

MENTAL HEALTH MATTERS: Tackling Bullying in Schools

Back-to-School can be a time of excitement for students. They are entering new classes, getting to know new teachers, and often making new friends. There is often hope of a fresh start and a safe, positive school climate. However, the new school year can also bring some anxiety for students who have experienced bullying, whether physical, verbal, or emotional (psychological). Cyberbullying (online bullying) can also have a damaging impact on students.

Bullying is not a new phenomenon. It happens at all ages, in all walks of life. Bullying can have psychological and physical effects for all involved - the bully, victim, and bystander. Research has shown that experiencing bullying can lead to social withdrawal, low academic success, low self-esteem, suicidal behavior, depression, anxiety, addictions, and so much more.

It is important for parents to notice if their children are exhibiting bullying behavior and understand that there are many reasons their children may be bullying others. Some bullies may feel that bullying gives them a sense of power and control; whereas they may really be feeling insecure, hurt, angry, mimicking behaviors seen at home; or they may be a victim of bullying, and this is their way to gain their power back. If bullying behavior is not addressed, the behavior may become even more aggressive, and potentially dangerous. For students who are exhibiting bullying behaviors, help is available. These students will need help with managing their anger, improving their social skills, and controlling their emotions. It will be important to reach out to the school counselor or seek professional help, such as therapy.

Parents should also look for signs that may signal their children are being bullied. These may include not wanting to go to school or constant complaints of headaches, stomach aches, or other woes to avoid going to school. Other signs may include a change in eating or sleeping habits, mood changes, or behavior changes. Communication is key; therefore, speaking with your children about their symptoms would help to determine if bullying is occurring or if there is another concern. Encourage your child to talk about their school day and share any concerns. For students currently experiencing bullying, there are several ways parents can help address the problem. First, parents must take bullying seriously, as children often think that by telling, the bullying will worsen. Educate your children about bullying so they can recognize it. Encourage your children to always tell an adult when something feels wrong. If bullying is occurring in school, reach out to an administrator. Teach your child assertive strategies to ignore and cope with bullying behaviors, perhaps role modeling scenarios. Encourage your children to use the buddy system to avoid being alone around a bully. Finally, teach your children to be *upstanders*, instead of bystanders, and speak out against bullying instead of watching it happen.

We must always take bullying seriously. It is imperative that bullying be considered a community concern that turns conflicts into courageous conversations with a community of caring individuals focused on prevention.