

## My child is bullying – now what?

Bullies can hurt, scare and intimidate. But inside that bully is still a child who is also hurting or struggling – just in a different way.

“Bullies are not bad kids. They have worth and, with support, encouragement and guidance, can change their behaviours,” says Tammy Lynn Blahy, a Canadian Certified Counsellor with the Manitoba Blue Cross Employee Assistance Program.

Youth may bully for various reasons. They may have low self-esteem, poor social skills, difficulty managing their emotions or lack empathy. Bullies may feel a lack of power or control or may be seeking attention, while some may also bully in response to their peers or in an attempt to gain or maintain popularity. They may also be struggling with a major experience or life event and are having difficulty processing their emotions. By intimidating or mistreating someone else, the bully may feel powerful or in control, which can make them feel good about themselves temporarily.

“Bullying involves fear and intimidation through verbal, physical or emotional means and includes repetition, intentionality and an imbalance of power. The person who is bullying gains power by intimidating and creating angst in others,” says Blahy. This can occur anywhere, including home, school, playgrounds, sports centres and social media.

But while the bully is creating angst in others, they are also feeling their own angst. This is still a child or youth who is experiencing big emotions that should not be ignored.

### What to do if your child is bullying

The main goal when talking to your child who has been bullying is to try to understand the issue that they are struggling with and identify what is interfering with their ability to build healthy, respectful relationships.



“Youth who bully also need support and guidance,” says Blahy. “It is important to take the time to understand their perspective and listen to and validate their concerns.”



Blahy quotes Dorothy Nolte and Rachel Harris's book, *Children Learn What They Live: Parenting to Inspire Values*. "Children have an inherent right to acknowledge and express their feelings, including angry feelings, just as we do. This does not mean they have the right to disrupt or harm others or to destroy property... As parents, we need to accept and respect our children's feelings of frustration while maintaining rules and limits of behaviour."

Beyond talking to your child, look for opportunities to improve their self-esteem, build confidence and change perceptions. This will increase their likelihood of establishing healthy, respectful relationships. Also, focus on building your child's capacity in problem solving and empathy raising to effect positive change.

For parents themselves, it can be difficult to hear the news that your child has engaged in bullying behaviours, and you may struggle with your own emotions about your child's actions.

"Parents – while needing to have the conversation with their child about the situation – may also need to take a brief pause to reflect on their own emotional reactions and needs, to be prepared to have a calm, direct and open conversation with their child," says Blahy, who holds a Master of Social Work.

Support your child or youth and move them towards respectful behaviour by staying calm and communicating the concerns, staying connected and responding with empathy, setting boundaries and seeking resources and support. Blahy points to your child's school counsellor, principal and/or teacher to ask for feedback and suggestions. If a child or teen is having ongoing difficulties in meeting social or behavioural expectations, additional support may be needed, such as child counselling.

"Worrying about your child comes with parenting. Parents are doing the best they can, and a child's actions doesn't necessarily mean a parent is doing a poor job. Parents are there to help children grow and learn from experiences," says Blahy. "All parents navigate difficult moments and situations with their children. We can use challenging conversations as teachable moments to encourage learning as opposed to guilt."

Above all, we need to remember that bullying is not normal and it's never okay, no matter what our child is going through. It can cause serious mental, emotional and physical harm to the person being bullied. Name-calling and derogatory words can erode a child's confidence and self-esteem at a young age, and that can stick with them for years. For the bullies, they will most likely end up in trouble academically, socially and emotionally. By continuing with their behaviour, they may lose friends and ultimately lose the "power" they covet. Working to resolve the reasons why your child is bullying and help them grow can correct the negative behaviour moving forward and result in a better situation for all children involved.

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**For more information call the Employee Assistance Centre at 204.786.8880, TTY 204.775.0586, toll-free 1.800.590.5553 or visit [mb.bluecross.ca](http://mb.bluecross.ca).**

