that to happen right now!" Take it slow and make sure [you] understand what it is and the situation that's happening.

LARA, AGE 11



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[Parents should] tell us how we can fix the situation. If it's part of our safety, then they should jump in and help us. But I feel like they should really just educate us.

OPHELIA, AGE 12

It's common for parents to want to step in and try to 'fix' the situation by telling children what they should say or do. Instead, think about how you can help your child feel more in control of the situation and develop their problem-solving skills by tackling it together.

What you can do

- **Ask** your child how they want to respond to the bullying.
- **Brainstorm** ways to respond to bullying.
- **Agree** on how to respond to the bullying.

Make sure your child knows you take bullying seriously, that they don't have to put up with it, and that together you will work out what to do.

Ask your child how they want to respond to the bullying

We know that children who have experienced bullying have ideas about what might help and how they want adults to respond.

Problem-solving takes effort and concentration. Make a time when you're both calm and won't be interrupted. Straight after school is usually not a good time, because children need to unwind.

Some parents like to just talk with their child and maybe write down notes. If you think your child might be uncomfortable saying some things out loud, you could each have some paper and pens to write down ideas.

Start by asking them questions like:

- 'What ideas do you have about what to do?'
- 'What would you like me to do?' Or 'What do you need from me?'
- 'Would you like me to just listen?', 'It sounds like you don't want us to do anything right now, is that right?'
- If the bullying is still going on, 'What might make it stop?'

If the bullying is happening at school, you might also ask:

- 'Who have you told at school?' Or 'Who at school knows what's happening?'
- 'What did they say or do?'
- If they haven't told anyone, 'Who do you want to talk to?' Or 'Who could you talk to about what has been happening?'
- 'How should we talk to them about it? What do you want them to know?'
- 'What do you think they will do?'

If the bullying is happening online, you might ask:

- 'What have you already done or tried (e.g. blocking the person doing the bullying, or reporting it to the website or app)?'
- 'What ideas do you have about how to make them stop?' Or 'Is there anything we can do to get it [bullying content] removed?'

There's more advice in this guide on [how to respond to bullying](#) at school or online but for now just focus on getting your child's ideas about actions they or you could take to make the bullying stop. They might have some great ideas that you or other adults would not have thought of.

Brainstorm ways to respond to the bullying

Write down all the possible solutions and responses you have talked about.

If your child doesn't have any ideas, you can offer some suggestions and ask if they agree or not. Keep in mind that they may have valid reasons for not wanting to take certain actions.

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Sometimes children are desperate to have a relationship with the bully, maybe because they have a history together. Or for some other reason, some children just don't feel confident to try other friendship groups. And so, that's going to influence the way that you make a plan.

MIRIAM WEBB, CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST

Each child's situation is unique but there are some tips from other parents and health professionals you might find helpful.

- Talk about how your child might respond if the bullying happens again. The best strategy is to walk away or not respond to anything posted online (but don't delete it – read more about responding to cyberbullying in Taking action to address childhood bullying).
- Suggest some strategies for staying calm in bullying situations – like taking some deep breaths or counting to 10 in their head.
- Suggest healthy ways to express emotions. Talk about ways to get their anger out, for example, taking the dog out for a run, drawing or painting, stomping it out or singing it out.
- Explain why they shouldn't fight back. You might tell your child you understand why they want to, but that responding physically, with mean or clever words, or by encouraging other children to dislike the person doing the bullying, can make things worse.
- As a parent, avoid getting directly involved with any children involved in bullying, and their families.

Once you've got your list of ideas:

- Talk about each option and help your child see what is possible and what is not. For example, if changing schools is on the list, talk about the pros and cons, what might happen and why it might not be possible (like the distance to travel).
- Talk about which ideas might be most effective but also those that might not work or could make things worse.
- Helping children recognise and name what they're feeling can also help them to work out which options might be unhelpful. For example, you could say 'I understand you're really angry about what X has been saying about you and you might feel like hitting or saying mean things back – but we know those behaviours are not OK. What else could you do with that anger?'
- Help your child imagine the possible consequences of each action by asking them to think about 'What would happen if ... ?' For example, you might ask:
'If you don't say anything to X, what might happen? Will they keep making those comments about you?'
'If you do say something, what could happen?'
- Help your child see and accept things that can't be changed or controlled and instead focus on things they can do. One way to do this is draw a 'circle of control' (like the example below) and encourage your child to write or draw what's inside the circle (things they can control) and what's outside (the things they can't control).



Example 'circle of control' illustration

Agree on how to respond to the bullying

Developing a plan can help you and your child feel more confident and empowered. Some families like to write out their plan and make it clear who's going to be responsible for different actions (for example, the child, parent or teacher) and review it as things are done or change.

You might use reminders about the plan you have made together. For example, you might stick a note on the fridge reminding everyone in the family to 'Stay calm, keep cool', or text your child something like 'Remember, it's not about you. What can you control?'

Talk about what your child can do if they feel unsafe, upset or angry at school (or wherever the bullying is happening). For example:

- Go to a safe place, like the library or a wellbeing space.
- Use breathing exercises to calm down.
- Talk it out with a friend or trusted teacher or other staff member
- Do a grounding or mindfulness activity, for example, focusing on:
 - 5 things you can see
 - 4 things you can hear
 - 3 things you can feel
 - 2 things you can smell; and
 - 1 thing you can taste.

It's important for parents to model positivity, optimism and patience. Reassure your child that you (and others) are there to support them and that things can get better. This doesn't mean promising that the bullying is going to stop immediately or the person doing it will change overnight.

In some situations, you might agree with your child not to take any immediate action but wait and see if the bullying behaviour continues. Be clear about when it might be time to tell an adult at school or wherever the bullying is happening. For example, if the same behaviour happens once more, or if the child engaging in the bullying doesn't remove an online post despite saying they would.

Ensure other members of your family, and other caregivers who are aware of the situation, know of and will reinforce the plan you and your child have agreed to.

Dealing with bullying is challenging. But it's a chance to teach your child some problem-solving skills and make a plan together, and show them you have confidence in them to deal with difficulties they might face. This not only helps them learn problem-solving skills but can reduce anxiety or self-doubt and builds their resilience for dealing with problems throughout life.

Immediate support and advice

If you are worried your child might harm themselves, contact a mental health crisis service.



What to do next

Once you and your child have considered what might help address the bullying they're experiencing, it's time to take action that will stop your child from being bullied.

AVAILABLE HERE

Taking action to stop your child from being bullied

