

# Module 10: When your child is the bully



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Discovering that your child is engaging in bullying behavior can be a challenging and emotional experience for any parent. This module aims to help you understand why children may bully others, recognize the signs of bullying behavior, and develop effective strategies to address these issues constructively.

# Understanding Why Children Bully: Individual Factors

Bullying behavior rarely emerges without underlying causes. Research has identified several individual factors that may contribute to a child's tendency to bully others. By understanding these factors, parents can better address the root causes rather than just the symptoms.

## Attention-Seeking Behavior

Interestingly, many adolescents who bully others don't consider themselves bullies. Research by Shu (2024) found that teens with high attention-seeking tendencies are more likely to see themselves as victims. This suggests that addressing specific problematic behaviors rather than labeling a child as a "bully" may be more effective.

The exact mechanism connecting attention-seeking to bullying isn't fully understood, but researchers theorize that the desire for popularity (Caravita & Cillessen, 2012) and social status (Houghton, 2012) among peers plays a significant role. For adolescents, their reputation among peers holds tremendous importance.

## Personality Traits

Research indicates that certain personality traits correlate with bullying behavior. Specifically, **low levels of agreeableness and conscientiousness and higher levels of neuroticism and extraversion** have been linked to bullying tendencies (Mitsopoulou & Giovazolias, 2015). Additionally, bullies often demonstrate lower levels of both cognitive and affective empathy—meaning they struggle to understand others' perspectives both intellectually and emotionally.

While personality forms from childhood through young adulthood, certain tendencies can be moderated through consistent guidance. For instance, **impulsivity**—a common trait among bullies—can be addressed by teaching children to extend the time between impulse and action (known as latency).

Understanding these individual factors doesn't excuse bullying behavior, but it provides valuable insight into how parents can help their children develop healthier social skills and emotional regulation. By addressing these underlying issues, parents can help their children find more constructive ways to gain attention, status, and social connection.

# Practical Strategies for Addressing Attention-Seeking Behavior

When a child engages in bullying to seek attention or gain social status, parents can implement specific strategies to help redirect these tendencies toward more positive behaviors. These approaches focus on helping teens find healthier ways to gain recognition and build their social standing.



## **Nurture Talents and Interests**

Help your teen identify and develop their natural talents and interests, whether in academics, sports, music, or arts. Excelling in specific areas can enhance their confidence and social standing naturally. Being part of a team or group activity fosters friendships and provides opportunities to connect with peers in positive ways.



## **Encourage Leadership Roles**

Support your teen in taking on leadership positions such as student council representative, club president, or team captain. These roles can elevate their visibility and respect among peers while teaching valuable skills like responsibility and cooperation.



## **Promote Community Involvement**

Help your teen discover activities they enjoy outside of school, such as volunteering or community service. These experiences can enhance their confidence, expand their social network, and provide a sense of purpose and accomplishment beyond the school environment.

Additionally, parents should focus on teaching empathy and social skills. Encourage your teen to consider others' perspectives and practice kindness, which can make them more approachable and respected. Help them learn to resolve disagreements calmly and assertively without escalating conflicts.

It's also important to discuss the difference between being well-liked for positive qualities versus seeking popularity for superficial reasons. Teach your teen how to assert themselves and resist negative peer pressure while maintaining respect for others.

Perhaps most importantly, model these skills in your family interactions. Demonstrate assertive communication and conflict resolution at home so your teen has positive examples to follow. Spend quality time with your teen, show genuine interest in their life, and celebrate their efforts and successes, no matter how small. Often, we find ourselves paying attention to our children primarily when problems arise, but recognizing their positive behaviors is equally crucial.

# Addressing Personality Traits Associated with Bullying

While personality traits develop over time and may be difficult to change completely, parents can help moderate certain tendencies that contribute to bullying behavior. Two key traits often associated with bullying are impulsivity and low agreeableness.

## Tackling Impulsivity

Impulsivity—acting without considering consequences—is common among children who bully. Parents can help extend the "latency" (the time between impulse and action) through these strategies:

- Teach emotional awareness using tools like emotion wheels to help teens connect feelings to actions
- Introduce the "Pause and think" technique—encourage a 10-second pause before reacting in emotionally charged situations
- Practice brainstorming multiple solutions to problems before acting
- Teach calming techniques like deep breathing (inhale for 4 counts, hold for 4, exhale for 6)
- Encourage regular physical activity to channel energy constructively
- Model thoughtful decision-making by narrating your own thought process during challenging situations

## Addressing Low Agreeableness

Children with low agreeableness may lie, be uncooperative, show aggression, and disrespect rules. This often accompanies a lack of empathy. Parents can help by:

- Focusing on the behavior, not the person: "That was a hurtful thing to say" instead of "You're always mean"
- Ensuring the teen experiences appropriate consequences for negative behavior
- Teaching the importance of sincere apologies and making amends
- Reinforcing attempts to follow rules or show politeness
- Discussing situations that trigger disagreeable behavior and developing strategies for handling them
- Teaching the difference between aggressive and assertive communication through role-playing

Remember that these approaches require consistency and patience. Small improvements should be recognized and celebrated, as changing established behavioral patterns takes time. The goal isn't to completely transform your child's personality but to help them develop more constructive ways of interacting with others.

# Environmental Factors and Role Modeling

External influences significantly shape how children and teenagers behave. Parents serve as the primary role models, making their responsibility substantial in preventing bullying behavior. Teaching children to make long-term efforts, be fair, and show kindness should include the parent's own example.



## Demonstrating Hard Work

Show your children how your accomplishments, like the home you've built together, came through sustained effort. This encourages children to value delayed gratification instead of seeking quick rewards like the power gained through bullying.



## Valuing Connections

Demonstrate how meaningful relationships with others help build the future you want. When children see how people help each other through strong connections, they learn the value of positive social interactions.



## Modeling Healthy Coping

Children learn to handle emotions by watching adults. Taking time to breathe when anger arises shows children effective ways to manage inevitable stressors. Let them observe how you handle your own emotions constructively.

Role models extend beyond family to include social circles and characters from media. Pay attention to your child's interests to identify positive role models from whom specific traits can be promoted. For example, if your child enjoys a video game with a brave protagonist who stands up for others, you can highlight these positive qualities and encourage your child to emulate them.

Environmental factors also include the broader social context. Schools can play a crucial role by organizing constructive activities that allow children to exert power and gain status in healthy ways. Competitive sports, academic competitions, and leadership opportunities provide alternatives to bullying for children seeking recognition.

**Activity:** In the next week, write down 2-3 tips you've learned from this lesson and practice them with your teenager. Keep a record of how things evolve and how they react to these approaches.

# Recognizing Signs Your Child May Be Bullying Others

While teachers may report bullying behavior at school, parents should be alert to early warning signs at home. Detecting these behaviors early allows for timely intervention before patterns become entrenched.

## Increased Aggression at Home

Home aggression often precedes aggression in other environments. Watch for:

- Screaming or inappropriately raising their voice
- Physical displays of aggression (throwing objects, pushing siblings, hitting objects or people)
- Disproportionate reactions to minor frustrations

While frustration itself is normal, the intensity of the response may indicate a problem. For example, if one sibling takes your teen's phone, it's natural to feel frustrated, but resorting to aggression or holding grudges suggests poor emotion regulation.

## Conflicts at School and Need to Dominate

Teachers will typically report serious bullying incidents, but parents should also be alert to:

- Frequent conflicts with peers reported by teachers or other parents
- A strong need to dominate others, including family members
- Dismissive attitudes toward others' feelings or rights
- Blaming others for conflicts without acknowledging their own role

To detect these tendencies, ask your teen to narrate events in detail, "as if they were a video camera that recorded the incident." This objective narrative helps parents determine whether the teenager engages in victimization and fails to recognize their contribution to conflicts.

Other warning signs may include possessing unexplained extra money or items, having friends who bully others, becoming increasingly aggressive or competitive, showing little empathy for others, or refusing to accept responsibility for their actions. If you notice these behaviors, it's important to address them promptly through open, non-judgmental conversations.

Remember that early intervention is key. The sooner you recognize and address bullying behaviors, the easier it will be to help your child develop healthier social skills and relationships.



# Dealing with Parental Denial of Bullying Behavior

When confronted with evidence that their child is bullying others, some parents' first reaction is denial. This response is understandable—parents may genuinely believe their child is innocent or want to protect them from negative consequences. However, denial can prevent necessary intervention and growth.

## Why Parents Deny Bullying Behavior

Parents may deny their child's bullying for several reasons:

- Fear of judgment from other parents or teachers
- Concern about their child being negatively labeled
- Worry about their own image as parents
- Desire to protect their child from harsh consequences
- Difficulty reconciling the behavior with their view of their child

While denial may temporarily shield a child from being labeled a "bully" and potentially harsh punishment, it ultimately prevents them from addressing and correcting problematic behaviors at a critical developmental stage.

## Consequences of Denial

Ignoring bullying behaviors can lead to:

- Escalation of harmful behaviors
- Missed opportunities for emotional and social growth
- Failure to address underlying issues
- Potential legal consequences as the teen approaches adulthood
- Continued harm to victims

## Accept That Good Children Can Make Mistakes

Understand that bullying behavior doesn't define your child's entire character. Even good children can make poor choices.

## Listen to Others' Concerns

When teachers, peers, or other parents raise concerns, listen openly rather than immediately rejecting their observations. Work collaboratively to understand the context.

## Reframe Your Thinking

Ask yourself, "If this were true, how could I help my child grow?" rather than, "How could my child do this?"

# Overcoming Parental Self-Blame

On the opposite end of the spectrum from denial, some parents may accept their child's bullying behavior but then fall into excessive self-blame. While it's natural to question your parenting when your child exhibits problematic behaviors, overwhelming guilt can be counterproductive and prevent effective intervention.

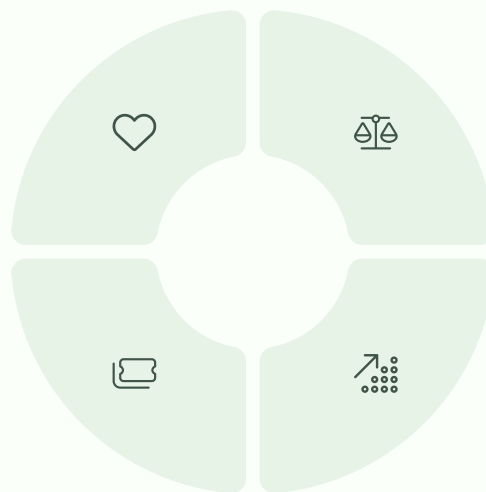
## Separate Behavior from Identity

Accept that your child's bullying behavior doesn't mean you're a bad parent.

It's a behavior that can be addressed and corrected, not a permanent reflection on you or your child.

## Seek Support

Reach out to other parents, school counselors, or professionals for guidance and reassurance. If self-blame becomes overwhelming, consider working with a therapist who can help you process these feelings.



## Acknowledge Imperfection

Remind yourself that no parent is perfect. Focus on what you can do now rather than dwelling on past decisions or perceived failures.

## Focus on Improvement

Acknowledge areas where your parenting could improve without falling into guilt. For example, say, "I want to work on helping you handle emotions better," rather than, "This is my fault."

When addressing your child's bullying behavior, it's important to validate their feelings while still holding them accountable for their actions. For example, you might say, "I understand you felt frustrated, but hitting someone is not okay." This approach acknowledges the emotion behind the behavior while clearly establishing boundaries.

Working collaboratively with your child, their school, and possibly a counselor to create a structured plan for addressing bullying behavior can be highly effective. This plan should include clear expectations, consistent consequences for unacceptable behaviors, and positive reinforcement for improvements.

By shifting focus from self-blame to constructive action, parents can create a supportive environment where their child feels empowered to change. Remember that acknowledging the issue and taking steps to address it demonstrates responsible parenting, not failure. Your willingness to face the problem directly and seek solutions is a strength, not a weakness.



# Teaching Emotional Regulation to Prevent Bullying

Many bullying behaviors stem from poor emotional regulation—the ability to manage and respond to emotional experiences in a socially appropriate way. By helping your teen develop stronger emotional regulation skills, you can address a root cause of bullying behavior.



## Identify Emotions

Help your teen recognize and name their emotions. Use tools like emotion wheels to expand their emotional vocabulary beyond basic feelings like "mad" or "sad." Ask questions like "How were you feeling when that happened?" to connect emotions to actions.



## Create Space Between Feeling and Action

Teach your teen to pause before reacting to strong emotions. The "10-second rule" can help—take 10 seconds to breathe deeply before responding to an emotionally charged situation. This increases the latency between impulse and action.



## Consider Alternatives

Encourage your teen to think of multiple ways to respond to a situation. Ask "What are three different ways you could handle this?" and discuss the potential outcomes of each approach to develop critical thinking about choices.



## Practice Calming Techniques

Teach specific techniques for managing strong emotions, such as deep breathing (inhale for 4 counts, hold for 4, exhale for 6), progressive muscle relaxation, or visualization. Regular practice makes these tools more accessible during emotional moments.

Physical activity can be particularly effective for teens who struggle with emotional regulation. Regular exercise helps release tension, improve mood, and increase focus. Encourage your teen to find physical activities they enjoy, whether team sports, individual activities like running or swimming, or even dance or martial arts.

Modeling emotional regulation is perhaps the most powerful teaching tool. When you experience strong emotions, narrate your thought process: "I'm feeling frustrated right now, so I'm going to take a few deep breaths before responding." This shows your teen that everyone experiences difficult emotions and provides a real-world example of healthy coping.

For teens who struggle significantly with emotional regulation, professional support from a therapist or counselor may be beneficial. These professionals can provide specialized strategies tailored to your teen's specific needs and challenges.

# Developing Empathy to Combat Bullying Tendencies

Research shows that bullies often demonstrate lower levels of both cognitive and affective empathy. Cognitive empathy involves understanding another person's perspective intellectually, while affective empathy involves actually feeling what another person feels. Developing both types of empathy can significantly reduce bullying behavior.

## Understanding Empathy Deficits

Children who bully others may struggle to:

- Recognize the emotional impact of their actions on others
- Understand how others might feel in certain situations
- Connect others' emotional responses to their own behavior
- Care about the suffering they cause

These deficits can stem from various factors, including modeling at home, peer influences, or even neurological differences. Regardless of the cause, empathy can be developed through consistent practice and guidance.



Using media like movies and books can help teens develop empathy by discussing characters' emotions and perspectives.



## Perspective-Taking Exercises

Regularly ask your teen to consider situations from others' viewpoints. When conflicts arise, ask questions like "How do you think they felt when that happened?" or "What might be going on in their life that caused them to react that way?" These questions promote cognitive empathy.



## Literature and Media

Books, movies, and TV shows can be powerful tools for developing empathy. Discuss characters' emotions, motivations, and experiences with your teen. Ask how they might feel in similar situations and what they would do differently.



## Service Learning

Volunteering with different populations can help teens develop empathy by exposing them to diverse experiences and challenges.

# Creating a Comprehensive Intervention Plan

Addressing bullying behavior effectively requires a coordinated approach involving parents, school personnel, and sometimes professional counselors. A comprehensive intervention plan addresses both the bullying behaviors and their underlying causes while providing clear expectations and consequences.

## **Assessment**

**1**

Gather information about the bullying incidents, including frequency, severity, targets, and contexts. Speak with teachers, witnesses, and your child to understand the full picture. Consider whether there are underlying issues like social skills deficits, emotional regulation problems, or environmental factors contributing to the behavior.

**2**

## **Collaboration**

Meet with school personnel, including teachers, counselors, and administrators, to develop a consistent approach across environments. Share relevant information about your child's needs and challenges while maintaining appropriate privacy. Establish regular communication channels to monitor progress.

**3**

## **Clear Expectations**

Develop explicit behavioral expectations with your child. Be specific about what constitutes bullying and what alternative behaviors are expected. Frame expectations positively when possible: "Speak respectfully to classmates" rather than "Don't insult people." Ensure your child understands these expectations.

**4**

## **Consistent Consequences**

Establish clear, consistent consequences for bullying behavior. These should be proportional to the behavior and focused on learning rather than punishment alone. Natural consequences that relate to the behavior are often most effective. For example, if your child damages someone's property, they should repair or replace it.

**5**

## **Skill Development**

Identify and address skill deficits contributing to bullying behavior. This might include social skills training, emotional regulation techniques, conflict resolution strategies, or empathy development. Provide opportunities to practice these skills in safe, supportive environments.

# Moving Forward: Supporting Long-Term Positive Change

Addressing bullying behavior is not just about stopping negative actions—it's about fostering positive development and healthy relationships for the long term. As your child makes progress, continue to support their growth with these strategies for sustainable change.

Maintain open communication with your child about their social interactions and emotional experiences. Create regular opportunities for check-ins where they can discuss challenges and successes without fear of judgment. Listen actively and validate their feelings while continuing to reinforce expectations for behavior.

Continue to strengthen your child's emotional intelligence by helping them identify and manage their emotions effectively. Praise their efforts to use healthy coping strategies and make responsible choices. Recognize that setbacks may occur and use these as learning opportunities rather than reasons for punishment.

## Building Positive Identity

Help your child develop a positive self-concept that isn't tied to dominating others. Encourage activities where they can experience success and recognition through constructive achievements. Support their involvement in prosocial groups and activities that align with their interests and values.

Emphasize that their past behavior doesn't define them. Reinforce the message that everyone makes mistakes, and what matters is how we learn and grow from them. Help them see themselves as capable of positive change and worthy of healthy relationships.

## Maintaining Progress

As your child shows improvement, gradually reduce the intensity of interventions while maintaining clear expectations. Continue to monitor their behavior and provide support during challenging situations or transitions, which can be triggers for regression.

Stay connected with school personnel and other adults in your child's life to ensure consistency across environments. Share strategies that have been effective and work together to address any new concerns that arise.

Consider periodic "booster sessions" with counselors or therapists if your child has received professional support, especially during times of stress or transition.

Remember that your relationship with your child is the foundation for all intervention efforts. Continue to strengthen your bond through positive interactions, shared activities, and unconditional love. Demonstrate through your words and actions that while you don't approve of bullying behavior, you always value and support your child as a person.