



Providing Support to Children Who Are Bullied: Tips for School Personnel And Other Adults

Bullying among children is aggressive behavior that is persistent, intentional, and involves an imbalance of power or strength. Children and youth who are bullied need clear messages of support from adults. Although we want children to be strong and assertive so that they can stand up to kids who bully, adults must realize that many children aren't ready to do this. Adults play critical roles in helping students who are bullied and in creating a healthy, safe climate in your school and community.

Although these tips are directed at school personnel, they also apply to other adults who interact with tweens (e.g., coaches, youth group leaders, ministers, and neighbors).

How can you help a child or adolescent who is bullied?

- Don't do further damage by lending too much support in public. Kids are concerned about what their peer group sees and knows. It may be more helpful to lend your supportive words and gestures in private.
- Spend time with the student. Learn about what's been going on. Listen. Get the facts (who, what, when, where, and how) and assess the student's feelings about the bullying. Is this the first time he or she has been hurt by bullying, or is this something that's been going on for a while? Recognize that this discussion may be difficult for the student. Tell him or her that you are sorry about what happened. Assure the student that it's not his or her fault.
- Praise the student for their courage to discuss bullying incidents with you. Explain how helpful they are being by providing this important information, not only for themselves, but also for the rest of the students and staff.
- Ask the student what he or she needs to feel safe. Those who are bullied may feel powerless, scared, and helpless. Give this student a voice. Follow through and grant their requests, when possible. Emphasize the confidential nature of your discussion and be clear about who will and will not be given this information. Get additional facts about the incident(s) from other adults or students, so the bullied student doesn't feel that he or she could be easily identified as the sole reporter of the abuse. Protect this student in conversations with the student(s) who bully. Don't reveal his or her identity, if possible. Rather, explain that you've learned about the bullying from a number of sources, including other adults.
- Communicate with colleagues about the bullying incident. Other staff members who have contact with the student who was bullied can also lend support and assistance. Ask them to continue their observations to be sure that the bullying has stopped. Also encourage them to communicate progress or further incidents to all of the appropriate staff members.
- Don't force a meeting between the student who is bullied and the student who bullied them. Such meetings can cause much further harm. Forced apologies don't help.
- Provide as much information as you can about your "next steps". Information is helpful for the student who is bullied to regain a sense of safety and control. Urge the student to report any further incidents of bullying that involve the same or different students.

- Encourage and support the student who is bullied in making friends. One of the most important bullying prevention tools is helping each student at school to have a good friend to be with and talk to.
- Explore how the student’s parents may be of support to them. Many children keep incidents of bullying to themselves and don’t tell their parents. Explain that if their parents know, more support may be available. Talk with parents, if appropriate, about your concerns.
- Make a referral, if needed. Bullying can be traumatic, just as other forms of abuse can be. Assess, or have another professional assess, how much support and assistance this student may need. Talk with your school counselor about a counseling or mental health referral. Err on the side of offering more services, rather than fewer. Bullying is no longer viewed as a rite of passage that all kids just have to endure. It is a form of abuse that can cause psychological, physical, and academic problems for children who are bullied.
- Make sure you follow up with a student who has been bullied. Let the student know that you are a resource for him or her and that you plan to “check in” with them in two to three days and beyond.

Reference

Olweus, D. (1993). *Bullying At School: What We Know and What We Can Do*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, Inc.