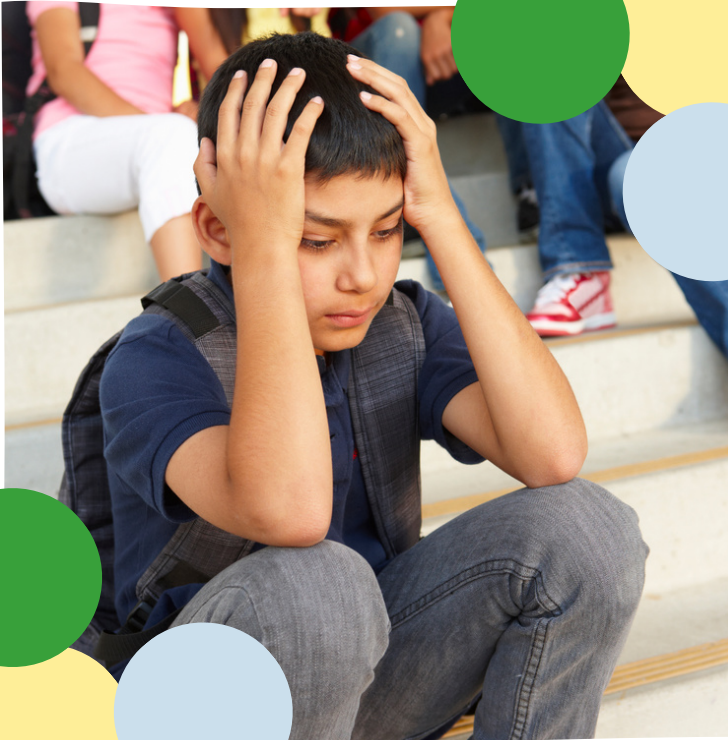


# Keeping Our Kids Safe: Anti-Bullying Basics



Bullying has been around forever and is often glamorized in the media. Remember Draco Malfoy from Harry Potter? Regina George from Mean Girls? Buzz from Home Alone? And while the “victim” usually wins in the movies, they most often don’t in real life. Bullying can have long lasting traumatic effects on our children. Many of us certainly know this too well, as parents/caregivers of kids who may be easily bullied, or be acting as the bully.

Overall, 1 out of every 5 school-aged children reports being bullied at school or on social media. And if you’re 9-12 years old, your chances of being bullied rises to almost 1 out of every 2 children. Yes, nearly 50%! 41% of students who were bullied believed it would happen again. And what are they bullied about? Their physical appearance, race/ethnicity, gender, disability, religion, or sexual orientation. [Source: [www.pacer.org](http://www.pacer.org)]

Most experts agree that bullying is any behavior that hurts or harms another person physically or emotionally. Bullying usually involves a real or perceived imbalance of power.

The student doing the bullying has or is perceived to have more physical, emotional, or social power than the targeted student. And, the victim may struggle to defend themselves or have difficulty stopping the behavior. Bullying takes many forms and with the widespread use of social media today, can be even more damaging than in the past. Cyberbullying is of particular concern because it can be anonymous, hard to detect, persistent, spread to a much larger audience, and potentially permanent. The damage done by cyberbullying can be widespread before the target even knows it exists. 2020 data indicates that one in five 9-12 year olds had been cyberbullied, cyberbullied others, or had seen cyberbullying.

# Keeping Our Kids Safe: Anti-Bullying Basics

Bullying is not conflict, disagreement, or expressing different beliefs (though such situations could lead to bullying.) In a conflict or disagreement, kids generally have equal power; they're on an even playing field. When bullying occurs, the playing field is unequal or perceived as unequal.

Many of our children who struggle with social-emotional situations might be bullied one day and do the bullying the next. Both are concerning. Our children are still growing, developing, and learning in every way. They have underdeveloped social and reasoning skills. They often lack confidence and compassion - qualities that are learned through experience and teaching. Labeling children as "bullies" or "victims" at this point can negatively impact them. Those labels can stick with them throughout their school experience and perpetuate the notion that the child IS their behavior. Labeling children can suppress their desire to learn and grow and further stigmatize them in the eyes of other students. Instead of labeling the child, label the behavior: "the bullying behavior." The goal is to teach and resolve the situation, not cast blame or judge.

## Common Myths About Bullying

**Myth:** Bullying is a natural part of childhood.

**Truth:** Bullying is learned behavior - and kids can learn more positive behaviors instead!

**Myth:** Verbal bullying doesn't matter, because words can't hurt you.

**Truth:** Words can be traumatizing, and are often the most harmful part of bullying.

**Myth:** Kids who experience bullying will grow up tougher.

**Truth:** Bullying doesn't build you up - it breaks you down.

**Myth:** Telling a teacher about bullying is tattling.

**Truth:** "Tattling" is done to get someone in trouble; "telling" is what you do to get help, and asking for help is always appropriate!

**Myth:** It's only bullying if the action is repeated over and over again.

**Truth:** Even one incidence of bullying can be harmful and should be addressed.

**Myth:** It's only bullying if the student doing the bullying intends to harm the student they are targeting.

**Truth:** While it's important to address the intention and/or purpose of the bullying, the intention and/or purpose doesn't diminish the negative impact of the behavior on the targeted student.

## What can you do when your child is being bullied?

1. If your child is the target of bullying behavior, let them know you are there to help. Reassure your child that you will help them find a solution. Let them know that the bullying is not their fault, and that no one deserves to be bullied.

2. Document everything you can, because with bullying, evidence matters. Keep all incident reports, communications from your child's teacher or school, and so on. Keep a notebook or document where you list every incident your child experiences, even if it's something seemingly simple like not being allowed to play with a particular student at recess. If your child has been physically hurt, consider having their doctor document their injuries.

3. Every school in Massachusetts should have a Bullying Policy. Read your school's bullying policy. It should be posted on the school website; if you have trouble finding it, ask for a copy from your child's teacher, the school office, or anyone in the school administration.

4. Let the school know about the situation, making sure to do so in writing. You may want to start by simply letting your child's teacher know what's happening with an email or note. You can also report the bullying to the principal or adjustment counselor, or whoever at your child's school is in charge of investigating bullying. The school website should include a form for submitting complaints about bullying anonymously, if you so choose. You can also send an email or letter - you should not be required to use a particular form in order to report bullying.

If you are later unhappy with the school's response, you can take the problem up the chain: speak to your district superintendent, and if that doesn't help, report the problem to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE)'s Problem Resolution System at <http://www.doe.mass.edu/prs>, email [compliance@doe.mass.edu](mailto:compliance@doe.mass.edu), or call 781-338-3700.

# Keeping Our Kids Safe: What Should the School Do?

Every school has its own bullying policy, so their response to bullying may vary slightly. Be sure to familiarize yourself with the school's particular policy. However, based on rules, guidelines, and a sample bullying policy put out by DESE, most schools, upon hearing of a bullying incident, will:

1. First and foremost, **ensure the safety of the student** who was the target of the bullying behavior. This can include a number of steps, including a safety plan which lists what steps must be taken to protect the student.

Steps might include:

Increasing staff supervision at transition times and periods like lunch and recess.

Having a school counselor or other designated staff check in with your child every day or two to keep track of any continued bullying.

Keeping the student/s exhibiting the bullying behavior away from your child, i.e. by reassigning classes or issuing a "no contact" order

Assigning an older student, known as a "peer role model," to sit with your child at lunch.

Putting a plan in place regarding what your child can do if targeted again, such as allowing the child to go to the office immediately to talk to staff who will address the bullying right away and (if desired) letting a child skip class if the child exhibiting the bullying behavior bothers them during it.

Providing a staff escort to help your child move between classes, so that your child doesn't have to be alone.

2. **The school's next job is to investigate the allegations of bullying.** Generally, the principal or their designee will consider all information related to the incident/s, including student reports and documentation provided by the parent. The principal or designee will interview all students involved, as well as student and staff witnesses. Once a determination has been made, parents should be informed immediately of the finding and of what general steps the school will take to address the situation.

3. Once a determination has been made, the school needs to **respond to the bullying behavior. Note that due to privacy laws, neither the student being targeted nor their parents will be informed of specific disciplinary actions being taken against the aggressor.** However, steps include suspension or (better) in-school suspension as well as learning more appropriate behavior through skill-building and direct instruction. **Studies show that by teaching students who have engaged in bullying behavior how to act more appropriately, be more socially aware, and be positive influencers, they can be empowered to become positive leaders and even stand up against other aggressors.**



# Keeping Our Kids Safe: Empower Your Child

One key aspect of addressing bullying is addressing the power imbalance by returning power to your child. Continued dialogue with your child is critical to returning that power. The Pacer National Bullying Prevention Center offers another option for returning power to your child - the *Student Action Plan*:

**Step 1:** Ask your child to think about their experience of being bullied.

**Step 2:** Tease out your child's ideas about how things could be better. Would it have helped if a teacher been present? If other students had stood up for them? This step is important, because it's all about helping your child regain power.

**Step 3:** Think about the steps needed to make those changes happen - and follow them! Continue the conversation until the situation is resolved.

## What If Your Child Exhibits Bullying Behavior?

Addressing your child's bullying behavior is crucial for their personal growth. Start with an open conversation to understand their motives. Teach empathy and compassion by helping them see the impact of their actions on others. Help them understand better ways of interacting with others. Help them be positively curious about "differences" and embrace them - we ALL have something to offer and deserve respect. Model supportive and positive interactions. Set clear boundaries and consequences, emphasizing kindness and respect. Consider involving a counselor or therapist for additional guidance.

## The Power of the UpStander

One of the most powerful things we can do is to empower students witnessing bullying to stand up for the student being targeted. Research shows that other students speaking out or taking action stops bullying behavior over half the time within seconds! Parents can model this behavior for children, but schools play a crucial role as well. Work with your school to ensure that they are providing opportunities for students to learn to be upstanders.

Students can be taught to be upstanders by:

- telling the bully to stop
- getting others to stand up to the bully with them
- helping the victim
- shifting the focus and redirecting the bully away from the victim
- telling an adult who can help