

Module 9: When your child is a victim of bullying



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This module provides parents with strategies to emotionally support children who have experienced bullying, help them process these difficult experiences, and prepare them for handling future situations. Through evidence-based approaches grounded in attachment theory and social learning principles, parents will learn how to validate their child's feelings, manage their own emotional responses, and coach their child toward resilience and recovery.

Understanding the Impact of Bullying

Children who experience bullying often feel isolated, hurt, and confused. According to Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1988), secure attachment with a caregiver enables children to trust and feel understood, laying a foundation for resilience. Research shows that emotional support from parents significantly reduces feelings of anxiety and depression in victims of bullying (Rivara & Menestrel, 2016).

The effects of bullying can be far-reaching, impacting a child's self-esteem, academic performance, and social development. Children may internalize negative messages, believing they deserve the treatment they're receiving. Without proper support, these experiences can lead to long-term emotional consequences.

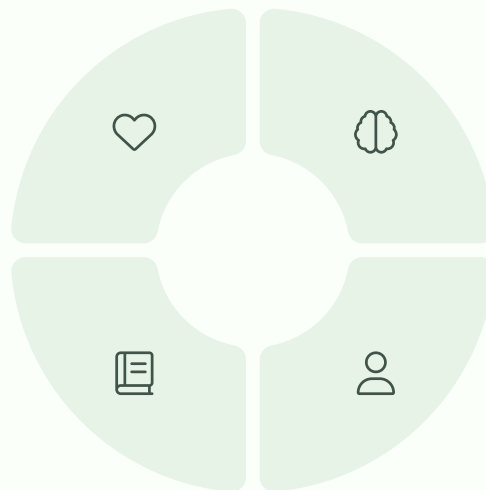
Parents play a crucial role in mitigating these effects by creating a safe space where children feel comfortable sharing their experiences and emotions. By responding appropriately to bullying situations, parents can help their children develop resilience and the skills needed to navigate challenging social interactions.

Emotional Impact

Feelings of isolation, hurt, confusion, anxiety, and depression

Academic Impact

Decreased concentration, lower grades, and reduced participation



Cognitive Impact

Internalized blame, negative self-perception, and diminished confidence

Social Impact

Withdrawal from peers, difficulty trusting others, and fear of social situations

Offering Emotional Support Through Validation

Validation is a powerful tool for supporting children who have experienced bullying. When responding to a child who has been bullied, begin with validation—acknowledging their feelings without necessarily agreeing or disagreeing with their emotional response. This approach communicates that you hear and understand them, helping to reduce the intensity of their distress and fostering a safe environment for further discussion (Sperling, 2021).

To effectively validate your child's experience, recognize their emotional responses without judgment. For example, if your child says, "I felt really embarrassed when they laughed at me," respond with, "That sounds really tough. I can see why you felt that way" or "It's okay to feel upset about what happened. Your feelings are important."

It's equally important to avoid invalidating phrases that minimize the child's feelings and discourage emotional expression, such as "The bully's opinion doesn't matter" or "Don't cry and let that bully get to you." Instead, reflect on their experiences empathetically to validate their feelings: "I can see that being left out made you feel really sad. That's completely understandable" or "When they said those things, it must have felt very unfair. You did well by telling me about it."

Effective Validation Techniques

- Listen attentively without interrupting
- Acknowledge specific emotions they express
- Use empathetic phrases that show understanding
- Maintain supportive body language and eye contact
- Avoid rushing to solutions before fully hearing them
- Reassure them that their feelings matter

Creating a safe space for your child to express their feelings is essential for helping them process bullying experiences.



Managing Your Emotional Reactions

Parents' emotional reactions to bullying are natural but can significantly impact the support they provide. To help effectively, it is crucial to acknowledge these emotions while maintaining focus on the child's needs, ensuring a constructive approach (BBC, n.d.). Feeling upset is normal, but setting emotions aside allows parents to prioritize their child's well-being (PACER Center, 2018).

When your child tells you they've been bullied, you might feel anger, sadness, guilt, or fear. These reactions, while understandable, can sometimes overwhelm your ability to respond helpfully. Taking a moment to process your emotions before reacting to your child's account is essential. You might pause and count to five before responding to prevent speaking out of anger or frustration, or say, "Let me take a moment to think about this, so I can help you the best I can."

Approaching the situation calmly and avoiding transferring anger or frustration onto the child creates a more supportive environment. Instead of raising your voice, calmly say, "This is upsetting, but we'll figure out the right steps together" or "It's okay to feel upset, but let's focus on finding a solution." This measured approach helps your child feel secure and supported rather than adding to their distress.

Recognize Your Emotions

Acknowledge your feelings of anger, fear, or sadness without judgment.

Take a Pause

Give yourself a moment to process before responding to your child.

Focus on Your Child

Shift your attention from your emotions to your child's needs.

Respond Thoughtfully

Communicate calmly and constructively, modeling emotional regulation.

Avoiding Dismissiveness

Dismissiveness undermines a child's confidence and may discourage them from sharing their struggles in the future. Acknowledging their experiences with seriousness and empathy is crucial for building trust and helping them feel supported through difficult situations.

To avoid dismissing your child's bullying experience, allow them to express their concerns fully without interruptions. Nod and make affirming sounds ("I see" or "Mm-hmm") as they speak, showing that you're listening. Avoid interjecting with solutions before they've finished explaining their feelings, as this can make them feel that their experience isn't being fully heard or understood.

Encourage open communication by demonstrating genuine interest and empathy. Say, "Tell me more about what happened during recess today," while maintaining eye contact to show genuine interest. Use empathetic phrases like, "That must have been really hard. I'm here to listen." Importantly, reassure them that they are not to blame for being bullied and that they have your support. Statements like "It's not your fault that this is happening. Bullying is never okay, and we'll work through this together" or "You don't deserve to be treated like this, and I'll do everything I can to help you" reinforce that you're on their side and that the bullying is not a reflection of their worth.

Signs of Dismissiveness to Avoid

- Minimizing the situation: "It's not that big a deal"
- Blaming the victim: "What did you do to provoke them?"
- Offering premature solutions: "Just ignore them"
- Comparing experiences: "When I was your age..."
- Rushing the conversation: "Let's talk about this later"
- Expressing disbelief: "Are you sure that's what happened?"

Supportive Alternatives

- Acknowledging severity: "This sounds really difficult"
- Affirming non-blame: "This is not your fault"
- Collaborative problem-solving: "Let's think about this together"
- Focused listening: "I want to understand your experience"
- Making time: "I'm here for you whenever you need to talk"
- Expressing belief: "I believe you and I'm here to help"

Helping Children Process Bullying Experiences

Processing bullying involves understanding emotions, reframing negative thoughts, and fostering resilience. Parents play a vital role in helping children articulate their feelings, reduce blame-related emotions, and plan constructive steps toward recovery. Social Learning Theory by Bandura (1977) emphasizes that children model emotional regulation based on caregiver behavior (Swearer & Hymel, 2015).

One effective tool for helping children process their emotions is an emotion wheel, such as Plutchik's Wheel of Emotions.



For example, Liam, an 14-year-old, might use the emotion wheel to express how he feels about being teased during lunch. He could identify sadness on the wheel, explaining that the teasing makes him feel hurt and upset. This simple exercise helps him articulate his emotions and seek support. Similarly, a child feeling nervous about facing their bully might use the wheel to pinpoint "nervous," a fear-related emotion, increasing their self-awareness and ability to communicate their feelings.

Using tools like the emotion wheel not only helps children identify their feelings but also enhances emotional regulation. A child feeling "frustrated" after being teased can use the wheel to recognize their anger, helping them seek support rather than reacting impulsively. This process of naming and understanding emotions is a crucial step in processing bullying experiences and developing emotional resilience.

Addressing Blame and Shame

Children often internalize blame when experiencing bullying, feeling they may have caused or deserved it.

To address blame and shame effectively, emphasize that bullying reflects the bully's behavior, not the child's worth. Use statements like "What they said or did is about them, not about you. Their actions are not your fault" or affirmations such as "You deserve to be treated with respect." Consistently reassure the child that bullying is never their fault with messages like "No one deserves to be bullied. What happened to you is not because of anything you did" and "The way others treat you says more about them than it does about you."

It's also important to avoid passing on parental worries to the child, as parents' concerns can make children feel more vulnerable. Instead of greeting them with questions like "Did someone bother you today?" try more neutral approaches such as "I missed you today. How was your lunch?" This encourages them to share naturally by maintaining a calm and supportive demeanor without priming them to focus on negative experiences.

Challenge Self-Blame

Help your child recognize that being bullied is not their fault by directly countering self-blaming statements. When they say things like "Maybe if I wasn't so different..." respond with "Being unique is wonderful. The problem is with how others are choosing to behave, not with who you are."

Promote Self-Compassion

Teach your child to treat themselves with the same kindness they would offer a friend. Guide them in positive self-talk: "I am worthy of respect" or "I did nothing wrong." Model self-compassion in your own behavior to reinforce this approach.

Reframe Negative Thoughts

Help your child transform negative thoughts into more balanced perspectives. If they think "Everyone hates me," guide them toward "Some kids were unkind today, but I have other friends who care about me" or "This difficult situation is temporary."

Planning Recovery Steps

Having a plan empowers children, helping them regain control and safety (Divecha, 2019). This process should be collaborative, involving both parent and child in creating a roadmap for moving forward.

- One effective recovery strategy is spending time with the child doing their favorite activities, such as arts and crafts, sports, or reading, to reinforce their sense of worth.
- Engaging in activities like martial arts or team sports can build physical and emotional resilience.
- Additionally, letting children make their own choices helps them feel in charge and develops their ability to be decisive. Simple questions like "This weekend, we could go to the park or watch a movie at home. Which one sounds like more fun to you?" give children agency in their recovery process.

One-on-one time with parents is particularly valuable during recovery. Help your child learn that they are beautiful, clever, and talented by making them feel they are the best. Appreciate every little thing they do and give them plenty of praise. For example, have your child help peel vegetables or stir the pot while preparing a meal. As you work together, you could say, "I really appreciate how carefully you're helping me. You're so thoughtful and skilled at this!" These positive interactions rebuild self-esteem and create a foundation for healing.

Recovery Activities

- Creative expression through art, music, or writing
- Physical activities that build confidence and strength
- Reading stories about resilience and overcoming challenges
- Volunteering or helping others to build purpose
- Learning new skills to foster a sense of accomplishment
- Spending time in nature for emotional regulation



Creative activities provide children with healthy outlets for processing emotions and rebuilding confidence after bullying experiences.

Coaching Children to Handle Future Bullying

Preparing children with **assertive communication** and proactive strategies builds confidence and reduces the likelihood of repeated bullying (Craig et al., 2007).

Assertiveness is the most effective way to solve interpersonal problems. Open, honest, and direct communication allows messages to be received without barriers or distortions. The ability to express feelings, emotions, and thoughts honestly, without harming others' integrity, leads to improved social interactions. Assertive responses help children set boundaries without escalating the conflict (kidshealth.org, 2023).

To develop assertive communication skills, teach the child to say "No" in a firm but calm manner, ensuring their tone and facial expressions do not convey fear or anger. Help the child express both negative and positive emotions in ways that match the complexity of the situation (Denham, 2007). Teach responses like, "Please stop. I don't like that," or gentler ones like, "I think it would be better if...," "I'd like to do this...," "Would it bother you if...?"



Practice Assertive Phrases

Teach simple, clear statements like "Stop, I don't like that" or "Please don't talk to me that way."



Role-Play Scenarios

Create safe practice situations where your child can rehearse responses to different bullying situations.



Develop Confident Body Language

Teach standing tall, making appropriate eye contact, and using a calm, clear voice.



Build Support Networks

Identify trusted adults and peers who can provide assistance when needed.

Role-Playing for Skill Development

Role-playing is a powerful tool for helping children develop and practice assertive communication skills in a safe environment. By simulating potential bullying scenarios, children can rehearse their responses without the pressure of a real situation, building confidence and competence over time.

When conducting role-play exercises, use realistic scenarios that your child might encounter.

During role-play, also focus on encouraging confident body language, such as standing tall, making eye contact, and smiling confidently. Teach your child to keep their back straight and shoulders relaxed, and to practice maintaining a balanced posture when speaking or listening. Explain that looking others in the eyes shows confidence and conviction in what they're saying. By engaging in such role-play exercises regularly, your child can build the skills and confidence needed to handle bullying situations effectively in real life.

Through consistent practice in a supportive environment, children can develop the communication skills and confidence needed to respond effectively to bullying situations. Remember to provide positive feedback and encouragement during these practice sessions to reinforce their progress and build their self-assurance.

Seeking Help from Trusted Adults

Children often avoid discussing abuse for several reasons: the shame they feel, the fear of being ostracized by their peers, concerns about not being understood by their parents, the worry of not being believed and then punished, as well as a gradual habituation to the new situation and a lack of concrete strategies to overcome these circumstances. Trusted adults provide guidance and reduce feelings of isolation (UNICEF, 2020).

To help your child identify and reach out to supportive adults, develop a list of people they can approach for help, such as parents, grandparents, teachers, or neighbors. One effective activity is the "friendship hand" game, where the child assigns each finger to a trusted person (LaRocque, 2021). This visual reminder helps children remember they have multiple sources of support available to them.

Encourage consistent reporting of bullying incidents by creating a safe and supportive environment where the child feels comfortable expressing themselves. Build the child's self-esteem by giving them responsibilities. When the child successfully navigates new or challenging situations, they gain a better understanding of their ability to manage stress. Encourage self-expression by positively reinforcing every attempt the child makes to communicate their experiences and validating their emotions (Banham et al., 2000).



School Staff

Teachers, counselors, and administrators are trained to address bullying and can implement interventions within the school environment.



Extended Family

Grandparents, aunts, uncles, and other family members can provide additional emotional support and perspective.



Mental Health Professionals

School counselors, therapists, and psychologists can offer specialized support for processing bullying experiences.

Avoiding Negative Environments

The child's state of well-being is influenced by environments where aggression is tolerated (Francis et al., 2022). Helping children identify and avoid situations that put them at risk for bullying is an important preventive strategy. This doesn't mean avoiding all challenging situations, but rather making informed choices about environments and developing strategies for navigating difficult spaces when necessary.

Start by identifying areas or times where bullying is likely to occur and plan alternatives. Raise awareness about the factors contributing to bullying behavior. Choose an environment where the child can integrate more easily (Abayomi & Daniels, 2021).

- For example, a child who has studied piano for three years and wishes to switch to another instrument may fall behind their peers. An honest discussion about the effort required to catch up can help the child make an informed decision based on their willingness to work, while understanding the effort involved. Similarly, a child with cognitive disabilities may benefit from being enrolled in a school tailored to their specific needs.

Understanding the risk and support levels of different environments can help parents and children make informed decisions about where to spend time and how to prepare for potentially challenging situations.