

Bullying

Bullying has recently been in the media spotlight. One in every four students endures bullying. In an average-sized school, an incident of bullying occurs every seven minutes. According to the National Association of School Psychologists, 160,000 children miss school each day for fear of being bullied.

Often the child will not report the abuse, fearing retaliation, and will instead live with humiliation and fear. The long-term effects on a child can include diminished self-esteem, lowered grades, skipping school or dropping out, as well as serious anxiety, depression, and possibly even suicidal tendencies.

The psychological scars for the victim can last a lifetime, but the bully is also at serious risk if no intervention is made. He or she may never develop empathy, be unable to form lasting relationships, and fail to learn the skills necessary for healthy adult functioning. Amazingly, as high as sixty percent of people who were identified as childhood bullies have had at least one criminal conviction by the age of 24.

The first step in addressing the problem is being able to recognize it. Besides physical intimidation, bullying also encompasses more subtle threats, relentless teasing, spreading rumors, stealing, destroying property, and efforts to isolate the victim from other children. Bullying in girls in particular tends to involve exclusion rather than physical aggression.

Signs that a child may be the victim of bullying include sudden, unexplained changes in behavior (such as being anxious or preoccupied or demonstrating a loss of interest in favorite activities), loss of appetite, bruises, scratches, torn clothing, missing or damaged property, inability to sleep, nightmares, crying in sleep, repeatedly losing clothing, money or possessions, appearing afraid to go to school, reluctance to take the school bus, repeated headaches or stomachaches in the morning, and evasiveness or discomfort when asked about his or her day.

Indirect questions about the child's most and least favorite parts of the school day or classmates may be more effective in uncovering bullying than direct queries. Watching an age-appropriate movie involving bullying such as *Back to the Future*, *Angus, It's a Bug's Life*, *Big Bully*, *Hearts in Atlantis*, *D2: The Mighty Ducks*, *My Bodyguard*, or *Mean Girls* can be another non-threatening way to broach the subject.

If you know or suspect that your child is being bullied, the first thing to do is to call his or her school and speak with teachers and staff. Increased monitoring of the bully and/or adult supervision of areas in which bullying most often occurs (such as bathrooms, changing rooms, or hallways during class-changes, library, and cafeteria) can

dramatically reduce opportunities for harassment. If the school does not have a comprehensive bullying-prevention program in place, encourage the school staff to consider implementing one.

Studies indicate a prevention program promoting the empowerment of a “caring majority” can create a 50 percent improvement in school climate. One tempting alternative to avoid is calling the bully’s parents. This rarely improves the situation, and often makes things worse. Finally, make a concerted effort to bolster your child’s self-esteem against the threats to his or her sense of worthiness and lovability. Seek out environments outside school where your child can make new friends and discover new talents and interests to promote self-confidence. Consider assertiveness or social skills training if they are indicated, and counseling to deal with feelings if the bullying persists. Assure your child that he or she is not alone or unlovable, and that together you will find a way to overcome the problem.

If you are concerned about this issue or know of someone whose life is being affected by bullying, Diakon Family Life Services can help. The program can create a custom-designed program for a congregation or group addressing bullying and how victims, bystanders, and adults can work together to minimize its effects.

Skilled therapists are also ready to provide individual or family counseling to both victims and bullies. For more information, contact Diakon Family Life Services at 1-877-DIAKON-7, Option 6.