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Is your child a bully?

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Written by Linda Morgan

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Admit it. In the back of your mind, tucked between anxiety about whether your child will ace his math exam or get chosen for the tennis team, lurks something you fear, maybe most of all: Will your kid get picked on by a bully? Left out? Pushed, shoved or taunted?

No one wants her child to be bullied. And few kids sail through school without living through some form of mean-kid victimization, especially in today's cyberspace world. Maybe someone started a [rumor](#) about your daughter or posted cringeworthy shots of your son on [Facebook](#).

But here's a jarring thought: What if it's your child who is doing the bullying? What if your daughter is the [Mean Girl](#) who's excluding kids from the lunch-room clique? Or your son is humiliating and bullying other boys by calling them names and shoving them around the basketball court?



Sometimes parents, unwilling to believe their child is the class tormentor, react with disbelief when someone suggests that their perfect little girl bullying the heck out of the other children, says Peter Sheras, Ph.D., psychology professor at the University of Virginia and author of the book [Your Child: Bully or Victim?](#) "How do you say to parents, 'I'm worried your child is a bully' without them saying, 'Talk to my lawyer?'"

Bullies can be hard to spot because they're likely to dial up the charm when around adults, experts point out. Often street-smart and socially savvy, they realize bullying others is an easy path to [social status](#).

"It's all about power," says Bridgid Normand, senior program developer for the Committee for Children, an international program that develops curricula for violence prevention. "Kids who bully others are after dominance. They are often the popular ones, the kids who are throwing their weight around in the schools."

And in case you're thinking it's better to bully than be bullied, think again. The long-term outcomes for bullies who don't change their behavior are dismal, Normand says. "When kids develop a pattern of aggression, it tends to continue and surface later in dating, family and workplace relationships."

By the time these kids are in their 20s, you'll often find them in the juvenile justice system. "A lot of these folks end up in jail," says Mike Donlin, program consultant with Seattle Public Schools.

Born to bully?

Will scientists one day come up with some kind of genetic marker for bullying? Is it in our DNA?

Not likely. "Bullying is a learned phenomenon that has to do with social pressure," says Sheras. Some kids turn to bullying — or ally themselves with bullies — to avoid being victims themselves, he says. "It's easier to hang out with the bully than to risk the finger being pointed at you."

Bullies harbor an excess of anger and tend to see the world in black and white. "They feel the world has treated them unfairly; that they don't get enough acknowledgment for what they do," Sheras says. "They're opinionated and judgmental."

Bullying can surface as early as elementary school when a group of kids decide, "We don't like Emily anymore." The behavior, experts agree, peaks in middle school, when the peer group becomes omnipotent. "There's a need to establish dominance and social status," says Normand. "Some kids try to be trendsetters, telling others to wear this or listen to that kind of music. They often target kids who have less status."

By high school, power plays emerge when students marginalize other kids they find less desirable, leaving them on the fringe of social activities. "As kids get older, the behavior goes from obvious and typical to subtle and manipulative," Donlin says.

Contrary to popular stereotypes, bullying is not a "kid thing" that evaporates as children grow up, says Donlin. "The negative behaviors of bullying just evolve as kids get more sophisticated," he says. "It turns into hazing, sexual harassment, aggression and cyberbullying — all variations on the same thing."

What to do

How can you tell if your child is a bully? Watch how your child treats other kids, experts advise. Monitor e-communications and pay attention to Facebook and other popular websites. "Notice whom your child hangs out with," says Sheras. "Does he spend time with a tough crowd? Do other kids shy away from him?"

Let's say your kid is one of those super-socially adept kids who have you — and the grown-ups around you — successfully seduced. Everyone (you, especially) sees this child as a charismatic leader. Then one day you get a call from school. It turns out your child has been bullying other kids. "The most important thing to do is stay calm," says Normand. "Really listen to what the teachers are telling you, and don't get defensive." Then begin working with the teacher, administrators and counselors to find out what's going on.

If the negative behavior doesn't stop, consult a mental health professional, she advises. "You want to nip bullying in the bud."

Other red flags to watch for? Bullies often like to dominate others, hide their behavior from adults, blame someone else for their problems and derive satisfaction from the fear or pain of others, says Normand. "They lack concern for the feelings of other people. It's a piece of empathy they just don't get."

If you see a pattern like this beginning to emerge, take action. If you overhear your daughter chatting away on the telephone, spreading nasty rumors and gossiping about a classmate, take away phone privileges. "Tell your child, 'If you're not able to manage yourself, my job as a parent is to step in and manage things for you,'" suggests Normand.

And point out the negative behavior, she says. "Say, 'I heard what you were saying and that's bullying behavior. It is not OK to treat people that way.'"


Linda Morgan, ParentMap's associate editor, writes frequently on education issues.

Signs your child is a bully

- She (or he) is aggressive, even toward adults.
- She likes pushing around and teasing other children.
- She dominates and manipulates.
- She is a smooth talker in tough situations.
- She is easily frustrated.

How families can help prevent bullying

- Create a home environment of tolerance, where differences are celebrated and everyone feels valued.
- Encourage your school to develop policies and procedures regarding bullying.

 Ask for a bullying prevention program to be implemented in your school.
Intervene every time you witness bullying behavior.

- If your child bullies others, provide predictable, consistent, matter-of-fact consequences.
- Support the child who is bullied. Work with the school to provide your child with effective protection against retaliation.
- Encourage bystanders to speak out against bullying behavior and to report it to adults.
- Spend time with your child. All children need a daily, personal connection with parents, teachers and other caring adults.

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Source: [Washington State Office of the Education Ombudsman](#)

Resources

Books:

[Your Child: Bully or Victim? Understanding and Ending Schoolyard Tyranny](#) by Peter Sheras

[Schools Where Everyone Belongs: Practical Strategies for Reducing Bullying](#) by Stan Davis

[Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls](#) by Rachel Simmons

Web resources:

[Stop Bullying Now!](#)

The Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) produces this website, which gives students information, tips and games on bullying prevention; it also includes resources for parents.

[Fight Hate and Promote Tolerance](#)

This site offers ideas and resources that help teens, teachers, parents and community members create environments that value diversity and support anti-bias activism.

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