SOUTH DAKOTA ParentConnection

Parent Brief

Understanding and Preventing Bullying

Bullying has been a topic of concern for a long time. And, while there have been many campaigns and resources developed to educate students, parents, and the public about the concerns for bullying and the impact on students, it continues to be a growing concern for parents.

South Dakota Parent Connection receives frequent calls from parents concerned that their child with a disability is being bullied at school. They are hurt, confused, and angry, often having difficulty knowing what the proper action is to address their concerns.

Society at large is becoming more aware of the growing concern for the social-emotional well-being of all students. Students with disabilities and health challenges are particularly at risk for ill treatment such as bullying.

This brief will provide information for parents, students, and educators about bullying and how parent, schools, and communities can work together on prevention of bullying and addressing concerns as they arise.

Topics Covered in this brief include:

- Types of bullying
- Who is involved in bullying
- Bullying and students with disability
- Prevention
- Importance of including social emotional skills
- Misconceptions in prevention
- Important role of parent/caregiver(s)
- Important role of school

What is Bullying?

Bullying is a distinctive pattern of repeatedly and deliberately harming and humiliating others, specifically those who are smaller, weaker, younger or in any way more vulnerable than the bully. It is the deliberate targeting of those of lesser power.

Bullying can take on many forms, to include verbal and physical attacks, threats, intimidation, social media attacks, and deliberate exclusion from activities. Studies indicate that bullying peaks around 11-13 years of age, and begins to decrease as children get older.

According to National Center for Educational Statistics, one out of every five (20.2%) students report being bullied at school, with male students more likely to be physically bullied than female students. However, a higher percentage of female students reported being the target of rumors and being deliberately excluded from activities.

Types of Bullying

Physical

Physical bullying involves hurting a person's body or possessions. Physical bullying includes hitting, kicking, pinching, spitting, tripping, pushing, taking, or breaking someone's things, and making mean or rude gestures.

Verbal

Verbal bullying is saying or writing mean things. Verbal bullying includes teasing, name-calling, inappropriate sexual comments, taunting, and threatening to cause harm.

Social

Social bullying, sometimes called relational bullying, involves hurting someone's reputation or relationships. Social bullying includes leaving someone out on purpose, telling other children not to be friends with someone, spreading rumors about someone, or embarrassing someone in public.

Cyber

Bullying that takes place using digital devices, such as cell phones and computers by sending or posting mean, hurtful, or intimidating messages which are typically anonymous. Common places for cyberbullying to occur are Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok.

Sexual

The most prevalent among teens and young adults, bullying occurs when an individual or group harass others through comments and actions that are sexual in nature.

(Safety and Children with Disabilities, CDC for Disease Control and Prevention)

Who Is Involved?

The Victim

What are common traits of those who are bullied?

Generally, according to StopBullying.gov, children who are bullied have one or more of the following risk factors:

- Are seen as different from their peers, such as being overweight or underweight, wearing glasses or different clothing, being new to a school, or not having what kids consider "cool".
- Are seen as weak or unable to defend themselves.
- Are less "popular" than others and have few friends.

The Bully

What are common traits of bullies?

Those who bully others do not need to be stronger or bigger than those they bully. Often, these students require support to change their behavior and address other challenges that may be influencing their behavior. *Children who bully may have more than one of the following characteristics:*

- Are aggressive or easily frustrated.
- Have less parental involvement.
- Have issues at home.
- Think badly of others.
- Have difficulty following rules.
- View violence in a positive way.
- Have friends who bully others.

The Bystander

Who is the bystander, and what can they do?

A bystander to bullying is anyone who witnesses bullying either in person or in digital forms like social media, websites, text messages, gaming, and apps. When bullying occurs, bystanders are present 80% of the time. It's extremely important to understand the role of the bystander, because when just one person steps up and intervenes to help, others are more likely to help as well. Unfortunately, what often happens is referred to as the "bystander effect", in which those observing bullying wait for others to act. Fear of responding gets in the way and leads to indifference, in which case bystanders witness, but do nothing. Adults can engage in bystander behavior when they ignore concerns for, downplay concerns about, or do not respond quickly and consistently to defuse bullying. When adults are engaged, bullying opportunities decrease.

Prevention of bullying will be discussed later in this guide and will cover how we can teach students who are bystanders to become upstanders by responding and taking action against bullying.

Difference Between Bullying, Teasing, and Agression

It is important to understand the differences in these behaviors because each requires different interventions.

Bullying

Three critical components that separate bullying from teasing are that bullying is:

- deliberate
- abusive
- causes harm– whether physical, emotional, or social

Bullying requires the targeting of an individual and is typically persistent, occurring repeatedly over time.

Teasing

- Teasing can be considered either positive or negative.
- Good natured teasing is a way for people to communicate with one another. It's considered a social exchange. Teasing can show that they can joke around and still be friends.
- Teasing can also communicate the negative. What seems playful to one child may not be playful to another. Teasing can be difficult for some children to understand if they struggle with conversation and social cues.
- Teasing becomes hostile when it intends to hurt/humiliate, and implies rejection and social exclusion, rather than camaraderie and social inclusion.

Distinguishing between bullying and teasing can be difficult, especially when a child struggles with conversation or reading social cues. If a child does not like the teasing, or feels it is becoming mean or hurtful, it is important to help them understand how to respond. This could be done through role playing or discussing situations and helping them determine what may be considered good-natured versus what may be bordering on bullying behavior.

Aggression

- Aggressive behavior is conflict that may be intentional or unintentional, direct, or indirect.
- Aggression is often a single event or set of actions.
- Aggression can take many forms including physical, mental, emotional, and psychological harm.

What is Cyberbullying?
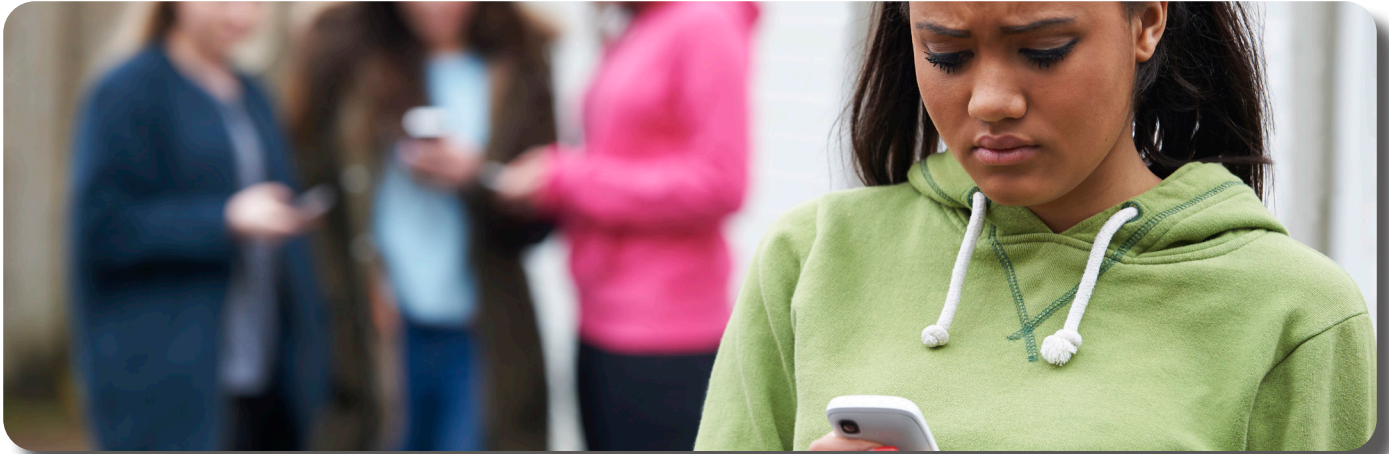
According to [PACER Center](#), cyberbullying is the use of technology to repeatedly and intentionally harass, hurt, embarrass, humiliate, or intimidate another person. Cyberbullying can happen anywhere there is online social interaction.

Some of the most common cyberbullying tactics include:

- Posting comments or rumors about someone online that are mean, hurtful, or embarrassing.
- Threatening to hurt someone or telling them to kill themselves.
- Posting a mean or hurtful picture or video.
- Pretending to be someone else online to solicit or post personal or false information about someone else.
- Posting mean or hateful names, comments, or content about any race, religion, ethnicity, or other personal characteristics online.
- Creating a mean or hurtful webpage about someone.
- Doxing, an abbreviated form of the word documents, is a form of online harassment used to exact revenge and to threaten and destroy the privacy of individuals by making their personal information public, including addresses, social security, credit card and phone numbers, links to social media accounts, and other private data.
- (Source: [StopBullying.gov](#))

When should I be concerned that my child may be experiencing cyberbullying?
If He or She:
- Unexpectedly stops using their device(s).
- Appears nervous or jumpy when using their device(s).
- Appears uneasy about going to school or outside in general.
- Appears to be angry, depressed, or frustrated after going online.
- Is oversleeping or not sleeping enough.
- Becomes abnormally withdrawn from friends and family members.
- Shows an increase or decrease in eating.
- Seems regularly depressed.
- Makes passing statements about suicide or the meaningless life.
- Loses interest in the things that matters most to them.
- Avoids discussions about what they are doing online.

Bullying and Students with Disability

Because bullies often target those who are less powerful or not as strong, students with disability or chronic health diseases are often targeted. Children with disabilities are two to three times more likely to be bullied than the nondisabled peers. (Disabilities: Insights from Across Fields and Around the World, Marshall, Kendall, Banks & Gover (Eds.), 2009.)

The IEP or 504 Plan can be a helpful tool as part of a bullying prevention plan. Every child receiving special education is entitled to a free appropriate public education (FAPE) and bullying can become an obstacle to that education.

The IEP team can work together to develop goals, benchmarks, or short-term objectives, and identify supplementary aides and services or program modifications or supports to prevent and intervene against bullying.

According to the US Department of Education, your child has the right not to be harassed by peers, school personnel, or other adults. Disability harassment is discrimination that violates Section 504 of the Individuals with Disabilities Act.

PACER'S National Bullying Prevention Center has created three sample letters available in English and Spanish that as a parent you may use as a guide for writing a letter to your child's school to report a bullying incident. These letters can be customized for your child.

The letters and instructions on how to use them can be found on their website.

- Notifying the School About a Bullying Incident is a template for parents to use as a guide for writing a letter to their child's school.
- Student with an IEP, Notifying School About Bullying
- Student on a 504, Notifying School About Bullying letters are for parents who have a child with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or Section 504.

The IEP and the IEP team can be helpful in creating a bullying prevention plan. For more information and strategies, PACER's National Bullying Prevention Center has created The Individualized Education Program (IEP) and Bullying document to get you started.

If your school district does not take reasonable, appropriate steps to end the bullying or harassment of your child, the district may be violating federal, state, and local laws. For more information about your legal rights, you may want to contact:

- *The U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights*
- *The U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs*

What Goals and Accommodations Can Help Address Bullying?

There are many reasons why a student with a disability may be susceptible to bullying at school. Some factors may include physical differences, language and communication difficulties, or a child's inability to read/recognize social cues. It may be that they lack the ability to respond effectively and they do not have appropriate self-advocacy skills. Whatever the reason your child is being bullied, there are ways the school can respond through the IEP or 504 Plan.

Some of those may include:

- Addressing individual social skills deficits. Teach and practice how to react, handle, or avoid bullying situations.
- Participate in a social skills group that includes role-playing, to learn how to directly or indirectly handle a bully.
- Include language goals for teaching better self-advocacy skills, such as learning to say "stop that", or learning to walk away.
- Monitoring of student by staff when student is in both structured and non-structured school settings.
- Using a "buddy system" for unstructured settings by pairing the bullied child with an older student or trusting peer.
- Have a trusted check-in person that your student can easily go to when needed.

A critical tool in addressing bullying among students with a disability can be through the individualized Education Plan or the 504 Plan.

Bullying Prevention

Effective bullying prevention is possible. One of the most effective ways to address and prevent bullying is through comprehensive, schoolwide programs. It may be necessary to change a school's culture, which involves collaboration between administration, personnel, students, parents, and community members. Effective prevention programs should include three elements: they should be evidence-based, developmentally appropriate, and be responsive to the broader social-emotional needs of students.

Here are some examples of effective prevention:

- Increased awareness, understanding and knowledge about bullying on the part of school staff, parents, and students.
- Involvement of the wider community, including parents and service providers.
- Integration of bullying-related content into the curriculum in ways that are appropriate to each grade level.
- Increased supervision and monitoring of students to observe and intervene in bullying situations.
- Involvement of students.
- Encouragement of students to seek help when victimized or witnessing victimization.
- A plan to deal with instances of bullying.
- Class and school rules and policies regarding bullying and appropriate social behavior.
- Promotion of personal and social competencies (e.g., assertiveness, anger management, self-confidence, and emotional management skills).
- A schoolwide community of respect in which every student is valued.
- Collaboration between parents, educators, service providers, and students to reinforce messages and skills across settings (e.g., home, school, community).
- A serious commitment to implementing the program on the part of the administrators and school staff.
  (Published by the American Academy of Experts in Traumatic Stress- 2020)

What Strategies Are Not Proven to be Effective?

There is no evidence that conflict resolution or peer mediation stops bullying. Therefore, schools should consider other strategies beyond zero-tolerance policies, which are often ineffective and can exacerbate bullying.

According to stopbullying.gov, although many schools have a zero-tolerance bullying policy that often suspend or expel students who bully others, there is research that shows this type of policy is not effective.

- The threat of suspension or expulsion may discourage children from reporting bullying.
- Bullying can be an early indicator of other problem behaviors.
- Although suspension and expulsion may be necessary in some cases, they should not be the standard bullying prevention policy.
- Another technique schools may use in addressing bullying is mediation. Unfortunately, this technique may send a message to the victim that what is going on is just a conflict between two people, rather than what it really is, a form of victimization.
- The message we want to give the victim should be that NO one deserves to be bullied and that everything possible will be done to stop it.
- To reduce the prevalence of bullying, a school's climate and its exceptions for student behavior must change.

What are Some Ways to Teach Healthy Social-Emotional Skills to Children to Reduce Bullying?

Teaching social emotional skills not only promotes a safe and positive climate within our schools, but it also creates healthy children who are ready to learn.

According to www.stopbullying.gov, there are three areas of social skills to teach and practice.

Social problem-solving skills:

- Find concrete ways to teach children the skills they need to solve problems.
- Teach social problem-solving skills directly related to various forms of bullying, which are verbal, physical, and indirect.
- Help children understand and deal with their feelings.
- Encourage impulse control and self-calming.
- Practice coming up with solutions, anticipating consequences, and evaluating the harmful effects of bullying.
- Help children understand that everyone is different and that this is something to be respected.

Empathy Skills:

- Teach children to label their own feelings and tell how they feel about bullying.
- Discuss how children who are bullied might feel.
- Explain that despite differences between people, everyone has certain basic feelings.
- Model empathy by talking about how you identify another's distress, and think of ways to help.

Assertiveness Skills:

- Teach children to ask for and offer things to each other in a polite way.
- Teach children to use assertiveness skills to avoid submitting to bullying tactics.
- Teach children to ignore routine provocative peer behavior.

How Can Parents Help if Their Child is Being Bullied?

It can be upsetting to find out your child has been bullied. It is important to let your child know you are there, willing to listen and be empathetic to the situation. It is also important to take action to make sure it doesn't continue.

> *Learn to recognize changes in your child's behavior, such as increased fear or anxiety, headaches, stomachaches, sleeping problems, depression, and self-isolation. These may be indicators that your child is being bullied.*

According to stopbullying.gov:

- If you suspect your child is being bullied at school, it is important to work with the school to solve the problem.
- Keep a written record of all the bullying incidents that your child reports to you. Record the names of the children involved, where and when the bullying occurred, and what happened.
- Immediately, ask to meet with your child's teacher and explain your concerns in a friendly, nonconfrontational manner.
- Ask the teacher about his or her observations:

    Has he or she noticed or suspected bullying?

    How is your child getting along with others in the class?

    Has he or she noticed that your child is being isolated, excluded from playground or other activities with students?

- Ask the teacher what he or she intends to do to investigate and help to stop the bullying.
- If you are concerned about how your child is coping with the stress of being bullied, ask to speak with your child's guidance counselor or other school-based mental health professional.
- Set up a follow up appointment with the teacher to discuss progress.
- If there is not improvement after reporting bullying to your child's teacher, speak with the school principal.
- Keep a record of all correspondence with teachers and/or administrators.
- If the harassment continues, document it and file a Notice of Harassment. you may need to move up the chain of command, contacting the superintendent, board of education, or possibly state or federal authorities.
- As a last resort, when all other options have been exhausted, and the bullying is serious or life threatening, it may then be necessary to file a complaint. Contact: U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, telephone (800) 421-3481.

How Can Parents Help if Their Child is the Bully?

It's hard to imagine your child is someone who would bully another child. No parent wants to hear that their child is a bully, yet it happens and it needs to be taken seriously. So, how can you help your child understand what bullying is and why it is a problem? The following are suggestions from Stopbullying.gov and STOMP Out Bullying.

- Help your child understand how bullying hurts other children. Give real examples of the good and bad results of your child's actions.

- Set firm and consistent limits on your child's aggressive or hurtful behavior. Be sure your child knows that bullying is never ok.

- Communication is key. Talk to your child to find out why he or she is bullying. Often, children bully when they feel sad, angry, lonely, or insecure, and many times major changes at home or school may bring on the feelings.

- Let your child know that you will help them to change the behavior and correct the situation. Ask them how they think the bullying could stop. What do they think has to change in order for them to change?

- Be a positive role model. Children need to develop new and constructive ways to get what they want. All children can learn to treat others with respect.

- Use effective, nonphysical discipline, such as loss of privileges. When your child needs discipline, explain why the behavior was wrong and how your child can change it.

- Find positive ways to stop bullying with the school principal, teachers, counselors, and parents of the children your child has bullied.

- Supervise your child and help develop individual skills and interests. Supervise their time online and monitor what sites they are visiting. Require them to friend you on social media sites and share their passwords with you.

- Additional counseling may be needed for your child. It will help them learn to behave differently, accept responsibility for their actions and teach them how to develop guilt, as well as learn how to form cohesive relationships.

Youth who bully others are at increased risk for substance misuse, academic problems, and experiencing violence later in adolescence and adulthood. Youth who bully others and are bullied themselves suffer the most serious consequences and are at greater risk for mental health and behavioral problems.

(Preventing Bullying CDC)

What is the School's Responsibility?

Schools have a responsibility to protect each and every student!

If you feel your child is being bullied, check out your district's bullying policy. Are they following it? South Dakota schools strive to be a safe and healthy environment for all students. If a school district in the state of South Dakota does not have a bullying policy, the district must follow the state model bullying policy until the school district adopts their own. The model bullying policy prohibits harassment, intimidation AND bullying. The bullying of students by students, staff or third parties is strictly prohibited and will not be tolerated. (South Dakota Compilation of School Discipline Laws and Regulations)

Ongoing education and training within our schools on the bullying policy and procedures is vital in the continued effort to provide students with an educational climate that is safe, conducive to learning, and fosters an environment where all students are treated with dignity and respect.

- School staff should investigate the bullying immediately. The administration should investigate a parent's concerns and then inform the parents about their plans to remedy the situation.
- School staff should never have a joint meeting with your child and the child who bullied them. A joint meeting may embarrass or intimidate the child who has been bullied and lead to further problems. Also, bullying is not a conflict, but a form of victimization, and the school should not refer the kids to mediation.
- Staff should meet with your child to learn about the bullying that he or she has experienced. During this meeting, they should assure your child that they will try their hardest to see that the bullying stops. A plan should be developed that will keep your child safe, and the staff should remain alert for any signs of bullying in the future.
- School personnel should meet with the children who are suspected of taking part in the bullying. During this meeting, staff should make it clear that bullying is not tolerated and is against school rules.
- Educators and parents should be careful not to 'blame the victim.' The child who is bullied should never be made to feel like it was their fault or that they were responsible for what happened.
- Give the school reasonable time to investigate and hear both sides of the story. It should not take longer than a week for the investigation, but give the school's administration time. Educators should not jump to hasty conclusions and assign blame without a thorough assessment of the situation.
- If bullying continues, write to the school's principal or administrator. Creating written documentation will record your concerns. Be sure to include any evidence to back up your complaint.
- Most administrators and staff are responsive to bullying concerns, however, if your school administrator is unable or unwilling to stop the bullying, write to your school superintendent for assistance.
- Be persistent. Bullying is an ongoing issue and it is important for parents to understand the bullying policy of their child's school, and be persistent in assuring that these policies are followed.
  (Source: Health Resources and Services Administration. "How to Talk with Educators at Your Child's School About Bullying: Tips for Parents of Bullied Children"

Bullying is preventable. It should not be considered a natural "right of passage", but should be taken seriously. It is important to understand what factors put people at risk for both bullying and being bullied.

Families, schools and communities need to work together to strengthen student's skills and make changes to the physical and social environment in an effort to prevent the incidence of bullying in our schools and communities.

Resources for Parents

Cyberbullying Research Center

Stopbullying.gov

PACER's National Bullying Prevention Center

CDC Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

ADDitude

Understood

SOUTH DAKOTA
ParentConnection
Resources for families of children with disabilities.

South Dakota Parent Connection provides assistance to families of children with disabilities and special health care needs and the professionals who support them.

Contact us for individual assistance, educational workshops, referrals to cummunity resources, or need help navigating the special education process.

Sioux Falls
3701 W 49th Street, Suite 102
Sioux Falls, SD 57106
(800) 640-4553
sdpc@sdparent.org

With Offices Also In
Aberdeen & Rapid City