Preventing Bullying
A guide for parents
Dear Parents,
The stories told by young people we work with are harrowing, and their parents, too, have upsetting stories to relate. When a child is being bullied and no one seems to take effective action, it is frustrating and heartbreaking. And if it's your child who has been bullying others, you may be at your wits' end, worried about those being harmed, as well as your child's behaviour.

We have put together this brief guide to give you suggestions for helping your child. You can learn the signs of bullying, how to work with the school, and some practical and tested techniques to teach every child.

Please look on our website for more information. You can ring our Helpline if you need advice, and investigate our ZAP courses for bullied children, especially if you are worried about the effects bullying has had on your child. We can also help you if your child is bullying others.

Be bold and brave in your fight for what you know is right for your child.

Best wishes,

Claude Knights
Director
www.kidscape.org.uk

Note: We use the term 'targets' for those children being bullied, and 'bullies' for those children who are bullying others. We do not believe that children should be labelled or that they should think of themselves as victims - which sounds passive - but as the targets of bullies.
WHAT IS BULLYING?
Bullying is not always easy to define. We define it as:
• deliberate hostility and aggression
• directed at a target who may appear vulnerable
• an outcome which is painful and distressing to the target

Bullying can be:
• Physical: pushing, kicking, hitting, pinching, and any other forms of violence, threats ("give me your dinner money or you'll be sorry")
• Verbal: name-calling, sarcasm, spreading rumours
• Emotional: exclusion, isolation, tormenting (hiding books, threatening gestures), ridicule, humiliation
• Racist: racial taunts, graffiti, gestures
• Sexual: unwanted physical contact, verbal abuse
• Homophobic: physical or verbal abuse based on stereotyping sexual orientation, whether or not the target is gay
• Cyber bullying: using technology to bully-text, setting up abusive websites, posting photos, misusing social networking sites, sexting

Bullies can employ many types of bullying - they choose whatever works.

POSSIBLE RESULTS OF BULLYING
We know persistent bullying can result in:
• depression
• low self esteem that may last a lifetime
• shyness
• poor academic achievement
• isolation
• threatened or attempted suicide or self-harm

Bullying also damages bullies, who learn that they can get away with violence, and that aggression and threats can be an effective way to control people.

Kidscape carried out a survey of young offenders and found that many had been actively involved in bullying at school. Studies have found that adults who were bullies as children have a higher chance than others of acquiring a criminal record, tend to be aggressive, and have problems in maintaining relationships.
MYTHS ABOUT BULLYING

Friends and relatives may say some of the following things about bullying. They are well-meaning, but wrong!

“They’ll just have to learn to stand up to the bullies.” Children who tell about bullying have usually reached the end of their tether. If they could have dealt with the bullying, they would have. Asking for support is not weakness but an intelligent decision.

“Tell them to hit back - harder.” Bullies are often bigger than their victims, so the victim could get seriously hurt by ‘hitting back’. Parents tell us that when their children do hit back, they are often caught by a teacher and blamed unfairly.

“It’s character-building.” The sort of ‘character’ it builds is not the sort of character most parents want for their children. Bullying damages self esteem and certainly does not help either bullies or victims.

“Sticks and stones may break your bones but words can never hurt you.” Bruises left by blows fade, but the scars left by name-calling can last for ever. An 84 year old man told us: “I can remember every word those fiends said. I’ve been hearing their bullying jeers in my head all my life”.

Bullying is NEVER a good thing: it is always damaging, both for bullies and their targets.

WHY ARE SOME CHILDREN TARGETED?

Children become targets because bullies need victims. Our research shows bullies tend to ‘test’ their targets-to find a child who reacts by crying or running away or otherwise seems vulnerable. Bullies will find something to focus on, small or large: wearing glasses, red hair, being intelligent and getting good marks as well as struggling academically. Whatever it is, this so-called difference is just the excuse the bully needs or creates to ‘justify’ his or her behaviour.

Bullying is not the fault of targets. The bullies are responsible. However, we should recognise that some children may be particularly vulnerable to bullying because they may have specific difficulties, such as poor co-ordination or more serious needs. Usually school staff members are aware that these children may require extra help. One way forward is to prepare all the children by discussing such issues from the outset, thus avoiding problems.
SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

- If your child has some special educational needs, he or she may be bullied because other children don’t understand why a child might look or behave differently. Sometimes the bullying can be worse if a child’s special needs are not immediately apparent. It helps to talk to your child’s teacher about educating the other pupils.
- There is usually a support group which can help with information - you can share this with the teacher.
- Suggest that a member of the support group comes to talk to the class.
- Children can learn to help their peers, which is good for both.

POSSIBLE SIGNS OF BULLYING

Children may indicate by their behaviour that they are being bullied. If your child shows some of the following signs, ask if someone is bullying or threatening them.

Children may:
- be frightened of walking to or from school
- not want to go on the school bus
- be unwilling to go to school (or be school phobic)

- feel ill in the mornings
- truant
- suddenly do poorly in their school work
- be anxious about using their computers or mobile phones
- come home often with clothes or books destroyed
- come home hungry (bully has taken dinner money)
- be withdrawn, distressed, stop eating, lack confidence
- attempt or threaten suicide
- cry themselves to sleep; have nightmares
- have their possessions ‘go missing’
- ask for money or start stealing money (to pay the bully)
- refuse to say what’s wrong (too frightened of the bully)
- have unexplained bruises, scratches, cuts
- begin to bully other children or siblings
- become aggressive and unreasonable
- give improbable excuses to explain any of the above
HOW YOU CAN HELP YOUR CHILD

If you are worried that your child is being bullied, ask him or her directly. Children who are being bullied are often frightened to tell about what is happening, either because they have been threatened, or because they fear adult interference will make things worse. Be prepared for your child to deny that there is anything wrong. Encourage your child by saying that you are concerned and that you want to help and support him or her, whatever the problem, and that you can work together to solve this problem. Don't promise to keep the bullying secret, but reassure your child that you will help sort out the situation.

Take whatever your child says seriously and find out exactly what has been going on. This will certainly require talking to the teachers, perhaps the head of year, even the head of school. Visit our website for more advice. (www.kidscape.org.uk)

Some children may need more practice in talking or playing with other children; not all master this before entering school, and an inability to blend in can set up a child for bullying. ‘Bully-proof’ your child by emphasising a positive outlook, a good stance and eye contact, a smile, taking turns, sharing. Help develop their social skills by role-playing with them.

SUPPORTING A BULLIED CHILD

Bullying has been compared to brainwashing, with the targets ending up believing that somehow they deserve to be bullied. They feel vulnerable and powerless. Their self-esteem may have been considerably damaged, especially if the bullying has been going on for some time, and rebuilding a child's self-confidence takes plenty of praise and affection.

• Reassure your child often by emphasising your love and that you are 100% on his or her side

• Reassure children that the bullying is not their fault, and can be stopped

• Explain that reacting to bullies by becoming upset only encourages them. If bullies get no response, they'll get bored. We know staying calm isn't easy!

• Practise saying “No” very firmly and walking away from a bully. It is hard for the bully to go on bullying if the target appears not to be upset. Other techniques that work can be found in the ‘Saying No’ section later.

• Help your child think up simple, neutral responses to the bully’s most frequent taunts. Responses don't have to be brilliantly witty or funny, but children on our ZAP assertiveness training courses say that it helps to have a reply prepared

• Try to minimise opportunities for bullying: tell your child, don’t take valuable possessions to school, don’t be the last person in the
changing room. Stay with a group even if they are not friends - there’s safety in numbers.

- If the bully threatens your child to get money or possessions and there is no safe way out of the situation, tell your child to give up whatever it is the bully wants. Keeping safe is more important than keeping possessions.
- Make time to sit down and talk - about your child’s ideas, feelings, solutions.
- Make opportunities for your child to do well; for example, plan activities your child is interested in and good at.
- Give them responsibilities - this helps to make a child feel valued and important.
- They can make a ‘feel good’ poster: find a happy photograph of your child and stick it in the centre of a piece of paper. Around it, work together to write down some of the nice things people have said about your child.
- Sometimes bullied children become withdrawn - help them develop social skills: invite others round and arrange outings.
- Try not to let your child sit around moping - diversions can help. Encourage work on a hobby or a sport.
- Sign up for Scouts, Guides or martial arts, drama, music and other courses outside of school to increase the possibility of making new friends.
- Don’t discuss your own distress and anger in front of your child. Your calm will help them stay calm. And many children fear upsetting their families.

What am I good at?
WHY DO SOME CHILDREN BULLY OTHERS?

There are lots of different reasons why a child may become a bully. Some children may turn to bullying as a way of coping with a difficult situation: the death of a relative, their parents' divorce. Some are used to bullying to get their own way, often in a family where everyone bullies; some are abused and take out their humiliation and anger on others; some want to be 'top dog' and are prepared to use aggression and violence to command obedience and loyalty.

Whatever the causes of the bullying, bullies pick on others as a way of making life better for themselves. They use intimidation to get what they want. They are often not happy and use bullying as a way of trying to achieve popularity and friends. True, bullies often have a gang, but many of their followers are frightened of being targeted too. They are frightened people, not friends.

Bullies have to learn that bullying is unacceptable and that, if they continue to behave unacceptably, then there are consequences. Although they should be given plenty of encouragement and help to change, bullies must not be allowed to get away with tormenting others.

WHAT TO DO IF YOUR CHILD IS THE BULLY

If you learn that your child is a bully:
- Stay calm
- Try not to become angry and defensive
- Ask exactly what your child has been doing
- Ask if there is a pattern to this behaviour, or is this a one-off incident
- Talk to teachers, playground supervisors, and other parents - the more you can find out about what has been going on, the easier it will be to work out why your child has been bullying and what can be done about it.
- Enlist the school's support in helping your child learn better habits.
HELPING THE CHILD WHO BULLIES

- See if your child has any ideas about why the bullying started, and what might help it end. Is there something else in the background? Has the child been bullied as well? The majority of bullies have been bullied!
- Reassure a child that you still love him or her - it’s the behaviour you don’t like, but you will work with your child to help change this
- Find out if there is something in particular which is troubling the child.
- Work out a way for your child to make amends for the bullying, starting with an apology.
- Set limits. Stop any show of aggression immediately and help the child find other, non-aggressive ways of reacting
- If your child bullies when faced with certain situations, work together to practise alternative ways of behaving
- Explain that it is not a weakness to get away from a situation where the child can feel himself losing his temper. It is a sensible way of ensuring that the situation doesn’t get worse
- Teach your child the difference between assertive behaviour and aggressive behaviour - use the Assertiveness Section in this booklet
- Create opportunities to praise your child for doing things well
- Talk to the school staff. Explain that your child is making an effort to change his or her behaviour. Ask them for ideas. It might be helpful for you and your child to talk to a psychologist. Ask your GP for a referral
- Talk to the staff about setting realistic goals for your child - don’t expect too much too soon - and about rewarding him or her when a goal is achieved. Ask if the school can provide a room where children could go if they feel they need time to ‘cool off’
- Other children may deliberately provoke your child, especially if they think he or she is trying to reform. Explain to your child that there may be taunts or provocations, but that it is best not to respond, but just walk away

Parents can help by controlling their own aggression and by making it clear that violence is always unacceptable.