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## Family Focus

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"Jill" mentioned during a therapy session that her 8-year-old son, "Brandon," who was in third grade, was being bullied on the school playground by a boy in his class. The other child called Brandon names, such as "fag" and "ugly", and made fun of his ears that stuck out a bit. The bully got two other boys to join in with him against Brandon, to the point where Brandon was scared and miserable. Fortunately he told his mother, and she could then assist him in dealing with this problem.

Sometimes children don't tell anyone that they are being bullied. Some signs that your child could be a target of bullying include social withdrawal and isolation, changes in sleeping or eating habits, cutting, apathy and poor grades in school, moodiness, frequent displays of anger, and general unhappiness. Be persistent in asking him or her about friends, school, teachers, and specifically if anyone is bothering them in any way.

In general, there are steps your child can take to deal with bullying. The old advice of just ignoring bullies doesn't seem to serve our children well since often the bullies persist in their attempts to torment. Instead, encourage your child to do the following:

- 1) Try to stick with at least one or two other children. Bullies prefer preying on victims who are alone, so they can exert their power to intimidate more completely.
- 2) Use humor if possible. This serves two purposes. One is to try to diffuse the situation. The other is to give the impression that the bully's mean comments aren't effectively penetrating.
- 3) Use eye contact and calmly tell the bully to stop.
- 4) Move away from the bully and go to an adult for help.
- 5) Parents and older children can talk privately with a teacher, counselor, and/or principal to ask them to observe and try to catch the bully in action. Just reporting the bullying behavior is not always effective. Setting up a "he said, she said" situation can backfire because the bully will deny the accusations and then not be held accountable. And often the perpetrator will seek retribution for being exposed. So it is best if the bullying behavior can be witnessed and documented by people in authority.
- 6) If your child continues to be very upset and all methods to combat the bullying fail, then find a way to remove your child from the bully or bullies. Yes, bullies should not have the right or power to affect decisions you and your child make, but your child's well-being is much more important than standing on principle. Choosing a fresh start in a new school or enrolling in an accredited study program online can provide a welcome relief for your child.

### Cyberbullying:

Older children are vulnerable to bullying on social media, so check this out as best you can and as quickly as you can. The sooner you address cyberbullying, the better you can protect your child from its damaging effects. A 2018 Pew Research Center survey found that 59% of U.S. teens acknowledged having been bullied or harassed online.

If your child denies being bullied, but you see telltale signs, this is the time to be proactive. If he won't voluntarily show you his social media accounts, you will need to find ways to access them. If you check for the purpose of keeping your child safe, and not in order to snoop into his or her private life, then you are being a responsible parent. You don't want to err on the side of caution since children who are bullied can be a threat to themselves or to others. In most instances, you need to insist that your child close their social media accounts and then check over time to be sure they remain closed as long as a threat exists.

In cases of cyberbullying encourage your child to document each episode by taking screen shots and forwarding them to you. Then report these incidents to school authorities, and if appropriate, to law enforcement officials. Check out cyberbullying support sites online. Reassure your child that there is

something wrong with the cyberbully and not with them. Your child is never at fault for someone else's cruel and deviant behavior.

One high school student I worked with was bullied for two years at school and on social media. "Lily" stuck it out at school because she was determined not to be driven away. She closed all her social media accounts. And she came in for therapy to work on ways to handle the situation and also for help with her ensuing depression. It was especially hard on her because the peers who were the most mean were formerly her close friends.

Lily concentrated on her grades with the goal of going away to college. She leaned on her parents, siblings, and other family members to help her feel worthwhile. She got a part-time job to bolster her spirits and to take her mind off of her problems. And she became president of the social action committee at school so that she could surround herself with other students working for good causes, and also to avoid feeling like such a victim.

Unfortunately, while we may not be able to control bullies' behavior and prevent it from occurring, we can try to mitigate the damage they inflict. Parents can try hard to emotionally support a child who is being bullied and keep him or her safe from external harm and from self-harm. Lily is now in her second year of college and is doing well. Although she was deeply affected by the peers who turned against her, and remains anxious about running into them when she is home on school breaks, she is now proud that she didn't let them stop her from succeeding in school and from pursuing her goals.

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[back](#)

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