

Families and child care professionals want children to develop a sense of physical, social and emotional wellbeing. Children's wellbeing can be challenged if they experience bullying by another child or a group of children which is why families and child care professionals share concerns about how to prevent bullying and how to deal with bullying when it occurs.

Learning to be a group member

Growing up in a family involves learning how to get along with others including adults and siblings. When your children attend family day care, long day care or outside school hours care services, they become members of a new group with other children and adults. Learning how to become a valued member of a group takes time for children and requires:

- ongoing support from adults who model social skills as a way to show children how to live respectfully and inclusively with others
- learning over time that having strong feelings is normal. Children gradually learn how to regulate those feelings appropriately. For example, by using words to describe angry feelings, such as "It makes me cross when you snatch my toys," rather than using actions such as hitting or pushing when angry.
- having daily opportunities to be a helpful group member and being acknowledged by adults for that behaviour. For example, "I really liked the way you helped your little brother to find his hat before we went outside".

Disagreements or conflicts between children in group care settings are a normal part of learning how to live together. Sometimes conflict can become more serious and entrenched if a child or a group of children use behaviours which intimidate or are intentionally hurtful over a period of time. This type of persistent, negative behaviour towards another child or group of children is called bullying.

Types of bullying

There are different behaviours that are identified as bullying, including:

- physical bullying such as hitting, pushing or punching, which tends to be more common in younger children
- verbal abuse which might include name calling, teasing, spreading negative rumours about a child, or using racist or sexist insults

Signs of bullying in children

There are a range of signs or behaviours across different aspects of development which might indicate that your child is being bullied:

Physical: there is evidence of physical bullying such as bruises or scratches or your child starts bed wetting, having nightmares or shows a loss of appetite

Social: your child complains about not having friends, or is very reluctant to go to child care or school

Emotional: your child is abnormally unhappy, fearful, upset or anxious or is displaying noticeable mood swings at home

Cognitive: your child is unable to concentrate at activities or seems to regress in learning.

- social isolation which excludes individuals or groups of children from play or social situations, which may occur with older children
- cyber bullying where technologies such as texting or e-mailing are used to taunt, insult, intimidate or harass another child. This is more commonly used by older children.

The immediate and long term effects of bullying

Bullying can have an immediate effect on children as well as long term effects if it is not challenged and stopped. For example, a child who is being socially isolated from their peers due to bullying may develop low self-esteem unless action is taken to prevent or to stop the bullying.

Strategies for families

If the types of behaviours or signs listed above are not normal for your child, or if they persist over time and become a more serious problem, this could indicate that your child is being bullied. Adults need to take action when they suspect or are aware that a child is being bullied as children are

not able to solve the problem of being bullied by themselves. There are several strategies you can adopt to help your child if you believe they are being bullied:

- Encourage your child to talk about what is happening and listen carefully to what they say. Affirm their feelings and make it clear that you believe them and that you will help them to deal with the bullying.
- Discuss your concerns with the professionals who care for your child and work with them to find ways to address the issue. Solutions may involve actions by parents, child care professionals and the child themselves.
- Continue to listen to and talk with your child. Support them to decide on appropriate actions to challenge or stop the bullying.
- Help your child to regain confidence and wellbeing by affirming their positive behaviours and focusing on the things that they do well.
- Use resources such as the web-based resources listed at the end of this *Factsheet* to help you and your child to resolve this issue.

If your child has been identified as bullying others, some of the above strategies will be helpful. In addition, there are other strategies worth considering:

- Monitor the amount of competition that occurs at home as highly competitive environments can make it difficult for your child to learn how to work cooperatively with others.
- Listen carefully to your child when you talk about the bullying behaviour and help them to recognise the triggers that started the bullying cycle so that with your help they can find appropriate ways to respond in the future.
- Help your child to understand the impact of their actions on the other child/ren by asking questions such as: "How do you think that child

felt when you teased her every day?" and "How would you feel if no one would let you play in their team?".

Strategies used by child care professionals

Child care professionals use a range of age appropriate strategies to prevent bullying from occurring and managing it when it does occur, including:

- adopting a policy of zero tolerance for bullying and consistently maintaining that policy with all children
- modelling respectful ways of interacting with colleagues, children and families in order to show socially and culturally appropriate ways of getting along with others
- ensuring children are supervised adequately inside and outside so that they can intercede if bullying occurs and in order to feel safe
- teaching children strategies to challenge bullying type behaviours before they become entrenched. For example, expressing their disapproval of verbal insults: "I don't like it when you call me by that name".
- communicating openly and sensitively with the families of children who bully or are bullied and working with them to find appropriate solutions and strategies for supporting the child involved both at home and at the service.

Conclusion

Bullying is an issue that is best addressed by families and child care professionals working together with children. Prevention rather than intervention after it has occurred and a focus on solving the problem rather than blaming or labelling children is possible if there is cooperation between all parties concerned (Linke, 2009) ■

References and further reading

- Linke, P. (2009). Dealing with bullying together: prevention and resolution. *Research in Practice Series*, 16(1). ACT: Early Childhood Australia.

Useful websites

- Stop Bullying Now!: www.stopbullyingnow/hrsa.gov/kids
- Bullying in schools and what to do about it: www.kenrigby.net
- Cyberbullying: www.cyberbullying.ca
- Kids Help Line: www.kidshelp.com.au



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