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When Your Child is a Bully

How to handle accusations — and the behaviour
Randi Chapnik Myers

Robyn Snider was at work when she got the call from her son's school: Josh, an outgoing fifth grader, had been suspended for bullying. Snider was shocked. Just a few years back, when he was suffering health problems, Josh had been bullied himself. So how had this happened? And what should she do?

As much as we hope our kids won't become targets of bullies, the reverse is also true — no parent wants the B-word slapped on their little angel. Yet since you don't see your child interacting all day at school, you just may find yourself in Snider's position. In case you are, here's how to handle yourself — and your child's bullying behaviour.

Take cues

Even if you haven't received that dreaded phone call, there may be signs you can recognize at home. Always keep your eyes and ears open for any unusually aggressive behaviour, says Chris Hinkle, founder of Firm Foundations, a Barrie, Ont., organization specializing in the prevention of bullying and workplace violence. The sooner you catch what's going on, she says, the sooner you can put a stop to it.

Watch for red flags like heavy-handed superiority, intolerance of differences and a consistent lack of empathy. For example, is your son bossing around his sister more than usual or picking on her incessantly (nicknaming her Shrimp, laughing when she trips) — especially when you're not around? You should also be concerned if your child starts coming home with extra money or new objects you've never seen before, adds Alexandra Penn of Champions Against Bullying in Toronto, who recently co-authored the interactive CD *The No-Nonsense Guide to Kids' Bullying Solutions*. "Right away," she says, "you should ask where he got that stuff."

Chances are you won't know that your child is bullying until someone tells you, and it may not be the principal. Say you're strolling across the school parking lot with your kid when out of nowhere, a mom is accusing your daughter of bullying hers. Your first instinct may be to start arguing. But do it and you just may spawn a family war.

Your response may differ depending on who's confronting you. If it's a teacher or counsellor, get details. "Ask for a log of what transpired," says Joanne Kates, director of Camp Arowhon in Ontario's Algonquin Park. Also ask what the institution did to investigate. Did they question the kids? Gather witnesses? Give warnings? If not, Kates says, ask them to explore and report back to you tomorrow. "You can live the 24 hours it will take for them to piece together the picture."

For her part, Snider was satisfied that the school had the story straight. "Apparently, in front of all the kids, Josh called a girl an unflattering name," Snider says. "That sparked a shoving match that ended with the girl complaining of a sore arm." Step by step, the school investigated. "They talked to groups of boys and girls, then to Josh and the girl separately, then together. They explained that name-calling was bullying. They didn't involve me until they had all the facts."

But what if you've got a furious parent in your face? Take the opposite tack, experts advise. While it's quite natural to feel defensive, Penn says, "the last thing you want is to get into 'he said/she said,' especially in front of the kids."

Of course, as parents, we want to protect our kids; we'd also like to believe that in raising them, we're doing a stellar job. But defensiveness will only send your child the wrong message. By immediately siding with her, you're implying that whatever is going on, it's OK with you. While your child's conduct is not necessarily a reflection of your parenting, most kids do learn their meanest tactics close to home — from older siblings, the four hours of TV they watch daily, or maybe even from you. It makes sense: If you see nothing wrong with picking a fight, neither will your child. So instead keep calm, respectfully listen to the accusation and respond with care. Assure the other parent you'll talk again — once you've had a chance to investigate. Then start sleuthing.

"You can't assume your kid is a bully just because someone said so," Kates says. Before reading him the riot act, track down as many unbiased sources as you can find — teachers, babysitters, bystanders — and ask for feedback. If they haven't seen obvious evidence, like a kick in the ribs, they may have noticed bullying that's harder to trace, such as practising exclusion or spreading rumours.

After you have a fairly clear picture, sit down with your child and talk. First, ask about the incident, then listen with an open mind. Be warned, though. Your objective facts are sure to come in handy because if your child really is bullying he may have a tough time admitting it. "Kids lie when they're in trouble because they're scared," Kates says. Or they feel they did nothing wrong because their victim was "asking for it." So don't be surprised if he swears up and down that he didn't do it, that it was just a joke or even that he himself was actually the victim.

Even so, you don't want the talk to turn into an inquisition. Make it clear to your child that you want to help and that it's the behaviour that's bad, not him. Then it's time to focus on the key question: Why?

Bullying is rarely just a simple push on the playground. Usually it's about something deeper that's bothering your child. "Use the situation to get to the bottom of what's going on for him," says Zopito Marini, a professor of child and youth studies at Brock University in St. Catharines, Ont.

Josh, the fifth grader suspended for bullying, has two older brothers, so he's accustomed to being last in line. With his peers at school, he was using name-calling to be cool, which gave him a feeling of power. At the same time, Snider says, Josh's childhood illness seems to have left him impatient of whining. "Because he's been through so much, he can't seem to tolerate anyone with a weak spot," she says.

Your child may also be bullying because he has trouble controlling his impulses, Marini says. When "reactive" kids feel frustrated — say someone knocked off their hat or pushed in line — they are likely to lash out at the aggressor or, in some cases, another child. Regardless of the cause of your child's behaviour, your goal is the same: to teach him to stand in his victim's shoes.

Unfortunately, consequences like suspension may not deter bullies, says educator Jeanine Amaral, a Toronto classroom workshop presenter. In fact, studies show that more than 60 percent of kids who bully in grades six to nine will have a criminal record by age 24. "Bullies get sent out of class, they feel cool" and in control of the other kids' attention, Amaral says. And when you feel cool, you feel better than everyone else, which does nothing to teach a bully empathy for his victims.

"Your daughter may not get that calling her friend a suck can hurt so deeply, or that whispering is a form of exclusion," Penn says. Empathy-building exercises, where you role-play with your child — you take the role of the bully — will help drive the point home. In addition to whatever disciplinary consequences you decide are appropriate, you may also want to involve your child in a powwow with the other child and her parents. That way, your child will hear, first-hand, how miserable her actions made her victim feel.

You can also build your child's self-control by teaching her to stop and count backward from 10 when she feels like lashing out.

In the end, however, it's not enough for your child to stop bullying. She absolutely must take ownership of her conduct, Hinkle says. In Josh's case, that involved writing a letter to the principal, explaining what he had done, why he felt it was wrong and how he could correct it. Then he called the girl and apologized. Snider also called the girl's mom. "I told her we'd handled the situation, and I was happy to hear how appreciative she was," she says. "It was a good lesson for everyone involved: You do wrong. You learn. Then you make it right."

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