

Why do kids bully? And what can parents do about it?

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Bullying is unfortunately a common problem in Australian schools, with surveys suggesting [one in five](#) teenagers are bullied.

While schools are responsible for ensuring a [safe environment](#), parents are likely to be distressed and unsure about what to do if their child is being bullied.

What exactly is bullying? And how can you help your child if you are concerned?

What is bullying?

Bullying is not just kids being thoughtless or a bit mean. It is [not](#) a single act, a mistake, or a mutual disagreement.

Bullying is a [repeated](#) act of aggression that is intended to cause harm. It can be physical (harming the person or their belongings), verbal (written and spoken words that cause harm), or social (isolating someone, harming their [social standing](#), or sharing private information).

It is not a "normal" childhood experience—it is targeted and has long-lasting and serious effects for the victim.

These effects include [reduced engagement](#) in education and loneliness at school, [loss of self-esteem](#), [psychological distress](#), depressive symptoms, problems with sleep, suicide and suicidal ideation, non-suicidal self-injury and [substance abuse](#).

Bullying can be overt and hidden

Bullying can be [overt](#) with observable actions like kicking or name-calling.

Or it can be covert, which is more hidden and can include whispering, exclusion, and rumors. While females and males are [equally likely to](#)

[have experienced bullying](#) and are equally likely to bully, males are more likely to engage in overt physical bullying, while females are more likely to engage in covert bullying through social or cyber behavior.

A 2019 Mission Australia [survey found](#) 21% of [young people](#) aged 15–19 reported bullying in the past 12 months. Of those who had been bullied, nearly 80% said the bullying took place at school.

More than 70% said the bullying was verbal, 61% said it was social, 36.5% said it was cyberbullying and about 20% said it was physical.

There is less concrete data about younger children's experiences of bullying. One reason is they tend to [over-report behaviors](#) that would not be defined as bullying. For example, a [young child](#) may believe they are being bullied if someone does not want to play with them.

Bullying in this age group can also be viewed by some researchers and educators with less concern as it can be incorrectly labeled as a "[normal](#)" part of childhood.

Why do people bully?

Bullying behavior is often motivated by a [desire to meet basic needs](#) for recognition, attention and approval. It is a misguided attempt to [increase your popularity](#) by making other people look small.

As UK bullying expert Elizabeth Nassem [notes](#), if children are popular they can "achieve respect, influence, admiration and leadership over their peers—sadly, at the expense of other children."

Another reason young people is bully is because they have been mistreated, experienced shame, or [bullied](#) themselves by peers, parents, or siblings. They bully others as an attempt to seek [revenge](#) and regain a

sense of [self-worth](#).

There are also systemic reasons why young people bully. Schools that [don't adequately supervise students](#), or have [practices or policies](#) that exclude young people with diverse needs can contribute to bullying.

When systems exclude or shame young people, young people within the system are more likely to do the same.

How can parents help?

Bullying is a complex problem. While the onus should be on schools to fix it, parents can be empowered to support their child if they are the victim of bullying.

1. Make space for your child to tell you

Children need to talk about their experiences of bullying in order for parents to act. However, research indicates they often don't speak out, with [one study](#) indicating only 53% of children told their teacher and 67% told their parents they were being bullied.

Young people [report](#) they don't tell because adult responses are often ineffective, insensitive or excessive.

They [also say](#) they fear looking weak, making the situation worse, and that adult support might undermine their sense of autonomy. In one study, [children explained](#) the main reason they wouldn't report bullying behavior was because they "didn't want to be a little nark" [an informer] and lose the approval of their peers.

These findings suggest it is important to provide space for your children

to talk and to be well equipped to respond when they do.

Listen to your child carefully, ask them what role they would like you to play in solving the problem. Assure them you will handle the situation sensitively and with a view to protect them from further harm.

Parents can also praise their children's [maturity and strength](#) when they report bullying and reinforce that it is [not "telling-tales" or "weak"](#) when someone's safety is at risk.

2. Approach school

While it can be distressing to hear your child has been bullied, it is important to process these feelings before you act so you can be calm.

Your first action should be contacting the [school](#) to report the bullying. It is [not advised](#) to contact the other child's parents directly. This can escalate the issue, break your relationship with the parent, take away your child's power, and the other parents may not act—so it leaves the problem unresolved.

When you [contact the school](#), ask for an investigation of the issue and a response timeline. This approach demonstrates that you are open to other perspectives and not seeking to blame anyone. It also indicates you expect an outcome.

You may also request that your child's identity is not shared to protect them from further retaliation. If there is no response, follow up until there is a resolution. Don't promise your child you won't do something because if your child or another is unsafe, you need to intervene to ensure their safety.

3. Provide your child with skills

Your child can also be better equipped by teaching them [emotional and interpersonal skills](#) to help them navigate instances of bullying.

These skills include self-regulation, [social skills](#), and problem solving. This can enable your child stay calm and not appear distressed, to be assertive when appropriate, and to consider creative ways of resolving difficult situations.

You can also teach your child safe, practiced, and planned responses they can use in instances of bullying. One example of this is "[fogging](#)". This is a technique where the child agrees the bully may or may not be correct but does not get defensive and upset.

For example, a bully may say "your shirt is ugly". A fogging response would be "you may be right". With this approach the [bully](#) is not getting a reaction to their insult and therefore not meeting their need for attention and control.

4. Gather a support crew

Help your child identify safe spaces, peers and adults they can turn to for support.

They need to understand that in the middle of the bullying behavior, they have people they can depend on who care for them. Bullies try to isolate. Your child needs to know they are not alone, they are loved, and they are supported.

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