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How to help your child cope with a bully

- Story Highlights
- HHS estimate: 30 percent of all kids grades 6-10 are bullied or have bullied annually
- Bullying usually occurs in places not monitored by adults
- Symptoms: personality changes, especially anxiety, sadness, withdrawal
- Expert: Calling the bully's parents "never a point of resolution"

By Judy Fortin
CNN Medical Correspondent

SMYRNA, Georgia (CNN) -- A week before the start of the new school year, principal Denise Magee roamed the hallways of Campbell Middle School in Smyrna, Georgia, preparing for battle.

The adversary? Preteen and teenage bullies.

Toting anti-bullying posters and masking tape, Magee was determined to let students see from Day One that she had a zero-tolerance policy when it came to that kind of harassment.

"Middle-school kids are just cruel to each other," Magee said. "They speak their minds, so you see bullying in the form of teasing, taunting, social isolation and name calling."

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services estimated that 30 percent of all children in grades six through 10 have been bullied or have bullied other children during a school year.

Clinical psychologist Mark Crawford of Roswell, Georgia, called the statistics unacceptable. "Bullying is not a rite of passage," he said. "It always has a bad outcome."

Crawford said several times a month he hears complaints from young patients who are victims of bullies. And he worried about the consequences. "Kids who are bullied are at greater risk of physical symptoms, physical complaints, emotional problems and academic underachievement."

Parenting expert Stacey DeBroff, author of "The Mom Book," cautioned that bullying often occurs in places that aren't monitored by adults, such as a walking route to and from school, a corner of a playground and the Internet.

She warned mothers and fathers to be on the lookout for signs a child is being bullied. "When you see signs of being anxious, sad and withdrawn, of having a kid move off their typical personality, it alerts you that something is going on."

Crawford noted that some of those symptoms can be attributed to typical adolescent behavior, but he added, "When you see a real change in a child's personality or their normal routine, it's a bad sign." [Health Minute: Watch more on defeating bullies »](#)

He also conceded that some children won't open up to their parents about bullying. "One of the reasons kids don't tell their parents they are being bullied is the fear that their parents will run in and do something about it and they think that will make it worse."

DeBroff agreed that it is tempting for some parents to rush in to solve the problem by calling the bully's parents. "You often know them, your kids have been in school together, you feel like calling them up...so they're on the defensive and really it's never a point of resolution."

Crawford said that it's important to do your homework before attempting to resolve the situation.

He encouraged parents to talk with their child first and get them to open up about what's happening. "You need to find out when it is happening, where it is happening and exactly what is going on," he said.

When elementary age children are involved, Crawford recommended parents intervene more quickly. "Younger kids have a limited arsenal from which to draw," he said. "They don't necessarily know how to be more assertive."

Middle-school students may want to have some control over the situation, according to Crawford.

In that case, he said it might be a good idea to go over possible scenarios and options that will help them put a stop to the bullying.

DeBroff said it is important to ask for help from a teacher or school administrator. "They want to know about it because it ripples into the classrooms and places that aren't visible to them."

Magee, the middle-school principal, agreed. "I do not want parents to leave us out of the scenario," she said. "I want them to immediately contact us."

But be judicious, she urged. Some parents can inflame the situation. "You will encounter situations where parents will tell their kids, 'If you are hit, I want you to hit back.' "

Experts point out it is important for parents to keep emotions in check and to not encourage a child to hit back or retaliate.

Instead, DeBroff suggested parents become strategic advisers to their child and help them avoid bullying situations.

In a couple of weeks, after her students get settled, Magee plans to hold grade-level meetings about her school's anti-bullying policy.

In the meantime, she remained optimistic and hoped this school year will be different. "The best-case scenario as local school principal? We are bullyproof, fully free of any bully incidents, that we are truly here with academic focus, no fighting, no teasing, no name calling, none of that. We're here to learn."

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