7 steps to STOP Bullying

by JUNE HUNT

www.HopeForTheHeart.org
The most comprehensive nationwide study of bullying ever conducted—involving more than 15,000 students in grades 6 through 10—found that over 24% of the students reported to have been bullied during the school year. In addition, 8% had been bullied at least once a week.¹

What can concerned parents, youth workers, and educators do to turn the bullying tide? Here are seven steps to get started.

**STEP 1: EDUCATE YOURSELF AND OTHERS.**

- **Raise awareness about bullying . . . before it becomes a problem at home or in the classroom.**
  - Understand that bullying is any deliberate, hostile physical, psychological, or verbal activity intended to harm, induce fear, and create terror.² Typically, bullying is not a onetime act, but rather repeated harassment involving an imbalance of power.³
  - Help kids understand what to do if they see bullying happening:
    1. First, choosing to disengage, walking away, or ignoring bullying that you know about in your school or peer group implicates you in the wrongdoing.
    2. Second, speak out clearly with courage and civility against any bullying activity.
    3. Third, remain vigilant. Be prepared to stand up for yourself or others who become the targets of bullying. More than 55% of bullying situations stop when a peer intervenes.⁴
  - Help kids by saying . . . “Don’t excuse yourself by saying, ‘Look, we didn’t know.’ For God understands all hearts, and he sees you” (Proverbs 24:12 NLT).

- **Role play various situations in which kids practice intervening. Have them practice saying things like:**
  - “Stop hitting her! Don’t treat her that way!”
  - “Stop making fun of him! That’s wrong!”
  - “Stop it! I’m going to tell (name of authority). I’m going to call them right now.”

In the role play, practice immediately how to respond to difficult, bullying situations. Proverbs 10:11 says . . . “The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life, but the mouth of the wicked conceals violence.”
• Be proactive by training children to successfully deal with difficult people or challenging relationships. 
  
  Teach children . . .

  — How to work out their differences through calm and reasoned communication rather than physical confrontation. Train them to:
    1. Explain their own thoughts, feelings, and perspectives
    2. Ask questions to reveal and understand another’s thought process and situation
    3. Empathize with the perspective and position of those different from themselves

  — How to break patterns of gossip, meanness, cliques, and aggression. Train children to:
    1. Stop comparing themselves to others
    2. Include and accept those who may be “different” or marginalized
    3. Recognize that our unique qualities help us stand out from the crowd and develop our identity

  — How increased freedom is attached to additional responsibility. Teach them . . . “Discretion will protect you, and understanding will guard you” (Proverbs 2:11).

STEP 2: REALIZE BULLYING CAN’T BE RESOLVED BY CONVENTIONAL MEANS.  

• By definition, bullying involves an ongoing abusive relationship of unequal power, therefore children and teens are not normally equipped to resolve this type of abusive cycle.

  — Traditional conflict resolution is designed to address conflict in which power is roughly equal.

  — Attempting to use traditional methods to resolve bullying could subject the bullied child to further victimization.

• Mediation and traditional counseling generally find some portion of fault with each party.

  — In a bullying situation, all blame must be assigned to the bully.

  — A bullied child should not be asked or be expected to accept responsibility for receiving abuse.

• Most mediators are trained to avoid taking a moral position on the issues they confront. Thus it’s critical for involved adults to articulate the wrongness of bullying. Especially since . . . “The proud and arrogant person—‘Mocker’ is his name—behaves with insolent fury” (Proverbs 21:24).
• Traditional abuse programs may assign too much responsibility for the students to resolve.
  — Bullying involves complex behavioral dynamics that can be tricky even for trained adults to handle. Relying on
  traditional conflict resolution methods may lead adults to conclude wrongly that their involvement is not necessary.
  — Students are not equipped to handle harassment and abuse alone. A support network of parents, school
    officials, and peers is necessary to overcome an established bullying culture.

• Therefore seek counsel from those who have an expertise in effectively working with bullies . . . “The heart
  of the discerning acquires knowledge, for the ears of the wise seek it out” (Proverbs 18:15).

STEP 3: RECOGNIZE THE SIGNS OF BULLIES . . . AND THOSE WHO ARE BEING BULLIED.

• Signs that a young person is being bullied:⁶
  — Wanting to miss school persistently or urgently
  — Withdrawing from social activities
  — Eating too little or too much
  — Experiencing general anxiety, fear, and/or depression
  — Engaging in extreme self-destructive behaviors
  — Drawing disturbing pictures or images
  — Receiving threatening e-mails
  — Feeling ashamed of race, religion, ethnicity, language, or other perceived “differences” from peers

Inwardly, these children cry out . . . “My spirit is broken . . . Surely mockers surround me; my eyes must dwell
on their hostility” (Job 17:1–2).

• Signs that a young person is a bully:⁷
  — Exhibiting overly aggressive attitudes and actions
  — Wearing clothing or hats that indicate affiliation with a gang or clique
  — Frequenting websites that promote violence, supremacy, or aggression
  — Drawing disturbing pictures or images
  — Initiating menacing phone calls, e-mails, text messages, and social media activity
  — Lacking age-appropriate empathy

Proverbs 14:8 warns . . . “The wisdom of the prudent is to give thought to their ways, but the folly of fools is deception.”
STEP 4: UNDERSTAND THE LEGITIMATE, GOD-GIVEN NEEDS THAT BULLIES ARE TRYING TO MEET . . . ILLEGITIMATELY.

- We are all born with three God-given inner needs: for love, significance, and security. However, bullies are seeking to meet one or more of these needs through illegitimate means.

- We must realize that, by God’s divine design, only He can meet our deepest inner needs.

- We need to introduce bullies to the ultimate Need-Meeter, Jesus Christ, and encourage them to trust Him to meet all of their needs. Philippians 4:19 explains . . . “My God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.”

STEP 5: HOLD KIDS ACCOUNTABLE FOR BULLYING.

As an educator . . .

- Take warning signs of bullying seriously. Don’t rationalize that “kids will be kids—they will outgrow it.” If there are escalating symptoms, devote focused attention to the problem before it gets worse.
  - Investigate allegations thoroughly and with sensitivity.
  - Insist on protecting the identity of those who reported the bullying so as to minimize the possibility of retaliation.
  - Involve parents and other appropriate authorities (teachers and administrators if the bullying is happening at school; local authorities if the activity has broader implications).
  - Meet with parents of the child who is being bullied.

The biblical book of wisdom says . . . “The prudent see danger and take refuge, but the simple keep going and pay the penalty” (Proverbs 27:12).

- Plan what you are going to say, then enforce repercussions.
  - Contact the parent before a confrontation.
  - Confront the child in private with their parents.
  - Calmly state your concerns.
  - Communicate repercussions that are specific, immediate, and relevant to the offense. . . . “For these are rebellious people, deceitful children, children unwilling to listen to the Lord’s instruction” (Isaiah 30:9).
As the parent of a bully . . .

- Make the heart of the child your highest priority by creating a plan of redemption. You can’t dictate the condition of a child’s heart, but if there is sincere remorse with a repentant heart, a plan of redemption can include offering restitution to those who have been bullied.10
  - Plan a meeting between the bully, the injured party, their parents, and yourself. In some cases, a face-to-face meeting may offer the bullying child an opportunity to develop sensitivity and empathy.
  - Plan how to reward positive attitudes and actions with words of praise, appreciation, and encouragement. When appropriate, extend increased trust.
  - Plan with the child a way to make amends and demonstrate kindness for those who have been harmed.
  - If prudent, plan a project for your child and their victim to complete under the direction of a mentor.
  - Pray that God will turn the child’s heart toward Him and others. Philippians 2:4 says . . . “not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.”

- Take specific actions to foster accountability and maturity.
  - Communicate that you strongly reject bullying behavior . . . but not the child.
  - Ensure that strict accountability is in place.
    1. Speak with a teacher and ask them to be on the lookout for any forms of bullying.
    2. Do not minimize, marginalize, or make excuses for bullying behavior.
    3. Talk to your child about appropriate ways to behave with others and why it is important.
    4. Adult presence and enforcement will be paramount to maintaining boundaries.
  - Consider professional intervention by a trained therapist if bullying has become a pattern. (Depending on severity and persistence, this may be appropriate for preteens as well.)
  - Share encouragement from Proverbs 13:18 with your teen: “Whoever disregards discipline comes to poverty and shame, but whoever heeds correction is honored.”

**STEP 6: BECOME FAMILIAR WITH CYBERBULLYING.**

- Cyberbullying occurs when electronic means—e-mail, texts, social media, etc.—are used intentionally to harass, intimidate, shame, and hurt others.
  - The digital world provides cyberbullies a ubiquitous tool for spreading hurtful messages quickly and almost effortlessly . . . reaching a multiplied audience each time the message is shared.
  - Unlike school bullying, children can’t go home to “get away” from the harassment of cyberbullying.
• Use parental controls, filtering software, and/or online tracking programs to monitor a child’s online habits. Teach children: “Wisdom will save you from evil people [bullies], from those whose words are twisted” (Proverbs 2:12 NLT).

• Report instances of cyberbullying to appropriate authorities—those related to both the perpetrator and the victim. This might include parents, teachers or administrators (if the bullying involves classmates), church workers (if the bullying involves church peers), and, in serious cases where warranted, law enforcement authorities.
  
  — Most online service providers have a policy against using their service to bully. Review your provider’s “Terms of Service” agreement and explain it to your child in simple terms. If the terms were violated, report the violation to the service provider.
  
  — If your child is caught being a cyberbully, restrict access to all electronic tools. Let the child know that online access is a privilege, not a right.
  
  — If your child needs Internet access for homework, let him know you’ll be monitoring his activity closely.
  
  — Become involved in your child’s online community to monitor their use of digital tools and ensure they are behaving responsibly . . . “Even a child makes himself known by his acts, by whether his conduct is pure and upright” (Proverbs 20:11).

STEP 7: “MODEL KINDNESS AND CONSIDERATION, EXPRESS UNCONDITIONAL LOVE, AND LISTEN ATTENTIVELY.”

• Realize that all bullies have, themselves, been bullied. However, that doesn’t mean that children who are bullied will “automatically” become bullies.

  — A safe home environment where the love of Christ is the rule—not the exception—is not an environment that is likely to foster a bully . . . “The eyes of the LORD are everywhere, keeping watch on the wicked and the good” (Proverbs 15:3).

  — Listen carefully to children and give them an opportunity to debrief after being away from your care at school.

  — Much has to do with their support network, their temperament, the enforcement of effective rewards and repercussions surrounding objectionable behavior, and the modeling they see at home. Take to heart these vital words regarding child rearing: “No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it” (Hebrews 12:11).
• Help children learn appropriate measures for self-defense . . . and when it is wise to use them.

— While the cry of their heart should be . . . “Rescue me, Lord, from evildoers; protect me from the violent, who devise evil plans in their hearts and stir up war every day” (Psalm 140:1–2), this does not preclude employing self-defense when it is warranted.

— Pay attention to body language that communicates far more than words.

— Teach and model the wisdom of Proverbs 9:12 . . . “If you are wise, your wisdom will reward you; if you are a mocker, you alone will suffer.”

For more information on Hope For The Heart’s ministry and resources, go to www.HopeForTheHeart.org or call 1–800–488–HOPE(4673)

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7. See also Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, “Warning Signs of Bullying,” http://www.violencepreventionworks.org/public/bullying_warning_signs.page.


9. For this section see Hunt with Capehart, *Bonding with Your Teen through Boundaries*, 121.

10. For this section see Hunt with Capehart, *Bonding with Your Teen through Boundaries*, 122.