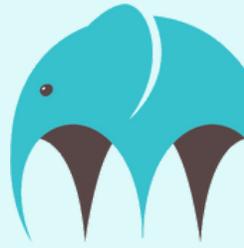


Understanding Bullying and Managing its Impact



As a parent or caregiver, it's concerning to hear that your child or young person is either being bullied or is bullying others. About 47% of Canadian parents have reported that their child or youth has been the victim of bullying. In an average Ontario classroom of 35 students, we can expect that [4 to 6 of them are either being bullied or are bullying others](#). The effects of bullying on children and young people can be serious and long-lasting, including low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, self-harm, academic issues, and physical health problems. In this resource, we'll help you understand what bullying is, why it happens, how it affects all children and young people, and what you can do to support your child and address the issue.

What's in this resource?

- What is bullying, and why does it happen?
- What are the effects of bullying?
- What should I do if my child is being bullied?
- What should I do if my child is bullying someone?
- Additional Bullying Resources



What is bullying, and why does it happen?

Bullying can happen at all ages and is when someone who has more power (whether it's physical strength, being more popular, etc.) uses that power to physically, socially, or emotionally harm another person because they're perceived as different in some way. In other words, bullying is a repeated behaviour that one person uses to hurt, harm, or intimidate another person.

Types of Bullying

Physical bullying. This form of bullying can include actions such as stealing or damaging property, spitting, shoving, tripping, punching, hitting, or any other touching that is unwanted.

Verbal bullying. This bullying behaviour can include teasing, name-calling, threats, purposeful humiliation, racist comments, sexual harassment, mocking, or other insults.

Social bullying. This behaviour can look like an individual or group gossiping about someone, damaging their reputation and friendships, or socially isolating someone by ignoring or excluding them (e.g., rolling their eyes and turning their backs on someone as they approach).

Cyberbullying. This happens when people use the internet to send threatening messages, share private images without consent, or use social media to harass or intimidate others. Those engaging in cyberbullying might also share personal information, pictures, or videos with the intention of hurting or embarrassing someone else.

Faith-based or religious bullying. This occurs when people are targeted because of their religious beliefs, practices, or symbols. These are actions or hurtful words that are deliberately used with the goal of causing physical, mental, or emotional harm. For example, an individual might be bullied for wearing a hijab, a cross, or another symbol of their religion.

Racially motivated bullying. This is a form of racism where someone is bullied because of their race, ethnicity, or culture. This can include physical, mental, or emotional insults that are overt. It can also include [microaggressions](#), which are subtle forms of prejudice and can take the form of a joke, slur, or offhand, derogatory comment. While the person using microaggressions might not mean to offend, it is extremely hurtful to those who are the targets of these statements.

Homophobic, transphobic, and biphobic bullying. These are terms that describe bullying motivated by prejudice against people who identify as [2SLGBTQIA+](#). Queer children and youth are four times more likely to be cyberbullied than those young people who identify as heterosexual. As with other forms of bullying, these can be physical, verbal (e.g., making negative comments about a person's gender identity or sexual orientation to make them uncomfortable), direct or indirect (e.g., excluding someone based on their gender identity and expression), or online.



Visit our [Understanding Gender, Sexuality, and Expression resource](#) to learn about supporting queer and gender-diverse children and youth.

Why might someone be bullied?

Anyone can be bullied, which is partly why this is such a pervasive concern for parents and caregivers. While bullying can affect any child or young person, there are certain groups that are at higher risk of being bullied due to factors like [race, ethnicity, religion, gender, disability](#), or socio-economic status. Other groups might also include:

- Children and youth who are successful, intelligent, and creative
- Those who may be perceived as different by their peers because of appearances (e.g., physical appearance or unique features, clothing choices)
- Children or youth who have mental health challenges (e.g., depression, anxiety, or low self-esteem) or physical health conditions
- Children or youth whose behaviours or interests might differ from those of their peers

Why might someone bully?

There are several reasons why someone might bully another person. In fact, some children or youth who bully others might have also been the target of bullying themselves. Some factors that might underlie a person's choice to bully another person include:

- Their own stress or trauma
- Using aggressive behaviours to cope with issues that affect them
- To mask their own low self-esteem
- Challenges in their home environment
- A limited understanding of how bullying impacts others
- Limited quality relationships with friends and/or family

What are the effects of bullying?

Bullying is rarely a one-time event. In most cases, bullying involves repeated incidents over time that can have lasting impacts on the person being bullied as well as the person engaging in bullying behaviour. Some of the serious, long-term effects of bullying include:

Social Withdrawal. Since bullying threatens a person's sense of self, their confidence, and their trust in others, it can cause them to withdraw from social activities and interactions.

Academic Impacts. Children and young people who are bullied can have trouble in school. Their performance may suffer because they can't focus or find it difficult to concentrate. This might make them feel less engaged in the school environment, which is made worse by the fact that they might cope by [avoiding school or particular classes](#).

Mental Health Concerns. There can be long-term psychological impacts on children and young people who are bullied, including feeling sad and stressed, having panic attacks, feeling anxious and/or depressed, finding it difficult to cope with daily life, and/or having sleep disturbances (e.g., too little or too much sleep, nightmares, etc.). Of particular concern is the finding that both parties involved—the target and the person(s) engaging in bullying behaviour—are at a high risk for suicide.

Physical Health Problems. The ongoing stress and anxiety related to bullying can lead to physical health problems like headaches, stomach aches, and exhaustion.

Low Self-esteem and Trust Issues. The impact of bullying on a person's confidence and self-worth is significant, as these tend to get worse over time. Youth who are bullied can feel like something is wrong with them, or they're "not good enough." It can also cause people to feel weary about and lose trust in others, making it hard to open up about these challenges or form new relationships.

What are some signs I should watch for?

It can be difficult for parents to identify if their youth is being bullied or engaging in bullying behaviour because it often occurs out of their sight. It may also be the case that the child or youth feels embarrassed, helpless, or worried about what might happen if they talk about their experiences. It's helpful to keep your eyes and ears open for the following signs:

Changes in Mental Health

Your child or youth may suddenly show signs of anxiety, depression, or nervousness, or seem to change moods abruptly. Visit [School Mental Health Ontario](#) to learn more about noticing mental health concerns in your child or youth.

Changes in Physical Health

Your child or youth may complain of stomach issues and/or headaches, or they seem to be eating and sleeping more or less than usual. There may also be physical marks on their body, like unexplained bruises, scratches, broken limbs, or other wounds.

Academic Concerns

Your child or youth's grades may start to drop, or you may notice that they seem to have lost interest in or actively avoid going to school and/or school events.

Social and Behavioural Changes

Your child or youth may come home with torn or damaged clothing, books, or belongings. They may seem to be avoiding social situations, losing friends, and/or spending more time on their own or with you. They may suddenly ask for money or become unusually secretive (particularly after spending time online). They may present as more defensive, secretive, or agitated than usual, and may begin to show angry outbursts that seem to come from out of nowhere.

What should I do if my child or youth is being bullied?

If you notice changes in your child or youth and it becomes clear that they are being bullied, it's important that they hear some key messages from you. You'll want to share with them that they are not to blame for what they're experiencing—**it's simply not their fault.**

It's also extremely comforting for them to hear that they're not alone and that you and other adults are there to help make the bullying stop. Emphasizing that bullying is never okay, and that they have the right to be safe and be treated with respect will also go a long way in calming them in the moment. Once you have set the stage, here are some concrete next steps you can try.

1

Talk and listen.

It can be hard to talk about the experience of being bullied. You may need to encourage your child or youth to share what has been going on in a supportive and non-judgmental way. Ask questions like, "I've heard a lot about bullying lately...is that something that's going on at your school?" or "Is everything going okay with your friends and other students at school?" Rather than trying to solve the problem, focus on listening and providing support.

2

Reassure.

Let your child or youth know that you believe what they're sharing with you, and that you're glad they confided in you. Remind them again that it's not their fault, and that you're going to help them.

Help your child or youth know when it's time to get help.

You want them to manage it first, and if the line of safety gets crossed, talk to them about when it's time for you to take over. I told my son, "I want you to know that I trust you to try managing this on your own first. I believe in your ability to handle it, and I know you can do this. However, I need to be clear: if a line of safety is crossed—whether that's someone threatening you, physically hurting you, or making you feel unsafe in any way—I will need to step and in and take over. My job is to keep you safe, and I'll always be here to help if you need me."

PARENT
to **PARENT**

3

Empower.

Let them know that it's okay to stand up for themselves, and that you and other trusted adults can help if they're feeling threatened or unsafe. Support them to learn coping strategies to use in the moment (e.g., deep breathing, relaxation, or grounding techniques) or ways to assert themselves.

4

Encourage.

Given the impact that bullying can have on a child's or youth's self-esteem, it is important to help them build back their confidence and feelings of self-worth. Encourage them to take part in activities they enjoy and spend time with supportive friends. Prioritize special family time to create a sense of safety, comfort, and belonging at home.

PARENT
to **PARENT**

Avoid saying things like, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me," because the sticks and stones being thrown can also be words, so you may have to explore how verbal bullying is impacting your child.

5

Engage the school.

Working with your child's or youth's school is a key part of addressing bullying effectively. Talk to your child's or youth's teacher or another school staff that you are comfortable with. Whether they are being bullied or bullying others, and whether it's happening in the school or not, academic performance is almost always impacted. The educator can help you with problem solving and connect you to resources.

If the bullying is happening at school, the principal and school counsellor might also get involved, as they likely have policies and interventions that can help make children and youth feel safe in the school environment. If, however, your child or youth is embarrassed or worried that involving the school will make things worse, take some time to understand their concerns and think about how to respond. For example, you might be able to make an appointment at the school at a time when other students are less likely to notice or engage with educators virtually.

You could also problem-solve with the school to work as a team to manage the bullying in a way that ensures there are no negative consequences for your child or youth, and that they feel safe and supported throughout the process. You can also check out your school board's website for information about policies in place to address bullying behaviour and what steps to take with the school team if you feel your concerns are not being addressed.

Visit our [School Mental Health Backpack](#) to learn more about communicating with your child's teacher.



School
Mental Health
Ontario

Santé mentale
en milieu scolaire
Ontario

Visit School Mental Health Ontario's [By Your Side](#) resource for more information on school-based supports.

6

Seek professional help.

If your child or youth continues to experience ongoing distress due to bullying, it is highly beneficial to seek support from a therapist or counselor who specializes in helping children navigate the effects of bullying, as the impact can be long-lasting. Visit our [Find Help](#) tool to get connected to a community child and youth mental health agency near you.

What should I do if my child or youth is bullying someone?

When a child or youth bullies, they learn to use power and aggression as a way of hurting and controlling others. If you suspect that the child or young person in your life is engaging in bullying behaviour, it can be concerning, uncomfortable, and disappointing. Young children might not realize that their actions can be harmful to others or might not recognize the extent of pain they're causing another child. For youth, bullying behaviours might help them gain and use power, increase their popularity, help them "get back at someone" for something, resolve boredom, exercise prejudice, or react to peer pressure. Whatever the root cause(s), as a parent or caregiver, you have a role to play in addressing this behaviour.

1

Talk and listen.

It's important to start an open conversation with your child or youth so you can hear about the situations in which your child or youth is bullying and try to understand why. You can help them understand how their behaviours might be affecting others and emphasize that bullying is not okay under any circumstances. It's important to do this with a calm and open approach.

2

Take time to understand why.

Explore whether they are feeling overwhelmed or stressed about something in their life and using bullying behaviours as a way of coping. Have things shifted in their friend group? Are they struggling to deal with different feelings and pressures? You can help them think through how they can handle situations in different, more positive ways.

PARENT
to PARENT

When I was dealing with my daughter targeting others, I tried to talk to her about it to better understand what was going on. I started by saying, "Sometimes when we're angry or hurting, it can feel better to see someone else hurting. Is that a feeling that you can relate to?"

3

Be a positive role model.

Children and youth might be more likely to exhibit bullying behaviours if they see adults treating each other in disrespectful or unkind ways. As a parent or caregiver, modeling positive behaviour, respectful communication, and constructive approaches to conflict resolution can help your child or youth to develop empathy and healthier ways of interacting with others. The way you interact with people conveys your expectations for how your child or youth should be connecting with their peers.

4

Establish appropriate consequences.

It's important to remember that "hurt kids, hurt kids." As a parent or caregiver, you'll need to spend time exploring the reasons for the behaviour to ensure that your child or youth has the appropriate supports in place to stop the behaviour. You may also need to put non-violent, swift consequences in place that are focused on correcting their actions or limiting their ability to continue the behaviour (e.g., limit their use of devices or internet, work with the school to limit free time where appropriate). Engage with other adults and school personnel to do this in a holistic way.

PARENT
to **PARENT**

It's important to name the behaviour and let them know that it's not okay. It can be more powerful than asking them what happened or why they did it. Let them know that when they made the decision to _____ (e.g., make a peer the target of a joke, physically hurt someone) they made a choice to cross a line. Ask them, "What are you going to do to repair this situation?"

5

Seek professional help.

As a parent or caregiver, you're not alone. There are many professional [therapists or counsellors](#) who can help your child or youth develop different strategies for engaging with peers. As well, at [Parents for Children's Mental Health](#), we're here to support you while you support the child or young person in your life.

Additional Bullying Resources

If you would like to learn more about bullying and its impact, you can check out the resources below.

- [Kids Help Phone](#): Bullying resources and supports for children and youth.
- [Bullying: We Can All Help Stop It](#): Information for parents and students about bullying and what parents can expect from the school and school board.
- [Bullying Prevention: Safe at School](#): Resources and professional learning models on a range of topics related to bullying.
- [PREVNet \(Promoting Relationships and Eliminating Violence Network\)](#): A national network of researchers dedicated to understanding and ending bullying. Includes information and resources on bullying prevention for young people, parents, caregivers, and educators.
- [Bullying Canada](#): Information and support for children, youth, parents, and teachers.
- [About Kids Health: Bullying](#): Information on bullying and cyberbullying.
- [Cyberbullying](#): Resources for parents, caregivers, and educators from the Government of Canada.
- [First Steps to Stop Bullying: Adults Helping Children Aged 4–11](#): A resource by Public Safety Canada for adults supporting young children who are either bullying or being bullied.
- [Helping Your Child Build Positive Relationships and Manage Conflict](#): A resource by School Mental Health Ontario.

You don't have to do this alone.

If you are a parent or caregiver worried about your child, or a young person looking for help yourself, please use our Find Help tool to connect with a service provider near you. Our network of child and youth mental health centres has 4,000 professionals ready to help children, youth, and families with free counselling and treatment. Our agencies provide care in person, on the phone, and virtually. No problem is too big or small.

[Find your closest child and youth mental health centre.](#)