

# Emerging Minds Families

## FACT SHEET

# Understanding your child's experience of bullying

### Definition

Emerging Minds acknowledges that families come in many forms. For the purposes of easy reading, the term 'parent' encompasses the biological, adoptive, foster and kinship carers of a child, as well as individuals who have chosen to take up primary or shared responsibility in raising that child.

If your child has told you they're experiencing bullying, or you've noticed signs of bullying and think they might be, it's important to talk about it with them as soon as possible.

Before you do: take a moment to check your own reactions and feelings – it's important that you're calm and ready to support your child before talking with them. You may want to read the guidance in [Finding out your child is experiencing or engaging in bullying](#) if you haven't already.

Resist the temptation to leap into problem-solving mode – that's the next step. In this first conversation with your child your aim is to find out:

- exactly what happened or is going on; and
- what your child is thinking and feeling.



To do this you will need to:

- understand what children who have experienced bullying need from the adults in their life
- get the facts – use open-ended questions and actively listen
- confirm you understand and validate your child's feelings; and
- help your child understand bullying behaviour and make sense of their experience.

### What children need

Many children find it hard to tell parents about their bullying experience, usually because they:

- feel ashamed
- don't want to worry their parent
- are afraid of being told off; or
- are concerned their parent may overreact and make the situation worse.

Children tell us that they need adults to listen, understand and not judge them.

Children want adults to be kind and supportive so that they feel safe and comfortable talking about their experience of bullying and how they feel. It's important that you confirm you understand and show

you're taking it seriously – but also don't move too quickly. Silences are OK. If you don't fill every gap in the conversation it gives them space to think and to talk more freely. You can even acknowledge it by saying something like 'I'm here to listen, it's OK to take time to think.'

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**Sometimes you want to talk about it, but you want them (adults) to be completely on your side. Sometimes parents are trying to find a solution straight away, whereas sometimes you just want to talk about it – and then just go to your room [and] lie down.**

LARA, AGE 12

**Not all kids are telling you stuff because they want you to go and talk to the teacher. And often, that is the fear and why they don't talk to their parents, is because they're worried they'll just go down to the school and make a fuss. And I think that that doesn't really solve anything. It shows that the bigger person can push their power around, and that's not what we are trying to teach our kids.**

VANYA, MUM OF TWO

Make sure you get a full understanding of what's happening and what your child needs before you start to problem-solve together. If you leap into action at the first mention of bullying your child might shut down and not tell you if it continues or gets worse. Instead, make time to listen to your child and be led by them.

## Get the facts

To find out exactly what has happened or is happening to your child and how it has impacted on them:

- Stay calm. When you're calm it helps your child to feel safe, be open and express whatever they're feeling.
- Park any assumptions about what might have happened or why. Be curious and non-judgemental.
- Ask open-ended questions that can't be answered with a 'yes' or 'no' – see the following examples.

- Practice active listening and limit distractions. Give your child your full attention and tune in to what they're saying and feeling. Put your phone – and theirs if they have one – on silent or out of sight.
- Be aware that they might not be telling you all the details of the bullying.

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**Stay engaged and listen ... because they might not say everything that's happening because they might be embarrassed or scared. They start believing that these things [that other kids say] are true about themselves. You've got to listen to them, but you've got to read in between the lines. Because what they're telling you is probably only half of what's really going on.**

SARAH, MUM OF THREE

Children often don't tell parents everything when it comes to bullying because they may be embarrassed, scared or worried about how their parents will respond. Gently asking questions like those following can help you get the full picture.



## What to ask

You don't have to ask all these questions or in this order. Choose those that feel right to you, depending on your child, their age, their bullying experience and what you already know.

### About the bullying

- 'Can you tell me exactly what has been happening?'
- 'What did the person doing the bullying do or say exactly?'
- 'What did you do when that happened?'
- 'When did it start?'
- 'Is it still happening? Is it getting worse?'

### About what they're thinking and feeling

- 'Why do you think it started?' Or you could ask something like: 'Do you have any guesses about why these kids are picking on you?'
- 'How does it make you feel?'

Your child's answers to these questions can help you understand what's going on – but also if they're thinking that the bullying is their fault or is happening because there's something wrong with them. This is really important to know so you help them make sense of this experience and address any self-blame.

Remember that young children need your help to understand and talk about their emotions. They might not fully comprehend what they're feeling, or have the words to communicate it and you may need to name it for them. For example, 'You seem really mad. I bet it hurts when you get pushed over.'

### About how they've responded

- 'How did other people around you react when it happened?'
- 'Did you tell anyone? What did they do?'
- 'Has it made you change anything – like what you do, where you go at school or the people you hang out with?'
- 'What have you already tried to get them to stop? Did that help? What were you hoping that would do?'

Your child's answers to these questions will help you understand what aspects of the bullying have been most distressing for them and any strategies they've tried to avoid or cope with the bullying behaviour.

## Confirm understanding and validate emotions

When you pay close attention to what your child is saying, they will be reassured you're listening and support them.

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**Just let them know that you're there for them. And support them through whatever they're going through and be very understanding.**

MIA, AGE 12

Here are some ways to show you understand what your child has told you and how they're feeling about it.

- **Summarise what you've heard.** Say something like 'What I'm hearing is that ...'. This also gives your child a chance to add any information or correct you if you've misunderstood something.
- **Allow them to 'let it all out'.** Often children will cry or get angry when talking about their bullying experience. As you might know yourself, these can be ways we release stress from built up tension. Think about what your child has been through and might've been keeping inside. Holding or hugging them while they cry or just listening while they vent helps children feel safe and supported.
- **Validate whatever they're feeling.** Tell them it's perfectly OK to feel whatever they're feeling and thank them for helping you understand it better. Even if it turns out what they're experiencing isn't bullying the important thing is to validate the child's feelings and let them know they always have your support.
- **Don't try to 'fix' it.** It's natural to immediately want to do something to make the bullying stop especially if your child is upset or angry. Problem-solving together is the next step. At this time, the most important thing is for your child to feel heard, understood and cared for. You could say something like: 'Yeah, that sounds like it's been really difficult. Of course you feel upset.'

When you validate a child's emotions it teaches them that whatever they're feeling is OK, and that it's safe to express and talk about all types of emotions. It's natural to want to make everything better so your child is not sad or angry anymore, but it's important to let children build resilience and learn that they can navigate through or manage feelings that are unpleasant.

In these moments, the most important thing is for your child to feel heard, understood and cared for.

## Making sense of bullying

Children who experience bullying often think it's their fault or that they're being bullied because there's something wrong with them. This is called self-blame and it can have a negative effect on a child's mental health.

Helping your child understand why other children engage in bullying behaviour can change that thinking. It can help them realise that the bullying isn't about them personally – it's often about how the person doing the bullying is feeling.

Help your child to think about what might be behind the bullying behaviour. Depending on your child's age and the situation you could ask them questions like:

- 'Can you think of any reason why X might be bullying people?'
- 'What do you think X might be getting, or hoping to get, out of behaving like that?'
- 'Do you have any idea what's going on for them at home? Could they be struggling with a big change or some other difficulties?'
- 'Does X have trouble managing their behaviour around other people too?'

It can be hard for children to see things from someone else's point of view. It's natural for them to feel angry towards the person who has hurt them and you may be feeling that way too. It's not about excusing the bullying behaviour, but helping your child think about what could be driving it.

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Sometimes it was about helping her fill in some of the gaps. Like “Why do they keep bringing up the same stuff? What's missing for them? What do you think might be going on?”. It's about empathy. Helping her see it from somebody else's point of view is a huge skill that she's going to learn more as she gets older in her teens. But at (age) 11, that stuff is new and you're figuring it out.

JESS, MUM OF ONE

It can be reassuring for children to know that bullying, unfortunately, is something that many children experience. It helps them to understand 'This is not a you thing. This unfortunately happens to lots of kids.'

Make sure your child understands the bullying is not their fault and they don't have to put up with it. Let them know their school (or club or organisation) takes bullying seriously, and about any policy or process to deal with bullying behaviour.

### Immediate support and advice

If you are worried your child might harm themselves, [contact a mental health crisis service](#).



## What to do next

Once you have a better understanding of your child's bullying experience and they understand it's not their fault, reassure them that together you will [make a plan to address the bullying](#)

AVAILABLE HERE

**Making a plan with your child to address bullying**

