

Empower Parents & Families

Resources & strategies for parents and families who have a teen who has been the target of bullying or who has a teen that's engaged in bullying behavior.



How to respond if *your child* has been the target of online bullying.

If your child has reached out to you and asked you for help to handle a bullying situation, what would you say or do? Here, we provide some general tips and strategies to help you have a successful conversation and handle the most frequently reported problems of bullying. Remember, you are the expert about your own child and also the role model for how to handle difficult situations.

step | one

Set yourself up for a successful conversation with your child.

- 1. Take your child seriously, and listen.** If your child wants to talk to you about a bullying situation, take it seriously. Your ability to listen to your child and understand their feelings and experiences means everything to your child. It is a basic human need to be heard and understood.
- 2. Find the best space to have the conversation.** Find a private place to talk with your child where you will both be comfortable and your child feels safe to talk freely. Consider taking a walk or going for a snack. Give your child the physical distance they need during the conversation.
- 3. Before you talk to your child, check in with your own feelings.** This includes: taking a deep breath, recognizing the strong emotions you may have about the situation, and, most importantly, managing them before you talk with your child. Using positive “self-talk,” like saying to yourself, “I love my child and want the best for him/her, so I will remain calm when we talk” can help you get into the right mindset so that the conversation stays positive. Imagine how you would feel if the situation had happened to you (so that you can “walk in their shoes.”)
- 4. Remember, you are the role model.** Your child is learning about the best and worst ways to respond to challenging situations like bullying from watching you. Your feelings are contagious. If you stay calm, your kids will more likely be calm and learn how to deal with challenging situations effectively. If you notice you are still upset and not sure you can stay calm while talking to your child, hold off until you feel ready to have a successful conversation.

step | two

Talk with your child about the problem.

Bullying comes in many forms online, including someone saying mean things, spreading rumors, posting an inappropriate photo of your child, someone not leaving your child alone, or someone making threatening remarks to your child. The first step to helping your child is to be a good listener and then talk through the problem.

1. Give your child unconditional support. No matter what has happened, let your child know you will listen to them. Let your child get out the full story without interrupting or criticizing them. Your child needs to feel emotionally safe in order to be open and honest with you. Reassure your child that you will not go behind their back to “fix or report” the problem and that you will work with them to find a positive resolution.

Some key points to guide your initial conversation:

- Be a good listener; don't put words into your child's mouth or jump to conclusions.
 - Use a calm and steady voice throughout the conversation. Avoid using harsh or accusatory language, which can result in your child either shutting down or becoming more upset.
 - Avoid being judgmental or critical about what behavior they were engaged in before the bullying incident.
 - Do not blame your child for being the target of bullying.
 - Avoid making promises you can't keep, but do reassure your child that you want to help find a successful resolution to the problem, and that you will do your best to make sure their life doesn't get more difficult.
- 2. Use gentle exploration and empathy.** This will help you to find out what happened, how your child feels about it, and what they might want to do. Make sure your child knows that the reason you are asking questions is because you need all the facts, so you can do your best to help them solve the problem.

Check out our Conversation Starters:

Example Conversation Starter: “I'm so sorry this happened to you, and I'm glad you told me. Can you tell me more about what happened and how you are feeling?”

Avoid comments like: “I told you not to be friends with (aggressor's name).” or “Come on – you're making a big deal about nothing – bullying is just a stage every kid goes through.”

Additional conversation starters include:

- “(Child's Name), that sounds upsetting I can understand why you are feeling angry, afraid, sad, embarrassed. Let's go find a quiet place so we can talk privately.”
- “(Child's Name), I'm so glad you told me. You did the right thing and I promise I will do my best to help you manage this. As long as you are not in any danger, I won't do anything you don't want me to do.”
- “(Child's Name), I'd like to know if you have experienced other mean things like this. It's good for both of us to think through this together.”
- “(Child's Name), bullying is not ok. I know it's difficult for you to talk about it. I really want to help you figure out what to do.”

If your child is being threatened, you might say something like the following:

- “(Child's Name), it's never ok for someone to threaten you. I'm really glad you came to me. Let's talk through this together and figure out what to do.”
- “(Child's Name), I can see why you are so upset about this, this is something that we need to take care of right away. You did the right thing coming to me.”

If your child doesn't want to do anything about it:

- This is a time when adult family members need to use their best judgment. Your child might not want to do anything because they are afraid of losing a relationship, escalating the situation, being bullied again, or are uncomfortable expressing themselves.
- Some kids don't want to be a “tattle tail” and are afraid of getting someone in trouble. It's important to make sure that's not the reason your child doesn't want to do anything. Explain the difference between “tattling” and “helping.” Tattling is about getting someone in trouble – usually when it's not dangerous. *Telling someone that you have been bullied isn't tattling, it's helping ensure the safety of someone who might be in trouble.*

step | three

Work with your child on an action plan. Empower your child to come up with a few ways to deal with the situation. Sometimes an initial plan doesn't work out and it's important to have multiple options.

Here are some ways to help your child manage the most common types of bullying. If it's a serious situation (e.g., someone is threatening your child), take immediate action because your child's safety is the priority.

1. Solve the problem together. Ask your child what they want to do and how you can help.

First, ask fact-finding and open-ended questions to better understand what happened.

Example Conversation Starter:

- "In order to best help you, I need to know what happened and who was involved."
- "What was going on between you and the person before this happened?"
- "Let's look at the photo/post together."

If you feel like you need more information or are not satisfied with what you are hearing, ask "What else might we do?" to help generate alternative solutions.

2. Using Facebook to create an action plan. Some issues between friends on Facebook can be handled with the multiple tools that Facebook offers.

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Here are a few things to know about reporting on Facebook:

- **Reporting is easy.** Nearly every piece of content on Facebook has a 'Report This' link.
- **Social Reporting tools enable you to solve many problems effectively.** Facebook enables you to report issues either directly to the person you are having an issue with OR to a trusted members of your community. Explore these options after clicking "This Post/Photo is a Problem."
- **Your child can report the post to Facebook.** If you click this box in the report flow, Facebook endeavors to review every post in a timely manner. If the post or photo does violate the terms, it will be removed.

- **Unfriend the person.** Your child might want to unfriend the person. This means the person will be removed from their Facebook friend list. This will cause News Feed stories to be reduced, and you will no longer be connected in the social graph. *{We may want to talk about adjusting privacy settings here....Steer}*

- **Block the person.** Your child may want to block the person altogether. This prevents the account who is being blocked from starting conversations with your child or seeing things that your child posts. They will also no longer be able to find each other on Facebook.

3. What to do if you and/or your child think the situation can be handled offline. Brainstorm some action steps that each of you think are realistic and likely to be effective.

General tips:

- **If your child is being physically threatened,** feeling scared or has any other strong emotions about what has happened, let them know that you are there for them and will do everything you can to ensure their safety. Explore with your child who else might help to resolve the problem like a trusted teacher or friend.
- **If your child expresses emotional distress or thoughts of self-harm** it is important to seek help from a mental health professional immediately and make sure your child is not left alone. You can ask a school counselor or psychologist for advice. **Go here...**
- **It's best not to contact the parents of the bully** when you are upset, to avoid escalating the situation. If you feel strongly that it is the right thing to do, be sure you are calm and motivated to find a positive outcome.
- **Revisit with your child access** to instant messaging, e-mail, social networking websites, cell phone or the Internet in general.

Options to consider for more serious incidents:

- **If the person who you are reporting is part of the school community**, decide with your child who the best person would be to talk to at their school such as the principal, a counselor or a trusted teacher.
 - *Conversation Starter*: “Your safety is the most important thing. It is really important to let someone at your school know, so they can help prevent this from happening again. Who do you trust the most that we could talk to together?”
- **If the person is using an online service to target your child, report the content to the online service provider**, and ask them to remove the offensive material. **Go here...**
 - Report the incident or offensive profiles to your service provider and request the post be taken down.
 - Trace e-mails and text messages. Attempt to identify the perpetrator.
 - Save the evidence, i.e. print screen or save pages.
 - Contact a lawyer if additional support is needed.
- **Report to law enforcement for serious incidents** (threats, intimidation or exploitation)
 - Report the serious incident to police.
- **Sexting**: Sometimes bullying can start by a sexting incident in which your child thought they were harmlessly sharing intimate photos with someone they trust, only to be threatened by the bully that unless some demands are met, the photos will be shared. This is especially sensitive because it can turn into extortion. It is important to:
 - Turn to law enforcement to help resolve the issue – both sexting and exploitation are against the law.
 - *Conversation Starter*: “(Child’s Name) – you may not be aware of it – but, sending naked photos online is really serious and can get you in trouble. If you are under 18 it’s actually against the law, it is the same as child pornography. So – I take this seriously – and, if this doesn’t stop, we can call the police and file a report.”

step | four

Follow up with your child.

1. **Ensure your child feels safe to go back to school.** Work on a plan with your child for how they will navigate their day.
 - Suggest to your child they find a close friend to be with at school the following day. Ask your child who they would choose to make sure they have someone they can turn to when they feel uncomfortable or unsafe.
 - If your child doesn’t have a friend to ask, suggest that they choose an older brother or sister, relative, or trusted teacher.
 - Roleplaying can help your child learn and practice strategies to handle possible scenarios that might occur at school (e.g., seeing the bully in class or the hallway).
 - Your child should use simple, direct language – and if they have to interact with the bully, they should try to avoid showing anger or fear, but rather show they are calm and confident.
 - Help your child to come up with a positive message they can say to themselves when they see the person who bullied them such as, “I have tons of friends and am strong and capable.”
 - Work with your child on what they might say and their “stance” if they have to interact with the person who bullied them. For example, they should stand at a distance and use a calm and even voice.
 - If the problem was resolved – the post or photo was removed – your child should not go out of their way to approach the bully, however, if their relationship has the potential for being repaired, they can thank them and let them know that they did the right thing.
2. **Check in with your child.** At the end of your initial conversation and each day for a few weeks check in to make sure they feel comfortable and safe at school. You also want to be sure that the situation has been handled as best as possible.



How to respond if *your child* has bullied someone else online.

If you found out that your child has bullied someone else, or your child reached out to you for help handling the situation, what would you say or do?

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1. Set yourself up for a successful conversation with your child.

- Find the best space to have the conversation. Find a private place to talk with your child where you will both be comfortable and your child will feel safe to talk freely. You might consider taking a walk or going for a snack. Give your child the physical distance they need during the conversation.
- Take a moment before you talk to your child to check-in and manage your own feelings. This includes: taking a deep breath, recognizing the strong emotions you may have about the situation, and managing them before you talk with your child. Using positive “self-talk,” like

saying to yourself, “I love my child and want the best for him/her, so I will remain calm when we talk” can help you to remain calm and guide the conversation in the right direction.

- If you feel like you might say something to your child you will regret, it’s important to remember that everyone makes mistakes. This challenging moment presents an opportunity to help your child develop empathy and learn healthier ways to treat others.
- Remember, you are the role model. Your child is learning about the best and worst ways to respond to challenging situations like bullying from watching you. Your feelings are contagious. If you stay calm, your kids will more likely be calm and learn how to deal with challenging situations effectively. If you notice you are still upset and not sure you can stay calm while talking to your child, hold off until you feel ready to have a successful conversation. ▶

- Give your child support, and listen. No matter what has happened, let your child know you will listen to them without interrupting or criticizing them. Your child needs to feel emotionally safe to be open and honest with you. Reassure your child that you will not go behind their back and that you will work with them to find a positive resolution.

- You likely will have judgments about what happened, especially if your child has disappointed you with their mean behavior. However, it is important for you not to express those judgments in a critical way. Try your best not to say things like, “What’s wrong with you? Are you stupid?” Rather, say something like “I am disappointed that this happened. This is serious – it is not ok for you or anyone else to spread rumors/say mean things/threaten, etc.”

2. Talk with your child about the problem. Some key points to guide your initial conversation include:

- Find out what happened. Find out exactly what happened, how long it has been happening, and if anything that has happened after it has been reported.
 - Your background knowledge of your child’s relationship with the person who was bullied, could influence how you discuss and handle the situation.
 - When asking your child about what happened, be a good listener; don’t put words into your child’s mouth, or jump to conclusions.
- Communicate your values. Let your child know that bullying behavior is unacceptable and that there will be consequences. Remind your child of important key values like kindness, respect and empathy.

If you find out from someone else that your child has been engaging in bullying behavior:

- *Conversation Starter:* “(Child’s Name), I got an upsetting call from someone today who told me that you have been saying mean things/spreading rumors/etc. about one of your classmates. I’m very disappointed to hear this. It’s not ok and you must stop immediately. Tell me exactly what happened so we decide what action needs to be taken.”

If your child discloses to you that they have been engaging in bullying behavior:

- *Conversation Starter:* “(Child’s Name), it took courage for you to tell me this when you know how upsetting it would be for me to hear. I’m not going to scream and

yell, but I want you to know that it’s never ok to say mean things/spread rumors/etc. Let’s sit down and talk through the situation so we can figure out the best way to handle this.”

If you find out the situation involved psychological harm or physical threats to another person; You will want to take immediate action after hearing your child’s side of the story, because everyone’s safety is priority.

- *Conversation Starter:* “(Child’s Name), I just found out that you threatened to hurt/said really mean things about one of your classmates. I’m incredibly disappointed and need you to know that this is unacceptable behavior. Tell me what your reason was for doing this.”

3. Explore the best possible solutions to the problem and take responsible action.

- Decide on your course of action. With your child, decide how the situation will be handled both on and off line.
 - Decide on the consequences. Let your child know that in your home there are consequences for being mean or hurtful to others. For some families this means taking away technology privileges, for others it means curtailing time spent with friends.
 - Stay firm if your child begs you not to do anything, or does not want to do anything, let them know that their behavior is not acceptable and that there will be consequences. You also must be consistent – that is follow through with whatever consequences were set.
 - Help your child remove the offensive post if they have not already done so. You might ask your child to imagine how they would feel if someone had posted something like this about them.
 - Avoid making promises you can’t keep. But do reassure your child that you want to find a successful resolution to the problem and will do your best to make sure their life doesn’t get more difficult through actions you will take.
 - Learn as much as possible. It will be important to find out whether this behavior is new for your child or whether something else might have occurred that you do not know about. This will help you decide on how you will handle this at home, including consequences, or seeking professional counseling for your child.

- Some recommended solutions to help your child resolve the problem with the target:
 - If this occurred at school, make an appointment with the principal to reinforce that you will work with school administration and your child to handle the situation as best as possible; that you will follow the school’s policy about the consequences for your child and that there will be consequences at home for your child’s behavior.
 - Encourage your child to apologize privately and/or publicly. Decide whether your child can do it alone, or may need your guidance to write the language for an authentic, meaningful apology.

Example of Parent’s coaching for private Apology:

- “(Child’s Name) – What you did is not okay and you need to take responsibility for your actions. First, you need to remove the post/photo, and ask anyone who forwarded it to pull it down as well. If it happens again, your technology privileges will be taken away.”

Example Public apology:

- “(Child’s Name) – Let’s sit together and think about how you can apologize to all the people your note went to.” The note you help your child write to whoever received can be something like, “On Thursday I wrote something on X’s wall that was really disrespectful. I was wrong to do it and am sorry. I apologized to X and want everyone to know that what I wrote was not true.”



If your child is the target of bullying and has agreed for you to reach out to the school.

(Note: Most schools only get involved if the bullying behavior happened using school-based technology or if off-campus behavior results in disruption of the learning environment of other students)

Example Parent to Teacher Conversation Starter:

- “I just learned that (Child’s Name) was bullied by NAME. My child is extremely upset, as am I. There is nothing more important to me than my child’s safety and well-being – and I need the school to handle this immediately. What is your policy for dealing with situations like this? How can we be sure that this will not happen again? I also would like to know the consequences for the child who bullied my child, and most importantly what can be done to help my child feel safe returning to school?”

If your child is the bully and you need to reach out to the school (or the school has reached out to you).

Example Parent to Teacher Conversation Starters:

- “I’m here because I got a call that my child has bullied another child. Obviously, I’m very upset to learn that this happened. I’ve heard my child’s story, but please tell me what you know about the situation. Who else was involved? Is there any history to this problem?”
- “I’d like my (Child’s Name) to apologize to the child he hurt, and I’d like your help in figuring out the best possible way to do that.”
- “I know my child did something that was seriously wrong and s/he has apologized to the other child. I still need to know how it’s going to be handled in your class. Are there lessons on how to deal with emotions and conflict? What are you going to say to the class? How can we make sure both my child and the other child feel safe coming back to school for the mistake s/he made.”

If your child is the bully and you need to reach out to the parent of the child s/he bullied.

Example Parent to Parent Conversation Starters (on phone):

- FRIEND – “NAME, I’m so sorry I just learned that my son/daughter spread a rumor (identify incident) about your child. (Child’s Name) understands that this is completely unacceptable. What do you know about the situation? I want to make sure your child knows that {Child’s Name} wants to apologize if you and your son/daughter are ready to accept it. We will do everything possible to make sure this never happens again.”

- UNKNOWN CLASSMATE – “NAME, this is NAME and I’m reaching out to you because I want you to know how terribly sorry we are about what happened between our children. I don’t know all of the circumstances, but I want to let you know that I’ll be talking to my child about it. I will do everything I possibly can to make sure it doesn’t happen again and ensure that (Child’s Name) apologizes. Please accept my apologies.”

4. Be clear about the consequences and follow through.

If you have not established consequences for bullying behavior, do it now and follow through. Whatever consequences you decide on should be firmly applied, taking into consideration the severity of the incident and the child’s comprehension of the hurt they have inflicted. For example, some families decide to limit or take away technology privileges at home for a period of time.

If your child has been bullied and you need to reach out to the bully’s parent.

Example Parent Bullied Child to Parent Conversation Starters (on phone):

- “Hi, NAME, this is NAME, my son/daughter (Child’s Name) told me that your son/daughter has been spreading rumors (identify incident) about him/her. Do you have a few minutes to talk about this?”
- When talking to an OPEN-MINDED PARENT – Thank you for taking the time to talk about this. As you can imagine, my child and I are both very upset about what happened. The most important thing for us is that this never happens again and my child feels safe and comfortable to go back to school. I hope you can talk to your child about this and encourage him/her to apologize directly to my child. It would be even better if your child could post a public apology to the group that received the message. I’m sure you can understand why this so important for us to handle immediately.”
- When talking to a DEFENSIVE PARENT – I can understand that it is difficult to hear this about NAME, but it’s really important for me to talk to you directly about this because the post was extremely upsetting to my child. I hope we can both agree that spreading rumors is unacceptable. Maybe there is a way for us to find out more

about what happened between them so they can help them to resolve this in a better way. The most important thing for me is that my child feels safe and comfortable in school. I’m sure you feel the same for your child. Would it be possible for you to work with your child to apologize? It would be even better if your child could post a public apology to the group that received the message. I hope you agree that the most important thing is to ensure that this never happens again ”

- IF YOU INTEND TO INVOLVE THE SCHOOL - “I’d also like you to know that I’m going to contact our children’s teacher, to make sure the school has something in place to communicate to all kids that bullying is not ok. Of course I’m going to ask the school to keep it confidential, but my child is afraid to go to school and the most important thing is that my child feels safe at school.”

5. Opportunities that you might want to explore, include:

- Get more involved with your child’s activities both offline and online. Pay close attention to your child’s Internet and cell phone activities to ensure that they have are behaving in ways that are aligned with your family’s values.
- Look for educational opportunities everyday such as watching movies with your child that have a bullying theme and then discussing them as a family.
- Talk with the principal of your school about bringing a social and emotional learning program to your child’s school. Find out what your school is doing to build a positive climate so your child feels safe, comfortable, and is able to learn. Also learn whether social and emotional skills instruction and training in conflict resolution is part of the curriculum.
- Consider counseling. Especially for severe or ongoing cases, counseling can explore the reason for their behavior, in a safe and confidential manner.