

# Help Your Child Understand What Bullying Is . . . and Isn't

By Trudy Ludwig

Bullying is comprised of three key elements: an intent to harm, a power imbalance, and repeated acts or threats of aggressive behavior. Kids who bully are consciously choosing to be cruel, with no sense of regret or remorse—even when the targets of bullying show or express their hurt or tell the aggressors to stop. Sometimes they're hurting too, thinking that hurting someone else can stop their pain.

I love how this one school I visited in Wisconsin helped their school community--students, teachers, and parents--understand the different tiers of hurtful behavior:

- When someone says or does something unintentionally hurtful and they do it once, that's **RUDE**.
- When someone says or does something intentionally hurtful and they do it once, that's **MEAN**.
- When someone says or does something intentionally hurtful and they keep doing it—even when you tell them to stop or show them that you're upset—that's **BULLYING**.

When a child is mean to multiple people or publicly posts a hurtful comment online that can be viewed by many, he/she is creating a repeated pattern of meanness, which can cross the line into bullying. Those who bully often lack empathy—the ability to know what it feels like to be in someone else's shoes and to have compassion for his/her pain and suffering. The more empathy and compassion we can instill in our children, the less room there will be in their hearts for contempt and disregard for others.

## Most Kids Aren't Cruel—Offline or Online

Numerous [Internet safety advocates and experts report](#) that most youth aren't bullying their peers. That's not to say that bullying isn't a significant issue. The minority of kids who are bullying can cause real harm to both the targets of bullying AND the many bystanders who witness the bullying.

Because kids tend to do what they believe the majority of their peers do, it's important to share with your children this truth: Most youth are decent, caring, and responsible when it comes to how they treat others. Let your teens know that you expect no less from them. And if they do witness bullying, encourage them to report the abuse to an adult they trust or, if online, to the service provider or through the social network's reporting system. Also encourage them to reach out and comfort the kid who is being bullied.

## Turning Kids' Mistakes into Teachable Moments

Let's face it: our kids are going to make mistakes. Our job as caring parents is to make sure our kids don't keep repeating those mistakes so they can move forward in positive, healthy ways. We do this by being good role models ourselves in how we treat those we encounter in life. We also need to hold our children accountable for their hurtful behaviors. You don't want your kids to just say, "Sorry." Have them SHOW they're sorry by making up for the hurt they have caused others.

## **Emphasize the Importance of Respecting Others' Differences**

Remind your child that every person has value. While we all may not agree with others' opinions, while we all may not end up being friends, we all deserve to have our presence acknowledged and to be treated in a civil and respectful manner.

The reality is that we aren't going to get rid of all the hurt in our kids' world. What we can do is raise more emotionally resilient kids who have the tools and strength to get through the hurt, while the caring adults (teachers, school administrators, parents, and care givers) and kids in their lives work together to effectively address and prevent peer cruelty.

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