



## Suggestions for Parents and Guardians

### Reporting Acts of Peer Aggression

Students learn best when they feel physically and emotionally safe in school. There have been a number of stories in the media about bullying, and both educators and parents are concerned about its negative effects on children and young people. Even though bullying is a very specific form of peer aggression that is characterized by an imbalance of power, the intention to harm, and repetition, it is often mistakenly used to refer to any act of aggression. Because bullying is a label that frequently has negative consequences on all students involved, it is a term that should be used sparingly. Not all acts of peer aggression are bullying; however, no form of peer aggression is acceptable in a learning environment.

Educators in most schools work very hard to ensure students have a safe and secure environment in which to learn. While educators may have the goal of ensuring all students' safety, there may be times when they are not aware that a student is the target of peer mistreatment. That is why it is important for parents to let educators know when they have a concern about their child being the target of peer mistreatment. Most schools take parents' concerns seriously and act quickly so the aggressive behavior stops. Following are some suggestions to help parents and guardians communicate important information to educators in a respectful and useful manner that is most likely to lead to a shared effort in finding effective solutions.

#### **Assess the level of concern to determine the need for a meeting with the school:**

If you think that another student is mistreating your child at school talk with your child to determine the seriousness of what happened. The severity of the impact on your child can help you decide what steps need to be taken.

#### **1. Little Impact: Is the aggressive behavior just annoying with *no significant negative impact* on your child's daily life?**

If the aggressive behavior seems to be more annoying than hurtful when you talk with your child, ask them what they have tried and discuss what happened as a result. Brainstorm ideas with them of other ways to respond and the likely outcomes of each. Options to consider might include ignoring, avoiding the person, asking the person to stop, and hanging out more with friends. Be sure to let your child know these strategies may or may not be effective in changing the other person's behavior and it is not a reflection on them. Check in with your child on a regular basis and monitor for any changes in mood or patterns of behavior.

If the peer mistreatment continues or its effect on your child worsens so that it is having a moderate or severe impact, refer to the suggestions below to prepare for a meeting with educators at your child's school.

#### **2. Moderate Impact: Is the behavior having a *noticeable negative impact* on your child's daily life?**

Talk with your child and discuss what they have tried, what happened as a result, and brainstorm additional actions they could take. In addition, begin to keep a log of aggressive incidents in chronological order that includes written descriptions with the following information:

- **When did it happen?** (Give the date of the incident and approximate time if you know it.)
- **Where did it happen?** (Where on the school campus did it happen?)
- **What happened?** (Describe what happened in as much detail as you can provide using language that is *behaviorally specific*. If something happened outside of the school campus that relates, include that information too. Be sure to include the names of the aggressors if they are known.)
- **Who saw it?** (Were there any peers or adults nearby who might have witnessed what happened? If so, include their names too.)
- **What was your child's response when it happened?** (Describe what your child did in response to the person's behavior and what happened as a result.)
- **How has it affected your child?** (Describe the impact of the incident on your child at the time and since it happened. Be sure to note any changes in your child's mood or patterns of behavior. For example, have you noticed any changes in your child's behavior related to sleeping, eating, learning, or other daily activities?)

If the mistreatment continues or your child's symptoms of distress do not improve, request a meeting with your child's principal or administrator. Your documentation of incidents and the harm caused to your child will provide educators with important information that can help them identify appropriate strategies to help both your child and the student who engaged in mistreating behavior.

### 3. **Severe Impact: Is the behavior having a *significant negative impact* on your child?**

If the impact of school-based peer mistreatment is clearly having a significant negative impact on your child's daily life and educational experience, it is important to request a meeting with the school as soon as possible. Bring any written documentation you have of specific incidents along with your child's reaction that includes the information suggested above. Stan Davis reminds parents that "depending on the actual behavior and on relevant state law" it may be appropriate to notify the police.

*[For additional guidance read the included **Advice for Parents and Guardians- What if Your Child is Being Mistreated by Another Student?** Stan Davis]*

#### **Things to consider about meeting with educators**

- If you decide to meet with school staff, let your child know before the meeting that you will be speaking to someone at the school. **Caution:** It is generally *not* advisable to take your child to the initial meeting with the school. It may be helpful at a later point in time to include your child at a meeting with school personnel because it can demonstrate to your child that you and the school are working together to ensure their safety.
- Depending upon the circumstances or severity of the situation, you may choose to begin by first scheduling a meeting with your child's teacher. If you are not satisfied with the outcome or want additional information, you may want to schedule a meeting with the school counselor and/or the building principal.

## **Before the meeting**

- Write down any questions you have ahead of time.
- Read your school's policy and procedures regarding bullying, aggressive behavior and/or harassment. This information can often be found on the school's website or check with the school office to get copies.
- Read "Matt's Safe School Law" (Michigan's anti-bullying legislation) if you would like to understand schools' legal responsibilities related to bullying. It can be accessed on line: <http://www.freep.com/article/20120604/NEWS05/206040335/Matt-s-Safe-School-Law>
- If you have received any written incident report(s) from the school about the mistreatment, make notes where you agree or disagree with the report(s) and bring them along to the meeting.
- Think about what you hope to achieve by having this meeting. Write it down.

## **At the meeting**

- Begin the meeting by expressing your appreciation for the meeting ("Thank you for agreeing to meet with me" and/or "I appreciate your willingness to work together to solve this issue," etc.).
- Remember that you are likely to be most effective in helping your child if you can develop a working partnership with the school. In order to achieve that, maintain a calm and respectful feeling tone when sharing your concerns and focus on working together to find solutions.
- Take a copy of your incident log and your list of questions to the meeting. To make sure you address all of your concerns, it can be helpful to read from your notes and list of questions, and then check things off as they are addressed. If you feel something has not been fully answered, do not be afraid to go back to the question. If you do not understand something, keep asking for it to be explained until you do understand.
- Ask about what action will be taken in accordance with the school's policy and get a time frame for taking action. Clarify who will contact you to let you know when the planned steps have been completed.
- Take steps to avoid confusion or misunderstanding by doing the following:
  1. Take notes regarding what is said, who said it, and the action steps to be taken by the school.
  2. Go over each point at the end of the meeting so everyone leaves with the same understanding.
- Before you leave, thank the educators you met with for anything they did that was helpful, such as taking the time to meet with you, listening to your concerns, working with you to find a solution, etc.

## After the meeting

- Send a copy of your notes to the school staff that attended the meeting to make sure everyone is clear about what was agreed upon. Thank them for their attention to your concerns.
- Follow-up to make sure the actions are followed through on the part of the school.
- Check in with your child to see if the mistreatment has stopped.

## Unsuccessful outcomes

It is always best to try to sort things out with the school when possible because action from the school often stops the hurtful behavior quickly. However, in cases where you are unhappy with the outcome of the meeting or if the person refuses to meet with you, following are some options to consider:

- *Continue* to keep an incident log and set your own personal deadline to go back to the school if the aggressive behavior does not stop. You could also request a meeting with a more senior person at the school.
- If the mistreatment continues, follow the schools' written complaints procedure.
- If the issue still isn't resolved and the harmful behavior is continuing, be prepared to go up the ladder to the superintendent, the school board, the police or an attorney.

**Note:** Schools have a responsibility to investigate acts of peer mistreatment and parents have the right to know when the investigation was conducted along with the outcome of that investigation. There is some information that schools may not be able to share due to legal limitations that protect students' privacy. Parents are only entitled to information that is allowable under student records and privacy laws and regulations. For more detailed information regarding privacy or parental rights, refer to FERPA for Parents from the US Department of Education.

<http://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/ferpa/for-parents.pdf>

Authors:

Dee Lindenberger - Optimal Learning

Kathy Parker - Lenawee Bully Free Schools Trainer