

Ten bullying myths

What do parents really need to know about bullying? It's not necessarily what you think.

By Valle Dwight



Myths and misconceptions

Not a day goes by without another gut-wrenching tale of bullying making headlines. Schoolyards erupt in violence. Social-media sites turn into cyber lynch mobs. Kids commit suicide after enduring months of abuse. Despite all the media attention, parents often remain in the dark about what actions to take when it happens to their children — or when their children bully others.

What can parents really do? What are the signs to watch for? How do you distinguish garden-variety personality conflicts between kids (which may include some mean behavior) from actual bullying? We contacted two experts, Drexel University professor and director of the Center for the Prevention of School-Aged Violence Charles Williams (aka Dr. Chuck) and clinical psychologist and author John Mayer, to illuminate the common misconceptions around bullying — and how parents can fight them.

Myth #1

You'll know when your child is being bullied

Just because your child doesn't tell you he or she is being bullied, doesn't mean it's not happening. In 2007 almost a third of middle and high schoolers reported that they'd been bullied at school. And those are the ones who admitted it. "It's one of those silent issues," says Williams. Many kids don't speak up because they think that it will lead to more abuse — or that there is an unwritten code that kids shouldn't tell.

If you notice that your child comes home with torn clothing; starts complaining about going to school; has unexplained bruises, cuts, and scratches; or seems depressed and socially isolated, these are signs of bullying. If you suspect bullying, keep talking with your child and go to the school for help and input. Talk with your child's teacher, a school administrator, or a school counselor to see if they've noticed any problems and, if so, work with them to deal with the problem sooner than later.

Myth #2

Bullying always includes physical aggression

Bullying is when one child regularly harasses another child. This could be verbal bullying like name-calling, teasing, and using threatening language. Or physical abuse like punching, shoving, hitting, and spitting. It can be electronic too, via texting and the Internet. There is a gray area, however, that is important for parents to know. Is it bullying when a child is excluded from a game? Not necessarily, but if your child is regularly left out, by all means talk with the teacher. (Check out the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program for a more detailed explanation of bullying.)

Here are the types of harassment students reported in a recent survey:

- 21% said they had been called names, insulted, or made fun of
- 18% reported being the subject of rumors
- 11% said they were pushed, shoved, tripped, or spit on
- 6% said they were threatened with harm
- 4% said they were made to do things they didn't want to do
- 4% said their property was destroyed on purpose

Myth #3

Fight back and you solve the problem

Many kids believe (especially if their parents tell them to) that hitting back is the best way to put a stop to bullying. "They say, 'You go back and hit him back,'" says Mayer, who insists that an eye-for-an-eye response is ultimately ineffective and often hurts far more than it helps. Why? Although hitting back might bring a moment of satisfaction, it can lead to escalation. Mayer compares it to an arms race, with the weapons just getting bigger and more destructive. Instead, he recommends telling your child:

- **Tell an adult.** Make sure your child knows to let an adult know what's happening, whether it's a coach, a teacher, or you. "You need to let them know," says Mayer. "They can intercede to stop it."
- **Don't react.** Encourage your child not to cry, stop walking, or acknowledge the bully in any way. "This can be super-hard to teach kids, but it's what works," Mayer says. If your child

responds, the bully will feed on it. By leaving the bully hanging, she or he will end up looking silly.

Myth #4

Bullies come from the top of the social pecking order

Sometimes this is true, but more commonly kids who bully are often victims of abuse themselves or are going through difficult problems at home. They may even have cognitive disorders that impair their impulse control. “Something is wrong with that kid in that time of their life,” says Mayer. It doesn’t mean all bullies will turn into criminals, he says, but at that time they are trying to wield power in an inappropriate way. The kid who bullies feels a lack of control in his or her own life.

Often issues at home, such as divorce, abuse, or violence, leave children feeling helpless. Kids who bully don't have the coping mechanisms to deal with that powerlessness. So what do they do? Get power the only way they can. Or as Williams puts it: "Hurt people hurt people." School administrators who understand this can address bullying more effectively by counseling bullies as well as victims

Myth #5

Parental attitudes have no effect on bullying

In fact, parents can help pave the way for bullying behavior in kids when they don’t teach their children to respect differences in people. Some parents may pay lip service to the idea that all people are equal, but if their actions reveal a different attitude, their kids will pick up on it. If parents talk disparagingly about other groups of people or tell racist, sexist, or homophobic jokes, the message they’re sending is: “All people are not alike, and some are better than others.”

“Kids pick up on those things,” says Williams. “They learn that people have more or less value.” So be aware of what you say at home — and how it can translate into aggression in your child at school.

Myth #6

If your child is a victim, call the bully’s parents

“Parent-to-parent meetings can get nasty,” says Williams, who advises parents of victims to refrain from contacting bullies' parents. The situation, already fraught with emotion, often gets only more heated when parents leap into the fray. (But if parents insist on talking with each other, Williams suggests they use a mediator.)

Instead, start with the school. Most schools have an anti-bullying policy that outlines the steps for dealing with bullies. Talk with the teacher and principal first, and together figure out the next steps.

Myth #7

Boys are more likely to be bullied

In a 2007 survey, almost 34% of girls reported being bullied, compared with 31% of boys. Although boys often bully in a physical way, girls' style of bullying tends to be more indirect. Girls bully by creating a hostile environment for their victims; they may spread rumors or exclude their targets from activities.

"In a way, it's easier [to do] because it's not direct," says Williams. And because it's so easy to spread a rumor or make threats, mean-girl bullying can do a lot of damage — without the physical clues for parents to pick up on. If your daughter is acting sad, depressed, and moody and is reluctant to go to school, talk to her about bullying.

Myth #8

Cyber-bullying is the gateway to other bullying

Actually, most bullying starts with face-to-face encounters and later may progress to texting, social media, and YouTube — which ups the harassment and humiliation with even more hurtful, and possibly fatal, results.

All the more reason to stop bullying before it goes viral, says Williams. If adults are vigilant and stop the bullying at school, it may never get to the cyber stage. And if your child is being bullied online? Don't brush it off. Report it to the school, and if physical threats have been made, get copies of the messages and report them to the police. Also, encourage your child to come to you if he or she sees cyber-bullying happening to another kid.

Myth #9

Parents are always their kids' best defender

Too often, says Williams, he sees parents who dismiss their children's reports of being teased and taunted. "You'd be surprised at how adults respond. They tell their kids to stop tattling or stop whining." Teachers and other school leaders have also dismissed the problem, says Williams, often with tragic results.

Mayer says the only way to stop bullying is for adults to play an active role and take complaints about bullying seriously. Parents need to set consequences when they see or hear about their own children's aggression. "Parents have to stop the behavior from the start," he says. "They can't tolerate it at home or with anyone in the family."

As for parents of the victims, explain that “there is something wrong” with the child who is bullying their kids. Victims are suffering from regular abuse and their self-esteem has been chipped away, while their sense of powerlessness has sky-rocketed. They need all the reassurance they can get that this isn’t their fault — they didn’t cause the problem. “Make sure your child knows they are not the problem,” says Mayer. “They’re not damaged. The other kid is.”

Myth #10

Schools bear no clear responsibility for bullying

Bullying has become a national issue, so much so that 45 states, including Massachusetts and New York, have passed anti-bully laws that define bullying and require schools to act when it’s reported.

Even so, some schools still aren’t taking it seriously, says Mayer. And this is not just a problem but a crisis, since most bullying happens at school. “Teachers have to take these things seriously,” he says. “They have to identify the bullies and tell them, ‘We’re watching you.’”

Parents should check that their kids' school has an anti-bully policy and system in place. If you're unsure what your school’s policy is, talk with the administration or check the school's website. Let the school know that the safety of your child is important to you.