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A PARENT'S GUIDE TO

(Cyber)Bullying

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Solutions to bullying are not simple. Bullying prevention approaches that show the most promise confront the problem from many angles. They involve the entire school community—students, families, administrators, teachers, and staff such as bus drivers, nurses, cafeteria and front office staff—in creating a culture of respect.

—StopBullying.gov

You got my homework finished, McFly?

We all know the stereotypical bully. He is male, large, intimidating, and unintelligent, just like [Moe from *Calvin and Hobbes*](#) or [Biff from *Back to the Future*](#).

Bullies can indeed have these characteristics, but the truth is that there is **no profile** when it comes to bullying. Roy Moore, Founder and Executive Director of [Be Strong](#), a nonprofit dedicated to ending bullying, says, "Bullying does not respect boundaries." A petite teenage girl could actually be the one bullying a huge football player—maybe not physically, but psychologically and emotionally.

Bullying is a complex issue. As such, it does not have a simple solution. Your kids might not have a propensity to bully or be bullied, but even if they are just bystanders, **bullying still impacts them**. And it's possible that bullying is even more common among adults than it is among kids. It's crucial for you to make bullying one of your regular and ongoing conversations with your kids so they know how to react to it when they either experience it or see it—or in case they're the bullies.

── What is bullying?

Just because kids are rude or aggressive does not mean they're bullying others. Roy Moore says that bullying must include the following:
- One or more parties harassing one or more parties;
- A real or apparent imbalance of power; and
- Occurs over an extended period of time.

While bullying certainly includes physical intimidation, it's not at all limited to it. Bullying roughly [falls into the following categories](#):
- Physical
- Verbal
- Social
- Cyber

To be clear what we're talking about when we use the term "bullying," it can include, but is not limited to, [the following behavior](#):
- name calling
- teasing
- spreading rumors or lies
- pushing or shoving
- hitting, slapping, or kicking
- excluding others
- threatening
- stealing belongings
- sexual comments or gestures

A note about sexual bullying
Moore notes that it's important not to confuse [sexual bullying](#) (such as someone sexting someone else) with the behavior of predators. The response to a [predator grooming a potential victim](#) should be totally different than the response we take to a bully.

What's special about cyberbullying?

[We can define "cyberbullying"](#) as "'willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices.'" On the internet, someone could be told, "kill yourself" (or KYS), for anything from having expressed a desire to commit suicide to having been bad in a game. Cyberbullying can look like teens gossiping and lying through texting, create fake accounts and profiles for others, or taking embarrassing photos of people when they don't expect it and then posting them online for anyone to see.

Technology gives us distance from each other, removing us from the consequences of our actions. It's easier to be cruel online because we don't have to face the consequences. [One study from the U.K.](#) found that even bystanders care less about online bullying than they would if they were to witness bullying in person. Because people can access the internet anywhere, if someone is a target of online bullying, it's not as though they can transfer schools to escape it. Cyberbullying allows for greater anonymity and cruelty, as well as [extensive victimization](#) because posts can go viral.

How big of a problem is bullying?

According to the CDC's [latest report on high-risk behavior among youth](#), 19% of students were bullied at school in 2017. In 2017, 14.9% of high school students were bullied electronically, and electronic bullying is much more common for females (19.7%) than for males (9.9%). It's probably worth noting that the number of students who report experiencing "persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness" in 2017 is 31.5%, a number that has been steadily increasing since 2009. StopBullying.gov says that [most bullying happens in middle school](#).

What are the risk factors for being bullied?

We want to emphasize again that **anyone** [can bully or be a target of bullying](#): "The power imbalance can come from a number of sources—popularity, strength, cognitive ability—and children who bully may have more than one of these characteristics." That being said, there are people groups who tend to get bullied more often than others. Roy Moore says that about 80% of all bullying happens to people for the following reasons:
  · body shape
  · having a disability
  · being a religious minority
  · being a racial minority
  · sexual orientation
  · being in foster care or adopted
  · being a first-generation immigrant

How can I tell if someone is being bullied?

Only about a third of kids who are being bullied will actually ask an adult for help. It's

therefore crucial that you're aware of [the warning signs](#) that your kids might be being bullied. These include:
- problems sleeping
- changes in eating habits
- loss of possessions
- injuries they can't account for
- loss of interest in activities they enjoy
- decline in academics
- isolation or loss of friends
- lowered self-esteem
- self-destructive behaviors

[With cyberbullying specifically](#), look for behaviors that demonstrate your kids are anxious about their devices. For example, watch for if they become upset before, while, or after using their devices or if they don't want to talk to you about their online activity.

What are risk factors for being a bully?

[Sherri Gordon of Verywell Family](#) points out that, "Bully victims often rise up after being bullied. They bully others weaker than them because they, too, have been bullied. Their goal usually is to regain a sense of power and control in their lives."

[Kids who bully others](#) might be popular and well-connected (*Mean Girls*, anyone?), but they also might be isolated loners with low self-esteem. They might be aggressive, violent, and have problems with authority. Their home life could be difficult or dysfunctional, with minimal parental involvement, and they could have friends who bully others. Moore also notes that sometimes kids learn bullying at home. [The following behaviors](#) are indicators that a child might be bullying others:

- growing aggression
- repeatedly in detention or sent to the principal
- tendency to get into fights (physical or verbal)
- concern over popularity and what others think about them
- having money or possessions they can't account for
- blame-shifting

[Your kids might be cyberbullying others](#) if they're particularly protective or controlling about their devices. They might get upset if they can't use them, hide them from you, or hide their activity when you come around. Other signs are if they use their devices all the time (even at night), create multiple online accounts, and don't want to talk to you about their online activity.

Recognize that children can play multiple roles depending on their circumstances. Moore observes that kids might bully others on one school hall, be bullied in another hall, and be bystanders in another. It's important to keep this possibility in mind as you address the issue of bullying with your children.

How does bullying affect EVERYONE?

Research shows that people who are bullied as children experience greater mental health problems as adults. This was in fact the case with a man we talked to who was bullied in his youth and never told anyone about it at the time. He says that the bullying he experienced had a long-term impact on his overall self-worth and still affects him now.

Bullying also has a harmful impact on those doing the bullying. Kids who bully tend to be more likely to be sexually active at an early age, engage in substance abuse, be violent and abusive, and commit crimes. Perhaps more surprising is the negative effect of bullying on those who observe it. Bystanders who watch bullying have an increased tendency toward mental health problems, substance abuse, and truancy.

Bullying also has a negative impact on parents, according to research out of Australia. 89% of parents who have a child being bullied said that the bullying negatively affected the entire family. Many parents of bullied children experience feelings of anger, guilt, frustration, and helplessness.

What should I do if my kids say they're being bullied?

Remember, the majority of kids who experience bullying won't tell anyone. If your kids come to you and actually tell you that they're being bullied, that means the pain they're experiencing is more significant than their fear that the bully will hurt them or that they'll be seen as a tattletale.

If you find out that your kids are being bullied, **it's critical that you're first and foremost empathetic and make sure your children know that you hear them**. Moore says that one of the toughest things you'll have to deal with as a parent is controlling your reaction when you hear your kids are being hurt. You will be tempted to go right into "protect" mode, become upset or angry, and swiftly mete out justice. But you must **remain calm and gather all the facts**—otherwise, you'll shut your kids down. **Make sure they know you don't blame them** for what's happening. Kids are often afraid to share because they blame themselves.

Keep in mind that if your children come to you with a story about someone else being bullied, what they're saying might or might not be genuine. They could present the information to you as though it were about a third party, but actually be talking about themselves.

When your kids come to you, the first thing you need to do is determine if they're either: 1. emotionally stable and frustrated; or 2. in crisis, meaning they're in fight or flight mode and could be considering self-harm or suicide.

As a side note here, students who experience **both bullying and cyberbullying** are **much more likely** to have suicidal thoughts and to attempt suicide.

What do I do if my kids are in immediate crisis (e.g., considering suicide)?

If your kids are in a crisis state, ask if they've thought of hurting themselves. If so, ask them why and how they've thought about hurting themselves. Your goal is to find out if they've progressed so far as to actually be planning how to take their lives. Most kids will not have gotten to the planning stage, so if they have a plan, **you need to get in touch with a psychologist immediately** (not the school) and get your kids long-term help. See our "Parent's Guide to Suicide & Self-Harm Prevention" and the Additional Resources section below for more information.

What's a biblical framework for addressing bullying?

It's important to address bullying from a correct viewpoint of who God is and who people are as fallen beings made in His image. We must not react to aggression out of hate, anger, or vengeance—but we also do not have to submit to abuse. While Be Strong is a secular organization, it approaches the issue of bullying using the following Scripture-based principles:

1. All people are fearfully and wonderfully made.
2. Treat others better than you want to be treated (modified Golden Rule).
3. Love your enemies.

Note that loving your enemies does not mean being a doormat. As Drs. Henry Cloud and John Townsend emphasize in their book *Boundaries*, loving people includes confronting their sinful behavior in appropriate ways.

How should I advise my kids to deal with different types of bullying?

If you stumble across bullying or your children come to you and tell you that bullying is going on, you should:
- Separate the kids involved.
- Stay calm and don't assign blame.
- Get the facts, from multiple sources.
- Determine if what happened was actually bullying, according to our definition earlier and the questions listed in the link above.

If your kids are not in crisis, address the problem based on the kind of bullying that is occurring (physical, social, verbal, cyber). As you seek to help your kids, be on the lookout for how you can empower them to handle their situations without you getting involved. **Do intervene if that's what's necessary.** But if your kids can safely deal with the problem themselves, that's ideal.

If the bullying has happened online (e.g., if there are texts or sexts or posts), save as much of that info as possible with screenshots. You will need it if third parties are involved. As you work toward potential solutions, get your kids' opinions on what

they think are the best strategies. See [this page](#) for advice for parents on addressing bullying. Bear in mind that in worst-case scenarios, the best solution might in fact be transferring your kids to another school.

What do I do about physical bullying?

Physical bullying is assault, meaning it's a crime and therefore a reportable offense. As soon as you find out about it, you should intervene by contacting the school authorities, the bullying student's parents, and the police if necessary. Scenarios in which you'll need to involve the authorities immediately [include](#) if there is a weapon involved, physical injury, violent threats, and sexual abuse. But what about when your kids are caught in the moment with no one to defend them? *Should you tell them to fight back?*

We can't really counsel you on this one way or another. There are only two choices for how people can react if someone is attacking them: fight back or take it till it stops (i.e. "turn the other cheek," [which may not mean](#) what we think it means). There could be serious consequences either way. If you counsel your kids to fight back and they do, your child might in fact overcome the bully, potentially putting a stop to the bullying. But the parents of the other child could take legal action against you. And what if other kids [join in the bullying as a group](#)? What if your child fights back and loses? If that happens, your kids have just made their situation much worse. Your children will have to make the call at the time and decide what will minimize the harm at that moment, as well as in the future. For more on this, try [this post](#) from Pastor Chris Nye.

What about verbal bullying?

Again, get your kids' opinions on how they think you can best help them. You could talk to their teachers, but this could have negative consequences, like causing the other kids to see yours as [a snitch and a teacher's pet](#). You could contact the other kid's parents, depending on what you know about them and if you think they'll respond well. You will have to use wisdom in evaluating the situation. If you can empower your kids to handle it on their own, that is the most effective tactic.

For the most part, when people participate in verbal bullying, they're looking for a payoff in the form of an emotional reaction. If kids don't give them the result they're looking for, bullies will often eventually quit, although your kids might have to try this strategy multiple times. If someone is verbally bullying your children, they can:
1. Stay calm and not react in sadness, anger, or fear.
2. Be reasonable and respond to the bullying kid's comments **without owning them**. Do not agree with anything that's not true.
3. Give the bully compliments. The goal is to create dissonance within the bullying child, who will not expect your kids to respond to an attack with kindness.
4. See if you can get the bullying kid to reveal why he or she is saying those words. For example, if the bully says something like, "You're ugly" or "No one likes you," stay calm and ask, "Why?" As the bully responds, continue asking "Why?" Then compliment the bully and immediately walk away.

There are variations on the responses that people can give to a verbal bully. For

example, this nine-year-old responded to a bully by saying, "Did you mean to be so rude?" See also this video from Be Strong (starting around 27 min.) for further examples of how to handle a verbal bully.

What about social bullying?

Social bullying (such as exclusion, publicly embarrassing others, and spreading rumors) has a lot to do with whether your kids are isolated or have friendships. If other kids are bullying yours by excluding them socially, your kids can deal with this problem by making friends. If your kids don't have friends at school, encourage them to get involved in a club and make good connections with people there. Friends have the ability not only to provide inclusion but also to defend each other when other people spread rumors and lies.

Most of the time social isolation happens during lunchtime. With that in mind, your kids could consider starting a We Dine Together club at their school so that no one ever has to eat alone. One girl who was suicidal discovered Be Strong and started her own We Dine Together club. Doing so turned her entire situation around because it gave her a voice and a "safe place," she says.

How can I help my kids deal with cyberbullying?

The first and most important step you can take to help your kids if they're being cyberbullied, as with other kinds of bullying, is to provide empathy, love, and support: "Targets of cyberbullying (and those who observe it) must know for sure that the adults who they tell will intervene rationally and logically, and not make the situation worse." Work with your kids to figure out potential solutions to their bullying problem. Depending on the situation, you might need to talk to the school or the parents of the kid who is doing the bullying. If the situation involves criminal behavior or physical threats, you will need to involve the police.

Encourage your kids not to react to minor instances of aggression, and teach them resilience to hostility. Words do have power to hurt us, but the more your kids can work on not internalizing hurtful words, the more resilient they will be, not just now, but for the rest of their lives. Limiting who they have contact with online can go a long way toward reducing the harm they experience from others. They should also save any evidence of cyberbullying in case this information is needed if the authorities have to be involved.

By far the most important steps you can take to protect your kids from cyberbullying is to have good relationships with them, have open communication, and teach them what proper and safe online behavior looks like. According to teens themselves, the best ways to stop cyberbullying are by **blocking** the aggressor, **ignoring** him or her, **getting parents involved**, **taking a break** from technology, and **reporting abusive behavior to the hosting site or app**.

You have a serious advantage if, when your kids first start going online, you intentionally moderate their activity (see our "Parent's Guide to Internet Filtering

& Monitoring" and "Parent's Guide to Smartphones") and disciple them in their technology use. As your kids grow older, be more hands off. Don't invade their privacy unless you believe them to be in serious danger. You shouldn't have to or want to control every aspect of your kids' online behavior as they grow up, but hopefully you will have good communication and good relationships with them. That way, if something bad does happen, you can help them.

We think it's wise to have a contract for how your kids use their devices—see our "Parent's Guide to Smartphones" for more thoughts on that. Check out this PDF for more info on cyberbullying, as well as what to do if you find out your kids are cyberbullying others.

What are errors that Christians might fall into when it comes to addressing bullying?

Roy Moore says that faith communities tend to fall into two pitfalls. One is that some people think that trusting in God means taking no action against bullying. Trusting God and praying are good and important, but won't magically make the bullying problem go away.

The second pertains to kids of questionable sexual orientation. Such kids are bullied about **four times** more than others. Sometimes people in faith communities think that protecting kids with non-traditional gender identities is tantamount to supporting their lifestyles. This view is false and misguided. Think about it this way: If you see kids in the street about to be hit by a car, you're not going to stop and try to figure out their sexual orientations or gender identities as a way to decide if you should save them. You'll run into the street to rescue them. In the same way, *all* children deserve to be protected from bullying. See this page for other common mistakes to avoid when dealing with bullying.

What if my kids are bystanders?

Over 70% of kids say they've witnessed bullying at school. StopBullying.gov states, "When bystanders intervene, bullying stops within 10 seconds 57% of the time." Moore says the reason that bystander intervention is effective is that a huge part of the payoff for the bully is social affirmation. Once, in elementary school, a man we talked to defended another boy who had a disability and was being bullied. The man didn't know the bullied boy well, but the boy who was rescued was so grateful that he wrote him a letter years later, thanking him and saying he saw him as a close friend.

Prepare your kids to be "upstanders" instead of bystanders—that is, to take action if they see bullying going on, whether it is online or offline. This could look like defending a target of verbal bullying, finding an adult if someone is being physically bullied, or befriending someone who is being socially bullied. Your kids can also share their knowledge with kids who are being bullied. For example, if they see students being verbally bullied, besides intervening they can take them aside privately and tell them about the tactics we mentioned earlier. The help of bystanders is crucial because targets

of bullying often feel powerless. And when bystanders do nothing, they are [indirectly encouraging the bullying](#).

When it comes to cyberbullying, [bystanders shouldn't "like"](#) hurtful comments. Anything they say if they choose to address the bullying should be reasonable and calm. It *might* be good if they private message the person doing the cyberbullying with their concerns, although this could backfire if the bully turns their aggression on your kids. But definitely encourage your children to reach out to the targets of the bullying with affirmation and encouragement.

—— Anything else should I know?

If you don't already, start to see bullying as a necessary topic to discuss with your kids. It's just as essential to talk about as academics, partying, or relationships. Use any opportunity that gives you a natural way to bring the topic up, whether it's a school assembly, something in the news, or a situation in a TV show.

Be shrewd and don't assume that your kids are immune to being bullied or to bullying others. If you think they might be harming themselves, ask them about it. Roy Moore says that if parents can add bullying to the other conversations they have with their kids, we'll "make meaningful progress" toward stopping bullying.

—— Discussion Questions

- How would you define bullying?
- Is bullying a big problem at your school, church, etc.? (Yes, bullying can definitely happen at church.)
- What kinds of bullying have you witnessed? How did it make you feel? Did you feel like you could do anything to stop it from happening?
- What would have been the most effective way for someone to intervene in those situations? What do you think would have happened if you had stepped in?
- Have you ever been bullied? If so, did you tell anyone about it? Why or why not?
- If you were ever bullied in the future, would you tell anyone?
- Do you feel like you can talk to us if you are bullied? How do you think we'll react?
- What are ways people accidentally make themselves targets of bullying? How can they prevent that?
- How do people become targets of bullying in ways they can't help?
- What does cyberbullying look like?
- What are ways people can protect themselves from cyberbullying?
- What would be good ways to help someone you notice being cyberbullied?

You can take a broader approach
If you see that bullying is part of your kids' school culture, you can take action to stop it by volunteering to host an assembly at the school to bring awareness to the problem, teach the students how to respond to bullying, and encourage them to be kind to each other. See the contact information at the bottom of [this link](#) to find out how you can host a student assembly.

—— Recap

- Bullying takes many forms and occurs when a person or group uses its power to harass others over an extended period of time.
- Bullying needs to be an ongoing conversation you have with your kids. It affects everyone and can have a lifelong impact on people.
- Cyberbullying is unique in that it happens on the internet, which contributes to greater victimization, apathy, and cruelty.
- While bullying knows no boundaries, there are certain groups that tend to get bullied more than others.
- Parents should be on the lookout for various risk factors indicating that their kids are either bullying or being bullied.
- The most important thing for parents to do if their kids tell them they're being bullied is to remain calm, show love and empathy, and get all the facts.
- Beware of going into "protect mode." Taking action (legal or otherwise) against bullying kids and their parents might be necessary, but will not heal the brokenness inside your child.
- If your kids are in crisis, you need to get them professional help immediately.
- A biblical model for dealing with bullying is that: 1. Everyone is made in God's image; 2. Treat others better than you want to be treated; and 3. Love your enemies (which does not mean being a doormat).
- There is no one-size-fits-all solution to bullying. It's important to coach your kids on how to respond to physical, verbal, social, and cyberbullying, whether it happens to them or they see it happening to someone else.
- Beware of falling into common Christian pitfalls.
- You and your kids can take action to change the culture of your kids' school in order to protect students from bullying.

—— Conclusion

There are a lot of actionable steps you can take when it comes to bullying, but don't forget to pray, too. As we said at the beginning, bullying is complex. Even though we've tried to offer you strategies and resources for dealing with it, when your kids are in the thick of a difficult situation, it can be hard to know what to do. See the resources below for further help.

Finding out your kid is involved in bullying in one way or another is a harsh reality, one you might be reluctant to address. But doing so will not only make a huge difference in the lives of the victims, but possibly also in the bully's and the bystanders' lives. As parents, we have the privilege and responsibility of pointing our kids to Christ in everything and teaching them to be more like Him in every way. Help them see this as another way to pass on the love they've received from Christ to those around them.

No matter the role your kids play in a bullying situation, they need your wisdom to know what to do and they need the security of your love. If you haven't talked to them about bullying or if it's been a while since you have, revisit that conversation and keep it ongoing. Even if the only result is that they make a habit of being kind to others, that is well worth it.

━━ Related Axis Resources

- [Parent's Guide to Smartphones](#)
- [Parent's Guide to Suicide & Self-Harm Prevention](#)

To watch with your teens:
- [Bullying Conversation Kit](#)

━━ Additional Resources

- "[Hempfield kids battle bullying](#)," WGAL News
- "[How to Prevent Bullying](#)," StopBullying.gov
- "[The Social Bond: A Practical Way for Schools to Reduce Bullying](#)," Cyberbullying.org
- [Be Strong](#)
- [Be Strong Local Resources](#)
- [Be Strong Student Checklist](#)
- "[How to Talk to Your Kids About Bullying](#)," Be Strong
- "[YOU Are the Solution to Workplace Bullying](#)," Be Strong
- [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#)
- "[Preventing Cyberbullying: Top Ten Tips for Educators](#)," Cyberbullying.org
- "[Bullied kids suffer academically, too, study says](#)," CNN
- "[From LOL to LULZ, the evolution of the internet troll over 24 years](#)," Splinter
- "[The History of Bullying in America](#)," Brooks Gibbs
- "[I Was Almost A School Shooter](#)," Aaron Stark, TEDxBoulder
- "[Bullying is Not Just a Kid Problem](#)," Cyberbullying Research Center
- [Reference Materials](#), Cyberbullying Research Center
- [Resources](#), International Bullying Prevention Association
- [American Association of Suicidology](#)
- [Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention](#)

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