Bullying: Helping Your Adopted Child Through the Tough Times
Written by Sherryl Kraizer, PhD on 21 Aug 2017

Bullying is an integral part of our culture. It happens every day in classrooms, in bathrooms and hallways, on playgrounds and in the neighborhoods of all communities. It is insidious and it is hurtful. Children who are bullied, physically, emotionally, or socially, are deprived of their right to go to school and to live in communities where they feel safe.

Being bullied is linked to depression and low self-esteem. Many adopted and foster children suffer with these also — linked to loss, feelings of “not being good enough” to remain with birth family, and also feelings of being different to their (often white) adoptive or foster parents. Some adopted or foster children are vulnerable with regard to social skills. The baggage that being adopted or of living in foster care brings these children means that they are open to becoming bullied or bullies. Some children present as easy prey to classroom bullies, while others bully as a means of bolstering faltering esteem.

What can parents do to help things in the classroom change? Most adults easily remember a specific bullying incident from their past. If they were the victim, they remember the panic, the sick feeling, wondering why no one was helping. If they were the bully, they remember the feeling of power and perhaps the shame for what they did to others. Some were bystanders. They remember the anxiety of not wanting to be the next target and often guilt for failure to intervene, even though they didn’t know how.

Is Bullying Really That Harmful?

Bullying is the deliberate and repeated infliction of harm on another person. It takes many forms. It may involve one child bullying another, a group of children against a single child or groups against other groups. Bullying includes many behaviors. Common forms of physical, verbal, emotional, and social bullying are shown below:

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<thead>
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<th>Physical</th>
<th>Verbal</th>
<th>Emotional</th>
<th>Social Bullying</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Hitting</td>
<td>Name-calling</td>
<td>Exclusion</td>
<td>Peer pressure</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pushing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kicking</td>
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<td>Pinching</td>
<td>Bad language</td>
<td>Not caring</td>
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<tr>
<td>Violence</td>
<td>Verbal abuse</td>
<td>No conscience</td>
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<td>Abusive</td>
<td>Mimicking</td>
<td>Thoughtlessness</td>
<td>Ganging up on someone</td>
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<tr>
<td>Destructive</td>
<td>Shouting</td>
<td>Gossip</td>
<td>Name-calling</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spitting</td>
<td>Taunting</td>
<td>Threatening</td>
<td>Pranks</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tripping</td>
<td>Cursing</td>
<td>Belittling</td>
<td>Internet harassment</td>
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Whether the bullying is direct or indirect, perpetrated by an individual or a group, the key component of bullying is that the physical or psychological intimidation occurs repeatedly over time and is designed to hurt. Young people who are bullied are more likely to be depressed, to feel isolated, anxious, to have low self-esteem, and to think about suicide. Bullying, as most children know, starts early and it is devastating. And as we have seen, it impacts all the harder on adopted and foster children with their intrinsic vulnerability in regards to self-esteem, and damages these children all the more.

**What Is the Role of Adults?**

All forms of bullying are opportunities to teach children how to get along, how to be considerate of all people, and how to be part of a community or group. But, children do not learn to solve conflicts and get along with others naturally. They have to learn specific skills that will prevent and thwart problems with bullying. As soon as children are old enough to interact with others, they can learn not to be bullies and not to be targets. This includes giving them the words to express their feelings, skills to monitor and change their behavior, and conflict resolution strategies.

When preschoolers begin to call people names or use unkind words, we should intervene immediately and consistently. In kindergarten, children learn the power of exclusion. We begin to hear things like, “She’s not my friend and she can’t come to my party.” Respond with, “You don’t have to be friends with her today, but it’s not all right to make her feel bad by telling her she can’t come to your party.”

In the early elementary grades, cliques and little groups develop which can be quite exclusionary and cruel. Children need to hear clearly from adults, “It’s not all right to treat other people this way. How do you think she feels being told she can’t play with you?” Kids don’t have to play with everyone or even like everyone, but they can’t be cruel by excluding others. Children who are not bullies or victims have a powerful role to play in shaping the behavior of other children. We need to teach these children to speak up on behalf of other children being bullied. “Don’t treat her that way, it’s not nice.”

**What Is Role-Play?**

Role-play is the tool that turns theories about prevention into reality. It is the game parents and teachers can use to coach children to better life skills. It is the way to find out what children think about the social problems they encounter and how they actually handle them. It is the primary skill-builder for prevention of bullying. It’s also a lot of fun!

Role-play is really just practice for life. It’s a way of preparing for what we can anticipate. Everyone does it. If you are going to your child’s school to discuss a significant problem with a teacher, you probably rehearse what you are going to say, or mentally practice how to approach the issue, thinking through how to respond if the teacher says this, or that. It is perhaps the most powerful way to prepare to be effective.
Learning to speak up is also a skill learned by doing. When a child is able to say, “Don’t do that to me, I don’t like it,” in a tone of voice that is clear and assertive, while standing up tall and looking directly at the person, you will know that role-playing has worked.

**How Do I Get Started?**

Initiating role-play is as simple as asking a “What if...” question or responding to a child’s “What if...” question. For example, you might begin with, “I heard that there was a problem in the lunchroom with one of the boys taking other kids’ desserts. What would you do if that happened to you?” When the child begins to tell you, suggest, “Show me what you would do, I’ll be the kid trying to take your dessert.” Play it out. See what resources the child already has. *(see Figure 1)*

If the child isn't particularly effective, suggest you switch roles. The child is now the bully. You should model standing up straight, looking the bully in the eye, and clearly saying, “Do not touch my lunch.” Then change roles and let the child try it again. If he or she gets part way there, provide coaching. Whenever you role-play, remember, it is a process. You are learning what the child’s skills are and helping to develop new ones. Avoid judging or making an issue over any part of the role-play or the value will be lost. Role-play is never a confrontation. It is an opportunity to share ideas, initiate discussion, and learn new strategies.

The three key elements of role-play are:

- **Speaking** — this includes deciding what you want to say and then saying it in an assertive manner, paying attention to tone of voice, volume, pitch, clarity, etc.
- **Body language** — this includes posture, facial expressions, the distance between the people involved, use of hands, etc.
- **Eye contact** — communication that is delivered face-to-face, eye-to-eye is more powerful.

Consistently combining all three of these elements takes time and practice. Children most often learn the skills one at a time and then integrate them. Practice and successive approximations is the key. Role-play teaches children how to communicate effectively and consistently so they can utilize the skills automatically.

**Family Ethos**

Perhaps your child isn’t being bullied or isn’t a bully, but children are aware of it occurring. Ask any children from kindergarten through high school who is bullying whom. A teacher or parent may not know, but the children always know and they don’t want to be next. They are also highly conflicted because they don’t want to be marked as a “tattle tale.” Okay — let them become advocates. Children like to speak up for others! *(see Figure 2)*
Advocates are those children who are neither bullies nor targets and they have the most powerful role to play in shaping the behavior of other children. They tend to have better social and conflict management skills. They are more willing to assert themselves without being aggressive or confronting. They suggest compromises and alternate solutions. They tend to be more aware of people’s feelings and are the children who can be most helpful in resolving disputes and assisting other children to get help. Often adopted and foster children who have proactive parents will have already been discussing the key elements of bullying (difference, weakness) with their parents, because adoptive and foster parents are aware. Maybe they will have discussed the effects of difference and feelings of inability, loss and vulnerability.

Schools need a policy and an educational plan regarding bullying that targets the entire student body. It should include:

- A clear statement regarding bullying: that it is unacceptable.
- A plan for student and parent education about the policy.
- Adequate and active supervision, especially at times when students are moving about freely during recess, class breaks, lunchtime, and after school is dismissed.
- A policy of immediate and early intervention (always too early rather than too late).
- Training that makes every child an advocate for every other child

We should scrutinize our schools for diversity and empathy for difference. And, we need to become advocates against bullying. If each of us is willing to speak up and to learn the skills to intervene effectively against bullying, this can no longer be a culture of meanness and violence.

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*Sherryl Kraizer, PhD, is the founder and director of the Coalition for Children. This article originally appeared in Adoption Parenting: Creating a Toolbox, Building Connections.*

**Resource**

**Role Play**

*Some Good Ways To Respond To A Bully*

It is helpful to have a range of statements, behaviors, or actions in mind as children are role-playing. The following chart will help you get started.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>Behaviors</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“That wasn’t nice.”</td>
<td>Walk away</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Don’t do that.”</td>
<td>Join another group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I’m going to tell if you do that again.”</td>
<td>Laugh and leave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“That really hurts my feelings.”</td>
<td>Ignore them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“That’s not a very nice thing to say.”</td>
<td>Act like you don’t care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Give that back or I’ll tell the teacher.”</td>
<td>Avoid the bully</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make a joke — “Whatever,” “No kidding”</td>
<td>Get away and tell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Leave me alone.”</td>
<td>Ask a friend to help</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Children should also develop action plans to get help. This might include:

- Go and tell a teacher.
- Tell a parent or another adult.
- If they are really afraid, run to someone who can help.

**Practice, Practice, Practice**

Role-play takes these concepts and makes them skills. Be sure to have fun putting an end to bullying with role-plays. Children love to role-play and will rapidly use it as a way to address other concerns they have. This is invaluable for parents and teachers. The “What if...” questions or scenarios kids suggest reflect their fears, concerns, anxieties, and curiosities. Children hear stories about things that have happened to other children, or they witness something in school or on the playground. They naturally think about what they would do. They want to role-play so they know how to handle a similar situation. By eliciting children’s ideas through role-play, we discover how they think, how they solve problems, their concept of how the world and their social groups work, and what they know and don’t know about solving interpersonal conflicts.

Always look for the skills children are bringing to these problem-solving, “What if...” scenarios and acknowledge them. These are the building blocks for all future skills.

Role-play scenarios are easy to create and modify according to the situation or the skills and needs of an individual child or group. Always keep the experience positive, empowering, and fun! Remember that interpersonal skills are learned a little bit at a time, so each step a child takes in the direction of being a clear, powerful, and assertive communicator is important.
What If a Child Wants To Disclose Bullying?

Children use “What if…” scenarios as a way to tell their parents and teachers things that have happened. It seems less like tattling to them and makes incidents easier to talk about. For example, “Mom, what would you say if some of my friends were making the little kids miss the bus and blaming it on someone else?”

To follow up, you would want to explain that telling about a problem is not tattling and that you would like to help without making the situation worse. You might role-play your child talking to someone at the school, with or without you. Or decide together that this is a situation you should handle with the school directly.

Always remember to thank your child for speaking up and for being an advocate for another child.