

20 Questions

Parents Ask Principals About Bullying...

and How You Can Answer



Responding to Parent Questions About Bullying: A Five-Step Process

This document was prepared by the National Association of Elementary School Principals, Education.com, a website serving parents, and Committee for Children, a nonprofit education and advocacy organization dedicated to bully prevention in schools nationwide.

Bullying hurts everyone involved, and it can leave deep, lasting scars. Fortunately, with careful teamwork between schools and their communities, it can be stopped.

As an administrator, however, you probably also know firsthand: bullying interventions often include difficult conversations, whether with children, staff, or distraught parents. If you have ever felt like you are in crossfire, you are not alone. Whether you're in the middle of a bullying situation at your school right now, or you just want to be ready should that time come, this document can help. Here are 20 common questions that principals often get asked about bullying. Each is answered with examples of practical responses and procedures, supported by expert consensus, that have been helping at many schools across the country. As a leader, you know better than anyone that every bullying event is different in its particulars, so you'll want to choose what's right for your situation. Do know this: You are doing the right thing by taking on this tough topic.

1. Listen with empathy and compassion and let parents know they've been heard.
2. Thank them for bringing the matter to the school's attention. It is the right thing to do. Bullying requires adult intervention.
3. Provide steps and options for a solution.
4. Develop a Student Safety Plan (for the student who has been bullied) or a Student Respectful Behavior Plan (for the student who bullied). The latter should follow your school's hierarchy of consequences for bullying.
5. Provide a timeline for when you will conduct an investigation and then follow-up with the parent. Schedule a call or follow-up meeting before they leave or get off the phone. Three to five school days is a good guideline for follow-up with a parent who has a child that is being bullied.

Bullying Hotspots: Questions Parents Ask



1. My child has been bullied on the school bus for weeks. What are you doing to stop it once and for all?

- As part of a whole-school bullying prevention initiative, all bus drivers should receive training about bullying prevention. They can then follow an established protocol for handling disruptive and/or bullying behavior.
- Assigned seating can cut down on problem behaviors and rough dynamics.
- Some schools/districts have chosen to add extra adult supervision and even camera surveillance on buses.
- Students must understand the rules and specific, expected behaviors for riding the bus and understand that it is a privilege they can lose. Some schools have students and families sign school bus riding contracts that outline behavioral expectations and consequences for not adhering to those expectations.



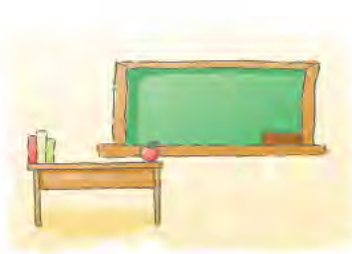
2. How can you help my daughter who is being bullied in hallways, usually when there's no adult in sight?

- In general, school administrators and staff can identify areas of the school where bullying is happening and increase supervision in those areas. Many schools have teachers take turns monitoring hallways during passing periods. Some schools have also made changes to the schedule such as staggering passing time if the hallways are over crowded and if problem behaviors are likely to occur.
- Specifically, individual safety plans have proven to be a helpful tool. In a situation like the one described above, a safety plan might include:
 - A peer "buddy" to walk with the bullied child through the hallways.
 - Identification of safe routes through the school.
 - Notification of teachers and other adults in the building about the situation.
 - Having teachers with classrooms along a daily "safe" route watch out for vulnerable students. Selection of a trusted adult in the building with whom a child can connect.



3. Can you set up a meeting with the family of my daughter's bully so we can all talk and get the bullying to stop?

- The most effective tactic in bullying prevention is to work with the child being bullied and the child doing the bullying separately. Here's why:
 - Power imbalance is a huge factor in bullying. The child bullying has created social and physical power over the child who is being bullied. This power imbalance may tend to skew a group session: an intimidated child will go silent, and a child who has bullied will feel even more empowered.
 - Parents of the bullied and the bully invariably see the issue differently, and tensions run high. When they are in the same room, parents on each side easily blame or lash out. It is best to work with each family separately.
- It is important to use the terms "child who bullies" and "child who is bullied" rather than labeling children as "bullies" or "victims," and to help parents understand why. This labeling can have the negative effect of implying that being "the bully" is a fixed trait or role, rather than a set of behaviors a child can move away from.
- Sometimes, parents will try to "take matters into their own hands" and contact another family directly. Administrators provide crucial help to all parties when they explain that these conversations easily backfire and escalate, and that it is best to work through the school.



4. Why don't teachers do anything to stop the bullying in their classrooms when it happens right under their noses?

- A hallmark of bullying is its secretive nature. It is all too easy for even the most caring, alert teachers to miss it, since they are pulled in several directions throughout the day. In addition, it is not always clear to a teacher that a situation is bullying (as opposed to teasing, conflict, or other interpersonal issues that are common between children). This gets particularly tricky when there are different stories from different people. Therefore, open, non-blaming communication between teachers, parents and students is crucial to pinpointing problems that go under the radar.
- Specific schoolwide strategies that have proven particularly successful include:
 - Bullying prevention training for all teachers and staff.

- Classroom management support for any teacher struggling to manage bullying in a classroom, including:
 - Reassigned seating
 - Class working groups
 - Weekly social-emotional curriculum teaching respect and kindness
 - Daily circle or share time where students can “talk it out”
- Studies show that students tend to report more bullying than teachers. This is a statistic that many schools are hoping to change by increasing teacher awareness of bullying.



5. As the school principal, what steps are you taking to make our school safe?

- Almost all states have laws that require schools to have a plan in place to prevent harassment, intimidation, and bullying. Parents should be encouraged to educate themselves about their school’s bullying prevention plan. According to research, here are the four major steps that can make a school safer:
 - Policies and procedures established and communicated to all staff, students, and parents
 - A bullying reporting process, including training school staff in handling reports from students and careful attention to confidentiality, anonymity, and/or protection for the person who reports.
 - Increased adult supervision in low-supervised areas, which may require some parents to volunteer due to budget cuts.
 - Schoolwide social-emotional or bullying prevention curriculum.
- A school Web site and handbook are effective ways to communicate anti-bullying policies and procedures to parents. Especially helpful information:
 - An outline of bullying prevention initiatives for the year.
 - School wide hierarchy of consequences or progressive discipline for bullying behaviors, such as losing privileges, apology letters, making amends, and restorative justice.
 - A description of how students are trained to report bullying.
 - Weekly bulletins and monthly newsletters emailed to families.



6. The student who bullies my child follows him around inside and outside the school. He can't get away. What can you do to stop this?

- If a bullying problem persists outside of school grounds and affects students' sense of well-being during school hours, and administrators still have an important role to play. Swift action is the most effective path, since uninterrupted bullying only escalates.
- Investigation works best when it is done within the week, and includes coaching sessions with each child individually.
- The student who has been bullied can benefit from a Student Safety Plan; for the child who has done the bullying, a Student Respectful Behavior Plan should include a written agreement that the bullying will stop.
- Safety and Behavior plans should both be monitored; teachers and staff should follow up with each child to make sure the problem has indeed stopped.
- In severe cases of stalking or harassment, local law enforcement should be contacted. This can be done either by parents or by the school. Some parents may be upset, but safety must come first.



7. My daughter is always excluded from the group of girls in her class. What can you do to make sure she's included in the group and treated with more respect?

- When one group of students deliberately and repeatedly excludes, it's called "relational or social bullying." Unfortunately, however, many people may not recognize this behavior as bullying. Schools need to educate everyone involved: this is bullying and it does need to stop right away. Your school's definition of bullying should clearly communicate that deliberate, malicious exclusion is a form of bullying. Parents also need to know the difference between their child being maliciously excluded and, for example, not being invited to a birthday party because only so many kids can be invited.
- Teachers or counselors may reach out to the girls doing the bullying and help them understand how and why it is unacceptable.
- Bullying students benefit from opportunities to practice positive social skills in the classroom, such as how to include others.
- Some schools set up "friendship benches," places a child can turn to if excluded or needs a recess friend. This location also signals to adults the child is in need.
- Children who have been relationally bullied can often use individual help with friendship-making skills, and with inclusion in positive groups on campus that can build confidence and self-esteem.



8. I think my child is being bullied, but he won't tell me because he's afraid of retaliation. He's not the same at home, seems very depressed, and just sits alone in his room. I'm worried and need your help.

- There is a clear link between bullying, depression, anxiety, and even self-harm and suicidal thoughts. Reports of bullied children who seem withdrawn and hopeless are considered mental health “red flags.”
- All parents should be provided with a list of warning signs to look for if they fear their child is being bullied.
- Parents can be encouraged to reach out to a school counselor, psychologist, social worker, or other mental health professional if they suspect their child is the victim of bullying. Working together, parents and school staff can create safe channels for honest reporting of what has been happening. Parents should also know about community referrals and crisis services that they can seek out if they think their child is at risk of self-harm or of hurting others.
- Whenever possible, it is optimal to preserve anonymity when a child reports a bullying student. Suggested language includes: “many people have told us” or “we’ve observed.”



9. My 11-year-old son is always last to be picked on a team, and he gets teased and taunted on the playground. He feels sick and stressed at home and doesn't want to go to school. You've got to help me. What are you going to do to stop this?

- Despite a staff's best intentions, bullying can easily take hold on a playground. When possible, quick investigation by an adult, followed by one-on-one counseling for all children involved and clear plans for moving forward, is usually the most helpful response. Several other strong practices:
 - Assigned buddies to sit with at lunch and play with at recess.
 - An alternative space for recess time, such as the library or a supervised classroom.
 - An on-campus mentor for the bullied child—a designated, trusted adult who can offer a meaningful bond.
 - A “friendship bench” near the school office, where kids can go when they're looking for a new friend.
 - Increased supervision on the playground.
 - Adult intervention and/or P.E. instruction to help teach students cooperative games that do not involve potentially humiliating processes such as choosingsides for teams.



10. I'd like to see a copy of the school safety rules. Don't they include bullying? If so, why aren't you doing anything? My friend's daughter goes to a school that has a bullying prevention program and bullying in her school is nearly unheard of. Why don't we have a program like that?

- Parents can be shown a copy of your school's code of conduct, which should include information about expected behaviors and safety rules, and should include a clear definition of bullying.
- If your school does not already have a comprehensive bullying prevention program, consider the following elements that have proven effective in many programs:
 - Staff-wide training session in bullying prevention.
 - Clear schoolwide policies and procedures about bullying.
 - Training for adults on how to receive bullying reports.
 - Clear agreements and processes for coaching all students involved in a bullying incident.
 - Classroom lessons to teach students the skills to recognize, refuse, and report bullying.
 - Structured curriculum that teaches empathy, respectful behavior, and social-emotional and friendship skills to students, to promote positive school culture and lasting forms of social power.
 - Clear lines of communication and cooperation between schools and families.



11. My child is stopped by bullies on his bike ride to school. They form a barricade around him with their bikes and won't let him pass. They taunt and tease him and sometime push him off his bike. He's started taking a long detour to avoid them, instead of taking the direct route just down the street. I need your help to stop this even though it isn't happening on school grounds.

- In many states, a school is responsible for the child's safety for the entirety of the school day, including the commute to and from school. Off-campus bullying requires investigation, especially when multiple children are involved.
- If the bullying students attend the same school as the victim, that school administrator handles the investigation.
- If the bullying students attend a different school than the victim, the school must work with the other school's principal to solve the problem.

- Once facts are clear, administrators generally contact the families of all students involved, and if necessary, contact police to make sure the student is able to get to and from school safely.
- In many schools, a Student Safety Plan is then created for the bullied child within five days of the report, and a Respectful Behavior Plan is established for the child or children who have bullied.



12. Other parents have told me that my son is bullying his classmates at recess. I just don't understand. My child is sweet and good-natured. I feel like he is getting stereotyped and now the other moms don't want to set up play dates with my child. Are you looking into this? I know my child is not a bully. It must be the other children. I'm going to call their parents.

- Because bullying is so shameful, families of children who bully often struggle with the news. It can be helpful to explain that research has shown that in any given school year, over two-thirds of students are involved in some part of the bullying cycle, whether they are bullied themselves or whether they experiment with bullying behaviors or become active bystanders, or some combination of the three. In other words, plenty of good kids try out bad behaviors at some time during their years in school. Unfortunately, research also shows that if students are allowed to fall into chronic bullying behaviors, they can experience serious problems in later life. So it's crucial that the school guides them decisively away from hurtful behaviors.
- Online resources can be invaluable in helping worried parents recognize signs that their child may be bullying.
- To bring an end to bullying, school intervention programs typically provide support for children doing the bullying as well as those who are being bullied.
- Unlikely as it may seem at first, parents can be invaluable allies to the school in stopping bullying. School counselors can help them continue to work with their children at home to build empathy and healthy patterns of friendship.
- As noted in Question #3, one step that is not recommended is for parents to call one another directly. Feelings just run too high, and the most common result is escalation. As difficult as bullying-intervention conversations are, administrators win long-term trust as well as healthy school climate when they take them on.



13. The teacher told me in my teacher-parent conference that my son Charlie is bullying Sam. I know Sam and he's probably instigating the fights. Charlie would never do anything to hurt someone. You need to tell the teacher to look at what's really going on here. Who was there to see the bullying? Do you or the teacher have any witnesses? And now that you've accused my child of bullying, what are you going to do about it?

* "Fights" are different from bullying, and it's crucial to know the difference.

- In a fight or conflict, both children have equal power, and they can work together to fix their problem.
- Bullying, on the other hand, happens when one child has more physical or social power and uses it to hurt someone else.
- When issues arise, staff should be trained to recognize the difference between bullying and fighting or experimenting with social power, and should be familiar with the procedures the school uses to deal with each one.
- It is important to address the parent's concern about the procedure that was followed to investigate this and other incidents. When necessary, all parents may need to be reminded, as well, that the school needs to respect the confidentiality of all students involved.



14. My daughter says she's afraid of her teacher. She says her teacher makes fun of her when she gets answers wrong and makes her sit by herself in a corner as "punishment" for behaving badly. My daughter says she doesn't act any differently than any other student in her class. I think my daughter's teacher is bullying her. What are you doing to stop this?

- Positive relationships between teachers and students are crucial for maintaining a positive school environment. This is a serious report that requires a serious investigation, and should include:
 - An investigation of teacher bullying, including interviews with the bullied child, the teacher, and other staff members who have observed the teacher and the child during school hours.
 - Support for the teacher and student if the investigation uncovers problems that violate school policy or ethos.
 - Clear guidelines for the teachers and staff, including regulations for appropriate discipline.



15. My son got into a shoving match in the cafeteria, but he says the other boy shoved him several times before he finally shoved back. But it was my son who got caught by the cafeteria monitor and sent to detention. The other boy got off scot-free. What's the process in this school for getting to the bottom of these fights instead of just isolating the kid who gets caught?

- Parents should always be encouraged to come forward when they suspect their child was wrongfully accused. Helpful steps for administrators include:
 - A clear process in place for investigative conflicts or fights.
 - Separate interviews of both students involved as well as any witnesses.
 - Training for all staff in distinguishing conflict from bullying and how to address each one.



16. I've spoken to you twice before about my son getting bullied on the playground. He came home this afternoon crying with a bloody nose. If this happens again, I'm going to call television and newspaper reporters and tell them that my son goes to a violent school and you're not doing anything to make it better.

- Despite our best efforts, bullying can still take hold and cause great frustration to everyone. Research supports a broad, multi-level approach built into all parts of school life. Particularly important ongoing processes include:
 - Increased supervision on the playground.
 - Clear, effective procedures for reporting and investigating incidents.
 - Safety Plans for bullied children and Respectful Behavior Plans for those who have bullied
 - Schoolwide plans, revisited regularly, to eliminate violence, aggression, and bullying
 - Implementing a classroom-based bullying prevention or social emotional learning curriculum
- All of these measures can be posted on your school's website and in regular school publications. If reporters call, you can quickly refer them, with pride, to these public sites. It is also wise to refer them to the school or district's designated public information officer, who can address the questions and focus on the positive actions that the school is taking.



17. My son's autism already sets him apart from other kids and really limits his social interactions with his peers. Now he's coming home very distressed and a few times, his clothes have been ripped and muddied. I'm certain he's being bullied, but he can't tell us about it. I want you to find these kids and punish them. I also want to know who they are so I can call their parents.

- Bullying incidents against children with disabilities should be resolved with a prompt investigation, and the targeted child's parents should be encouraged to avoid contacting the parents of the child bullying on their own. Important options for these particularly vulnerable children include:
 - Increased adult supervision during the school day.
 - Careful work with counselors to help the bullied child identify the student at fault.
 - A Safety Plan for the bullied child, with extra support from Special Education faculty as appropriate.
 - Consultation with the school district's legal counsel to clearly understand any unique responsibility the school may have in protecting the child due to his particular disability.



18. My child is being bullied in the gym locker room—out of sight of teachers and coaches. What are you doing to stop this?

- Even in the most caring school, private corners like locker rooms are potential trouble spots for bullying. Open communication is crucial, so that if problems occur, bullied children will speak up and get help fast.
- The most reliable prevention is to increase supervision in the locker room. If that is not possible, many schools arrange a different, safe place or time for the bullied child to change his/her clothes.
 - The P.E. locker of the perpetrator can be reassigned, or that student's class period can be changed.
 - It is helpful for all teachers and coaches to be aware of which child has been targeted and pay particular attention to his/her safety.
 - Students must understand the negative consequences for bullying in the locker room. Posting clear locker room rules can help.



19. As you probably know, my daughter came out as gay. Now, all the kids avoid her, call her names, send hurtful text messages, and gossip about her on the Internet. She's been excluded from everything she enjoyed at school. Right now, I don't feel safe having her go to school, so I'm keeping her at home. I'm not sending her back until she feels safe and accepted here. What are you doing to change this school? Until things get better for her at school, what can you do to help her keep up academically? I work here in town and can't send her to another school.

- When a child feels too harassed even to attend school, the teachers and staff must reiterate that they will do everything in their power to maintain safety. Furthermore, when bullying has included stereotypes and prejudice, the school staff faces the responsibility of creating a climate of acceptance.
- Some states are including language in their legislation that addresses bias-based harassment. Minnesota, for example, has recently passed legislation requiring that all adults in the school "affirm the dignity and self-worth of students" regardless of race, sexual orientation, disabilities, or other factors.
- When prejudice-based bullying has happened, school culture and climate need to be addressed. Effective steps can include:
 - Requiring all adults in the school to show kindness and respect towards all students, regardless of race, sexual orientation, disability or other factors.
 - Hiring a full-time "harassment prevention" official.
 - Providing on-site mental health counseling.
 - Identifying harassment "hot spots" on campus.
 - Supporting and encouraging student-led initiatives like gay-straight alliance programs.
 - Implementing schoolwide social-emotional learning programs that emphasize the inclusion of all students.
 - Clear policies against harmful slurs and other cruel language.



20. Some of the kids in my daughter's class have set up a fake Facebook page about her and are using it to post untrue and embarrassing messages. This has to stop! What are you doing about this cyber bullying?

- Although cyber bullying often occurs after hours, it can affect students' sense of safety at school and their ability to focus on their schoolwork. Administrators can and should work to stop it. Effective steps include:
 - Lessons on cyber bullying as a fundamental part of your school's bullying prevention program.
 - Training students and parents to identify and report cyber bullying.
 - A Safety Plan for the student being bullied.
 - Clear school rules that forbid cyber bullying and set up consequences for it.
 - Reminders to parents that no matter how upset they feel, they should NOT respond directly to cyber bullying.
 - Information for parents and students about Facebook's process for reporting and having false pages removed:
<http://www.facebook.com/help/?page=204546626249212>