

BULLYING: OVERVIEW FOR PARENTS & CAREGIVERS

WHAT IS BULLYING?

Bullying is when someone repeatedly takes their aggression out on someone else in a way that hurts the other person, and the person being hurt feels like they have no way to stop it. This is more than just conflict or mean actions, because one person is dominating the other.

WHAT CAUSES BULLYING?

Bullying is a result of pain that we don't know how to process, that gets dumped onto other people. We live in a world that normalizes blaming other people for the way we are feeling - we snap at our partner because we didn't get enough sleep, or we honk aggressively at a car that cuts in front of us because we're stressed that we're late. When actions like these become a pattern between people and one person has more power than the other (based on age, gender, occupation etc) it creates a bullying dynamic.

HOW CAN WE STOP BULLYING?

When we as adults see bullying happening, our first instinct is usually to protect the victim and punish the bully – this is a natural human response when we see this kind of domination and power imbalance. The difficulty with this approach is that we are reinforcing these two roles of bully and victim, and this actually promotes a continuation of the power imbalance. Being stuck in these roles of victim and bully is what causes the worst outcomes for kids. The first thing that helps shift these dynamics is to understand that both the child who is bullying and the one who is being bullied are in pain. One has learned to dump their pain onto others, and the other has learned to take on the pain of others. We can shift the power imbalance between these two by treating them as equals. Start by separating all parties involved and allowing them to calm down. Then have a conversation with each of them separately, showing them you care about them and see their pain, and encouraging them each to find their power to change the situation. Below is a script you can use as a guide in these conversations.

TIPS FOR HELPING YOUR CHILD COPE WITH BULLYING:

1. SCRIPTED RESPONSE: WITH THE CHILD WHO BULLIES

Ask about feeling: "I saw you said something unkind. I know you're a caring person so I wonder what you were feeling that made you act that way?"

Validate feeling: "I understand how frustrating that can be!"

Encourage accountability: "It's not OK to treat others that way. What could you change next time, and how can you repair it? I believe in your ability to do things differently!"

Set boundary: "You know what the rule is when we hurt each other, so let's do that now."

2. SCRIPTED RESPONSE: WITH THE CHILD WHO IS BULLIED

Ask about feeling: "What were you feeling when they said that to you?"

Validate feeling: "I'm so sorry you feel that way and that you had to go through this! It's not your fault – people only treat us badly when they are in pain themselves and it has nothing to do with you!"

Encourage accountability: "What's one thing you can do to take care of your feelings or help yourself in this situation?" (Eg. Ignoring them, walking away, asking them to stop, finding other friends, remembering it's not my fault, or thinking about the people that care about me)