

# Bullying

We Can All Help Stop It



**A Guide for Parents  
of Elementary and Secondary  
School Students**

Updated Spring 2011

*The effects of bullying go beyond the school yard. As a parent, here's what to watch for, what you can do, and where you can go to get help.*

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## What is bullying?

The Ministry of Education formally defines bullying as the following:

*Bullying is typically a form of repeated, persistent, and aggressive behaviour directed at an individual or individuals that is intended to cause (or should be known to cause) fear and distress and/or harm to another person's body, feelings, self-esteem, or reputation. Bullying occurs in a context where there is a real or perceived power imbalance.*

Definition of bullying from Policy/Program Memorandum 144, Ministry of Education

## How are schools responding to bullying?

*Students who bully others, whether it happens in person or online, can face different consequences.*

*Ontario's progressive discipline policy allows a principal to choose from a range of options to address the behaviour and help the student learn from his or her choices. Some examples include: an apology for a hurtful or disrespectful comment, a review of the expectations for the student or a meeting with parents. Students can also get suspended from school. These rules apply to both elementary and secondary students.*

*Progressive discipline helps to prevent inappropriate behaviour from escalating by promoting positive student behaviour and preventing unsafe or inappropriate behaviours at school and school-related activities.*

# BULLYING

## WE CAN ALL HELP STOP IT

### How can I tell if my child or teenager is being bullied?

A young child may not know the word “bully”, but she knows when someone is being mean, hurting her, or making her feel sad or scared. She may not tell you because she may be worried she’ll make things worse if she “tells” or “rats”.

Your teenager won’t necessarily tell you there’s a problem either and may use a term such as “harassment” rather than “bullying” to describe the behaviour. Teenagers often prefer to handle things on their own – they might think you’ll get upset or they might just find it embarrassing to have a parent involved.

There are signs that your child is being bullied, even if she doesn’t talk about it. Instead of waiting to be told, you can watch for signs that your child is being bullied – signs such as changes in behaviour, in attitude, or in appearance.

Children who are being bullied may not want to go to school or may cry or feel sick on school days. They may not want to take part in activities or social events with other students. They might suddenly begin to lose money or personal items, or come home with torn clothes or broken possessions, and offer explanations that don’t make sense.

Teens who are bullied and/or harassed may also start talking about dropping out of school and begin skipping activities that involve other students.



“Stay away from me.  
You can’t come.”

## Is it bullying if my child hasn't been physically hurt?

Bullying can take many forms. It can be:

- **physical** – hitting, shoving, stealing, or damaging property
- **verbal** – name calling, mocking, or making sexist, racist, or homophobic comments
- **social** – excluding others from a group or spreading gossip or rumours about them
- **electronic** (commonly known as *cyberbullying*) – spreading rumours and hurtful comments through the use of e-mail, cellphones, social media websites and text messaging.

## My child is being bullied. What should I do?

- Listen to your child and assure him that he has a right to be safe.
- Be clear on the facts. Make notes about what happened and when it happened.
- Help your child see that there is a difference between “ratting” or “telling” and reporting. It takes courage to report. Reporting is done not to cause trouble for another student, but to protect all students.
- Make an appointment to talk to your child’s teacher, another teacher that your child trusts or the principal or vice-principal of the school.
- Difficult as it may be, try to remain calm so that you can support your child and plan a course of action with him or her.
- Stay on course. Keep an eye on your child’s behaviour. If your meetings with school staff haven’t made the bullying stop, go back and talk to the principal. Follow up on the steps for ending the bullying that were agreed to at the meeting.
- Speak to the instructor or coach if the bullying is taking place during after-school activities or sports events.
- Contact police if the bullying involves criminal behaviour, such as sexual assault or use of a weapon, or if the threat to your child’s safety is in the community rather than the school.

## How can I get involved?

- Ask to see the board's bullying prevention and intervention policy and the school's bullying prevention and intervention plans.
- Ask to see the results from the School Climate Survey of students for your child's school. This anonymous survey helps schools assess students' feelings about safety and make decisions about how to prevent bullying and promote safer schools. Surveys must be done every two years.
- Consider joining the Safe Schools Team. The team is responsible for school safety and includes at least one parent, plus school staff, a student (where appropriate) and a community partner.

## How can I help my child deal with bullying?

By working with the school to help your child or teen handle the bullying problem, you are leading by example and giving a clear message that bullying is wrong.

Regardless of age, you can help by encouraging your child to talk to you about it and by giving the following advice:

- **Walk away** from the situation.
- **Don't hit back**, don't talk back, don't reply back.
- **Tell an adult** whom you trust – a teacher, the principal, the school bus driver or the lunchroom supervisor – about what happened.
- **Talk about it** with your brothers or sisters or with friends, so that you don't feel you're alone.
- **Find a friend** to be with in the places where you don't feel safe.
- **Call Kids Help Phone** at 1-800-668-6868, or visit their website, at [www.kidshelpphone.ca](http://www.kidshelpphone.ca)



"I don't feel well. I can't go to school."

## Is it possible that my child is bullying others?

Children who physically bully other students may also come home with bruises, scrapes and torn clothing. They may suddenly have more money to spend than usual or new possessions that they would normally not be able to afford. They may also “talk tough” about other students.

Children who bully sometimes do so at home as well as at school. Look and listen within your own household. Are there signs that one of your children is being bullied by a sibling?

Bullying behaviour can develop over a long period of time or as a result of major changes, losses or upsets in a child’s or teen’s life. Have any of your children recently had this kind of experience?

Think about how problems and conflicts are dealt with in your home. Do you talk through issues positively as a family? An important way to discourage bullying is to be a good role model and show your kids how to sort out difficulties without using power or aggression.

It’s also important to tell your children what bullying is. You should describe the different types of bullying and explain it is hurtful and harmful. Let your child know that bullying is wrong and is not acceptable behaviour under any circumstances.

## What has changed in terms of how schools deal with bullying and other incidents?

School staff who work directly with students must respond to inappropriate or disrespectful behaviour that has a negative impact on the school climate. This includes bullying, racist or sexist comments or vandalism.

All school staff must report to the principal incidents that can lead to suspension, such as bullying, or more serious incidents that can lead to expulsion.

Principals must contact the parents of students victimized by these types of incidents and tell them the following:

- a) the nature of the activity that resulted in the student being harmed;
- b) the harm to the student; and
- c) the steps taken to protect the student's safety, including any disciplinary measures taken in response to the activity.

For more information on how staff deal with incidents at school, see the "Reporting and Responding" section on the ministry website at [www.ontario.ca/safeschools](http://www.ontario.ca/safeschools) or talk to the principal if you would like to learn more about the services available through the school.

## Do boys and girls bully in the same way?

Both boys and girls can be bullies. Boys tend to bully physically, while girls generally use more indirect approaches, such as gossiping about classmates or isolating them by excluding them from activities or groups. Boys are usually bullied by other boys, whereas girls are bullied by both girls and boys.

Regardless of its form, bullying is unacceptable.



"They whisper when I walk by. ...told my friends not to talk to me anymore."

## If my child is being bullied, what can I expect from the school?

- You can expect the school to contact you if staff is aware that your child is being bullied.
- Your child's teacher or another teacher she trusts may be able to solve the problem or may have suggestions about the kind of help your child needs. Training in bullying prevention has been provided to teachers and principals.
- If you would like to learn more about the services available through the school, you can also talk to the principal.
- As part of the school's bullying-prevention program, teachers should discuss bullying openly in class and help students understand the importance of respect, caring about the feelings of others, and friendship and inclusion.
- Ask to see your school's code of conduct, which sets out how students, teachers, and other members of the school community should behave towards one another.
- Ask to see your board's bullying-prevention policy and the school's bullying prevention plan. These documents outline what the school staff can do to solve the problem.
- School staff are expected to make every effort to fully investigate your concerns, while protecting students' privacy.
- If, after a reasonable amount of time, you are not satisfied with the school's response, you may contact the supervisory officer of your school board.

## Well, at least my child isn't involved in bullying ...

Everyone suffers when bullying occurs, and everyone can help to prevent it. In 85 per cent of cases, bullying takes place in front of witnesses. Bystanders usually avoid getting involved because they're afraid they could become a target themselves or make things worse for the person being bullied.

You can help your child understand that bullying is not acceptable and that he can help stop it by reporting it to an adult.

## How serious a problem is bullying?

Bullying is never acceptable. It should not be considered just “part of growing up”. Research and experience consistently show that bullying is a serious issue, with far-reaching consequences for the students involved, their families and peers, and the community around them.

Many children and youth in Ontario are involved in bullying, either as a child who bullies others, a child who is victimized or both. These children are at risk for many emotional, behavioural and relationship problems and require support from adults to help them develop healthy relationships, not only in school but throughout their lives.

Students who are bullied often deal with social anxiety, loneliness, withdrawal, physical illnesses and low self-esteem. They can also develop phobias, take on aggressive behaviour, or slide into depression. Some students miss school, see their marks drop, or even leave school altogether.

The path is also rocky for those who bully. Children and teens who learn to use power and aggression to harm others may stop caring about the difference between right and wrong in general. Eventually, they may become abusive adults.

***Almost one-third of students in Ontario experience bullying at school, and one-quarter report having bullied someone else.***

Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, 2009

## How we're helping to make Ontario's schools safer

A positive school climate and a safe learning and teaching environment are essential if students are to succeed in school.

Learn more about:

- ***Safe Schools Strategy***  
This comprehensive strategy includes a safe schools team in every school, school resources, training for teachers and principals and a partnership with Kids Help Phone.
- ***Ontario's approach to discipline***  
“Progressive discipline” involves the whole school and promotes a positive school climate. It enables the principal to choose the appropriate consequences to address inappropriate student behaviour and offers students multiple supports to promote positive behaviour. This policy is explained in detail in policy/program memorandum 145.
- ***Code of conduct***  
Our guide to Ontario's code of conduct outlines the roles and responsibilities for everyone in the school community, including students, parents, school staff and community partners.
- ***Bullying prevention and intervention***  
Policy/program memorandum 144 outlines expectations for school boards on developing and implementing bullying prevention and intervention policies.
- ***Bullying Awareness and Prevention Week***  
Ontario has designated the third week of every November to encourage schools to focus on this issue and promote a safer learning environment.

- ***Premier's Safe Schools Awards***

The award recognizes up to 10 safe schools teams that have done exceptional and innovative work in creating a safe and inclusive school environment.

- ***School climate survey for parents***

This survey is available in 22 languages.

[www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/safeschools/climate.html](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/safeschools/climate.html)

- ***Kids Help Phone***

This confidential counselling service is available 24/7.

Visit [www.kidshelpphone.ca](http://www.kidshelpphone.ca) or call **1-800-668-6868**.



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