



## Understanding Teen Bullying: An Introductory Exploration for Parents

Bullying among teenagers has become an increasingly concerning issue in recent years. With the rise of social media and mobile technology, bullying no longer stops when the school bell rings. Teens now face bullying 24/7 through hurtful texts, harassing phone calls, embarrassing photos, vicious online rumors, and more.

As a parent, it's normal to feel worried and even scared about the possibility of your child being bullied. However, arming yourself with information is the first step to being able to prevent and address bullying. This article provides an introductory overview of teen bullying, including the causes, different forms it can take, warning signs your teen may be bullied, and what you can do as a parent.

### What is Bullying?

Bullying involves repeated aggressive behavior intended to cause harm, distress, or

unhealthy power imbalances. According to StopBullying.gov, bullying has three key components:

- Intentional action aimed at inflicting physical or emotional harm
- An imbalance of power, where the bully has more power than the victim
- Repetition, where the bullying happens continuously over time

Bullying is not an isolated incident of kids “just being kids.” It is targeted, predatory behavior that can take many forms, outlined below.

## Different Forms of Bullying

There are four main types of bullying teens can experience:

- Physical bullying: This involves harming the victim’s body in some way. Hitting, kicking, shoving, spitting, tripping, punching, slapping, pinching, and other acts of physical aggression are all examples of physical bullying. Physical bullies may also steal or break their target’s belongings.
- Verbal bullying: This type of bullying uses words, statements, and name-calling to harm the victim emotionally. Verbal bullying includes teasing, taunting, insulting, name-calling, threatening to cause harm, gossiping, spreading rumors, mocking, making offensive comments, and more. It’s the most common form of bullying experienced by both girls and boys.
- Social bullying: Sometimes referred to as relational bullying, social bullying aims to damage the target’s relationships or social reputation through exclusion, manipulation, and rejection. Social bullies often spread false rumors and gossip in attempt to control their target’s social standing. They may intentionally exclude others from activities or convince their peers to ignore or avoid someone.
- Cyberbullying: This form of bullying utilizes electronic means such as text messages, emails, chats, and social media to harass, humiliate, intimidate, or threaten the victim. Posting embarrassing photos, creating fake profiles, sending threatening emails, spreading rumors on social networks, and sending unwanted explicit content are all examples of cyberbullying. It can be especially damaging as it spreads rapidly online and bullies can hide behind a veil of anonymity.

## Warning Signs Your Teen May Be Bullied

Teens who are bullied often try to hide it from their parents for fear that parental intervention could worsen the bullying. Look for these warning signs that your teen may be experiencing bullying:

- ▶ Unexplainable injuries like bruises, cuts, or damaged clothing and belongings
- ▶ Frequently “losing” money and valuables
- ▶ Abrupt changes in eating habits
- ▶ Difficulty sleeping and/or frequent nightmares
- ▶ Declining grades and loss of interest in school
- ▶ Sudden loss of friends or avoidance of social situations
- ▶ Feelings of helplessness and/or decreased self-esteem
- ▶ Self-destructive behaviors like running away from home or harming themselves

If you notice multiple warning signs in your teen, open up the conversation in a loving, non-judgmental way by asking questions like “Is everything alright at school?” Let them know you’re concerned and are there for them if they’re experiencing any difficulties.

## Causes of Bullying

Understanding the potential motivating factors behind bullying can help parents cultivate an environment that prevents it from ever starting. Common causes include:

With compassion and emotional support, you have the power to help your bullied teen heal both in the short and long-term. Your advocacy shows them they are not alone. Collaboration with the school is key - do not let up until administrators take meaningful steps to keep your teen safe. You may even consider additional resources like counselors, teen support groups or self-defense classes tailored to bullying situations. There are many resources available to teens who have experienced bullying’s harmful effects. Early intervention and treatment helps minimize lasting scars.

- Lack of monitoring: Kids require adult supervision, both at school and home. Lack of monitoring gives bullies opportunities to victimize others.
- Family issues: Family environments marked by domestic violence, abuse, or lack of affection can lead kids to believe aggression and manipulation can solve problems.
- Popularity and social status: Bullies often are motivated by a desire for more social status, or dominance in their peer group. Targets of bullying tend to be socially isolated kids.
- Group dynamics: Certain toxic group dynamics like pack mentality can contribute to bullying situations. Weak kids often get bullied while peer group members cheer the bully on rather than defend the victim.
- Jealousy and resentment: Bullies jealous of talents, attributes, or possessions of their victims are motivated to harm the target's self-esteem and social standing.
- Lack of consequences: When bullies face no punishment from parents, teachers, or other adults, the behavior continues unchecked. Consistent consequences are vital.
- Low self-esteem: Those with poor self-esteem and difficulty fitting in are more likely to become bullies in order to feel powerful and in control.

By cultivating a positive home environment, modeling empathy, encouraging healthy socialization, setting boundaries, and enforcing consequences, parents can reduce many of the factors that motivate bullying behaviors.

## What Parents Can Do About Bullying

- 1 Provide a safe space for your teen to open up. Let them know you are always there to listen without judgment and will help them through any bullying situation.
- 2 Remain calm if your teen reveals bullying. Getting visibly angry or upset will only discourage further disclosure. Validate their feelings and reassure them it's not their fault.
- 3 Resist the urge to immediately contact the school. This could worsen the bullying if administration mishandles the situation. Work collaboratively with your teen to develop an appropriate course of action.

- 4 Equip your teen with coping strategies. Provide emotional support while also teaching them how to walk away from situations, respond assertively, reach out to trusted friends and teachers, and boost their confidence.
- 5 Document evidence of cyberbullying. Save harassing texts, social media posts, or offensive photos. These will help administrators take action if needed.
- 6 Be an example of kindness and empathy yourself, within your family and community. Start in the home to foster environments where bullying cannot thrive.
- 7 Advocate for comprehensive anti-bullying policies at your teen's school. Ensure proper procedures, training and monitoring are in place to prevent and address all forms of bullying.

## **A Note on Bullying and Suicide**

While the majority of bullying situations do not lead to suicide, parents should be aware that there is an unmistakable link between bullying and suicidal thoughts or behaviors in some teenagers. Warning signs include talking about suicide, expressing hopelessness, giving away prized possessions, preoccupation with death, and sudden personality changes. Seek help from a mental health professional immediately if you observe these red flags.

Teen bullying is a complex problem requiring vigilance, open communication, and compassion on the part of parents, teachers, and other responsible adults in a teen's life. While bullying is very common, parents can help stop it in its tracks through being informed, establishing trust with their teen, and advocating for safe school environments. Although bullying will likely remain a concern for parents, by working together with kids, it can be reduced over time to build a kinder, more inclusive society for the next generation.