

NOTE:

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TAKE A STAND:

Preventing Bullying, Interpersonal Conflict & Violence

Family Handbook

By Sherryll Kraizer, Ph.D.

“What we do to children
they will do to society...”
Karl Menninger

Dear Family Members,

Your child's class is beginning a discussion about prevention of bullying and interpersonal violence. In the next few weeks, they will be discussing:

- Identifying bullying behaviors of all kinds
- Effective ways to avoid or stop bullies
- How to speak up – Take A Stand - against bullying
- How to be an advocate for those who are being bullied
- How to accept coaching and be a coach for others
- How to communicate effectively
- How to ask for help when you need it

Please take some time to read this handbook. It will make it easier for your family to use some of the ideas being introduced at school.

Talk about these ideas at home. Most families find that the ideas presented in the program are helpful to everyone. After all, we would all welcome less conflict and tension in our lives.

Sincerely,

Sherryll Kraizer, Ph.D.
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BULLYING

Bullying, intimidation and interpersonal conflict is something all children encounter in one form or another. Children struggle with being called names, being picked upon, being excluded, not knowing how to make friends, or being the ones acting unkindly or aggressively toward others. All forms of bullying are abusive, and all are opportunities to teach children how to get along, how to be considerate people, how to be part of a community or group.

Bullying can take many forms: physical, emotional, verbal or a combination of these. It may involve one child bullying another, a group of children against a single child or groups against other groups (gangs). It is not unlike other forms of victimization and abuse in that it involves:

- An imbalance of power
- Differing emotional tones, the victim will be upset whereas the bully is cool and in control
- Blaming the victim for what has happened
- Lack of concern on the part of the bully for the feelings and concerns of the victim
- A lack of compassion
- A cycle that will continue and often escalate without intervention

Bullies are very often children who have been bullied or abused themselves. Sometimes they are children experiencing life situations they can't cope with, that leave them feeling helpless and out of control. They may be children with poor social skills, who do not fit in, who can't meet the expectations of their family or school. They bully to feel competent, successful, to control someone else, to get some relief from their own feelings of powerlessness.

WHO ARE THE VICTIMS

Not all children are equally likely to be victimized by bullying behavior. Those children who are more prone to be picked upon tend to have the following characteristics:

- Low self-esteem
- Insecure
- Lack of social skills, don't pick up on social cues
- Cry or become emotionally distraught easily
- Unable to defend or stand up for themselves
- Physical characteristics which make them appear different
- May not have a support group of family or friends

Some children actually seem to provoke their own victimization. These children will tease bullies, making themselves a target by egging the person on, not knowing when to stop and then not being able to effectively defend him or herself when the balance of power shifts to the bully.

Children who are not bullied tend to have better social skills and conflict management skills. They are more willing to assert themselves about differences without being aggressive or confronting. They suggest compromises and alternate solutions. They tend to be more aware of people's feelings and are the children who can be most helpful in resolving disputes and assisting other children to get help.

IF YOUR CHILD IS BEING BULLIED

If you learn your child is being bullied, you may immediately want to protect your child and confront the aggressor. You may feel embarrassed and want your child to toughen up, to get in there and fight back. You may feel helpless yourself. None of these responses are helpful.

Get as much information as you can about what has happened. Avoid blaming anyone, including the bullying child or children. Look at your own child's behavior and style of interacting. Ask yourself what you know about your child and how you can turn the immediate situation around.

If you are going to get in touch with the parents of a bullying child, remember that they will probably feel defensive. Keep in mind that your goal is to have a safe and nurturing environment for all of the children, not to escalate an already difficult situation.

For your own children, there are several suggestions:

- Discuss alternatives to responding to bullies.
- Don't react, walk away, get help if pursued
- Agree with the bully, saying, "You're right."
- Walking away
- Be assertive.

ROLE-PLAY

Children learn by doing. Role-play is what makes prevention of bullying and interpersonal conflict real for children. **Role-playing takes concepts and turns them into skills. Actually walking through situations and having your children practice different responses is what takes the ideas presented here from the level of a concept – or an idea – to a skill that is learned in the “muscles” and will never be forgotten.**

It is like the difference between understanding how to ride a bicycle and actually being able to ride a bicycle. Role-play, mixed with discussion and other activities, enables your children to learn the skills in their muscles. This is what allows them to act on behalf of themselves or others in real life situations.

The process of teaching role-playing is one of discussion first and then actually walking through a scenario, applying the concepts to real situations, and learning how to implement the concepts with skill. This is usually a process of successive approximations based on your coaching your child, helping them as they go, to get better and better at standing up for themselves and others.

IF YOUR CHILD IS THE BULLY

What every parent doesn't want to hear - your child is behaving like a bully. Your first response will probably be defensive. Disarm the situation and buy yourself some time to process what's being said. For example, say "Instead of labeling my child, please tell me what happened." Make yourself really listen, Remember that this discussion is ultimately about the well being of your child, regardless of how it's being presented.

Even if your child is behaving aggressively or acting like a bully, remember that this behavior is probably coming from your child's feelings of vulnerability. You need to look for what is going on in your child's interaction with others, what is causing your child to behave that way.

In talking with your child, **DO NOT BLAME**. Do not get into a discussion about the "whys" of what happened. Your discussion should focus on several key points:

- Bullying is not acceptable in our family or in society.
- If you are feeling frustrated or angry or aggressive, here are some things you can do.
- Remember to role-play, act out the new behaviors.
- Ask, how can I help you with this? Who could you go to in school if you see yourself getting into this type of situation again?
- Specify concretely the consequences if the aggression or bullying continue.
- Be ready to listen when your child wants to talk about it.
- You want to stop the behavior, understand your child's feelings, then teach and reward more appropriate behavior.

PREVENTING BULLYING

As soon as children begin to interact with others, we should teach them not to be bullies and not to be bullied. We need to show them that intimidation, interpersonal conflict and violence are not part of what we value. We can help provide words for their feelings, intervene to limit and change their behavior and teach them appropriate ways to express their feelings and wishes. **Children do not learn to solve these kinds of problems and get along by themselves. We need to teach them.**

When preschoolers begin to call people names or use unkind words, intervene immediately and consistently. In kindergarten children learn the power of exclusion. Respond to, "She's not my friend and she can't come to my party." with, "You don't have to be friends with her today, but it's not all right to make her feel bad."

In the early elementary grades, cliques and little groups develop which can be quite exclusionary and cruel. Children need to hear clearly from us, "It's not all right to treat other people this way. How do you think she feels being told she can't play with you? Kids don't have to play with everyone or even like everyone, but they can't be cruel about excluding others."

Making fun, picking on and other forms of bullying need to be identified in their earliest stages. The message needs to be crystal clear: "This is not okay. Think about how he must feel. How could you hurt her and let other kids know it's not all right to treat her this way?"

Children who are not bullies or victims have a powerful role to play in shaping the behavior of other children. **Teach your children to speak up on behalf of other children being bullied.**

RESOURCES FOR HELP

Parents want to believe that their children will come to them if they have a problem and that is usually what they do. But there are three situations parents should prepare for. One is that children sometimes aren't very effective communicators and we don't hear what they are trying to say. The second is that we aren't always very good listeners and we don't understand what they had to say. Finally, sometimes children need to know what resources they have for help in the extended family or outside the extended family.

The Take A Stand Program helps prepare children to be better communicators, and to ask for help when they need it. You can support that effort by asking your children, "If you had a really hard problem that you wanted to tell me about, how would you get my attention?" "How would you know I heard and understood your problem?" "What would you do if, for some reason, I couldn't help you with the problem or didn't understand?"

Help your children develop a contact list of people they can talk to. Make sure they know how to reach those people. The reality for all of us that sometimes, our kids want to talk to someone else about a problem. The more your children know about accessing help – from you and others -- the more we can assure their safety and well-being as they grow up.

NO MORE SECRETS RULE

The **No More Secrets Rule** – taught in the younger grades of the Program – is one of the most important things you can teach your children because intimidation and secrecy keep young children from telling about bullying and other abusive behavior, particularly at the hands of older children or adults. This rule is an important part of protecting younger children and we encourage you to adopt this rule at home.

The No More Secrets Rule is an agreement you make with your family that you won't keep secrets anymore (not even in the family) and if asked to keep a secret, your children will say "No, we don't keep secrets in our family and I'm going to tell." Younger children can simply say, "No, I'm going to tell."

Surprises are okay. Surprises are things that make people happy that get told sooner or later, whereas secrets are never told. Children quickly learn the difference, and by age four can respond to a request for secrecy about a birthday gift with "That's not a secret, it's a surprise."

Young children often confuse secrecy with whispering. Explain to them that telling something you only want one person to hear is different from keeping a secret. A secret is when they promise not to tell anyone else.

By age five or six, children can learn that there are many ways to be asked to keep a secret. They enjoy making a game of trying to trick Mom and Dad into keeping a secret without using the word secret. For example, what if someone says any of the following: "This is just between you and me." "Do you promise not to tell anyone else?" "You don't need to tell your mom and dad, I'll tell them later." "We won't tell them about our little game?" Your children should respond to all of

these requests by saying, "No, I don't keep secrets and I'm going to tell."

By age seven or eight, secrecy is such an integral part of children's lives with their friends that they are reluctant to give it up. This includes friendship clubs, secret bonds, oaths, pacts, etc. Essentially, we're allowing secrecy with peers and discouraging it with anyone older.

If a request for secrecy, whether or not the word secret is actually used, seems confusing or odd or compromising, one option open to older children is to say "I really don't like keeping secrets and I don't want to start now," or "I don't like this idea, let's do something else," or "I'd like to go home now."

Privacy is not the same as secrecy. Privacy means you can be by yourself or keep something to yourself. Secrecy means you're bound not to tell. **Privacy respects individual needs. Secrecy creates shame and keeps children from getting help when they need it. It's important that children know the difference.**

THE COALITION FOR CHILDREN

The Coalition for Children is a private, not-for-profit organization, founded in the United States in 1983, which is committed to creating and providing positive and effective programming for children and families. The Coalition is not a group, rather it acts as a catalyst, bringing together individuals and organizations for specific projects and community action. The specific focus of the Coalition for Children for the last 25 years has been the prevention of child abuse and interpersonal violence. Projects include: development and evaluation of new programs, consulting, training, research, and community-wide efforts such as The Safe Child Project.

Our current focus is making all of our programs available around the world without charge to families and schools.

You might also be interested in the Safe Child Program which helps you protect your children. Topics include:

- Prevention of child abuse
- Safety around strangers
- Safety for children who stay home alone

Dr. Sherryll Kraizer, Executive Director of the Coalition for Children, has a Bachelors degree in Special Education, a Masters degree in Psychology and is a Ph.D. in Education. She is the author of The Safe Child Book, the Safe Child Program, the REACH, CHALLENGE and RECOVERY Programs and 10 Days to a Bully-Proof Child. She is internationally recognized for her prevention programs and research in program effectiveness. She lives in Denver with her husband Al.