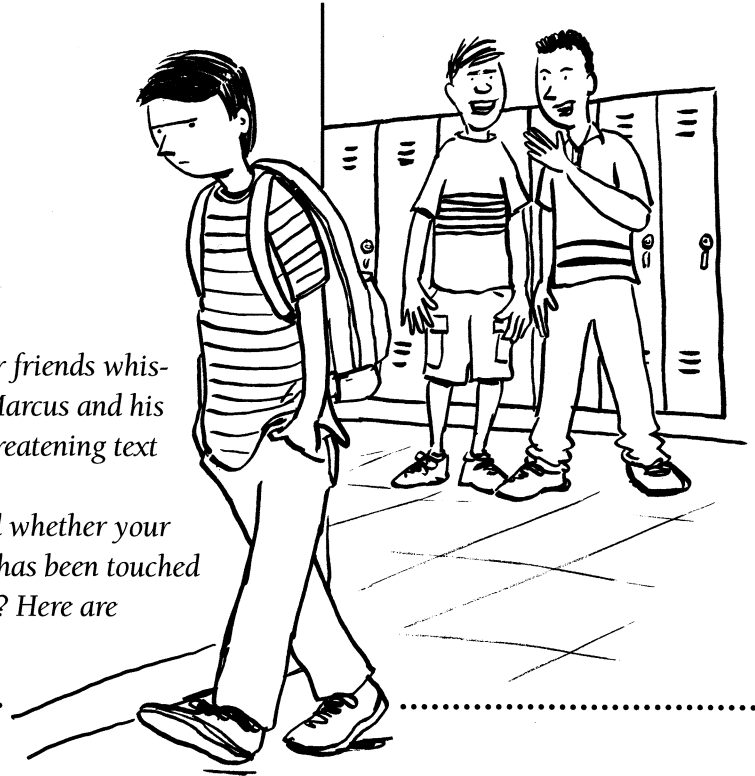


Bullying Q&As

Lisa sits quietly at the “popular” lunch table while her friends whisper about an overweight classmate. On the school bus, Marcus and his buddies push a younger boy off his seat. Ellie receives threatening text messages from her ex-boyfriend.

These middle graders are all affected by bullying. And whether your child is a witness, a bully, or a victim, it’s likely that she has been touched by the problem at some point, too. What can a parent do? Here are answers to common questions about bullying.



Q What is bullying?

A Bullying ranges from rejection (“This table isn’t for geeks”) to physical attacks like pushing and punching. It also includes spreading rumors, threats, name calling, and sexual harassment. When bullies use technology (say, by posting rumors on Facebook or sending hurtful text messages), it’s called *cyberbullying*. Usually, bullying is an ongoing problem rather than a one-time thing. Also, a bully typically has an advantage over his victim. For example, he might be more popular or physically stronger. Any form of bullying—verbal or physical—should be taken seriously.



Q I’ve been hearing a lot about bullying lately. Is it more common these days?

A Technology like text messaging and social networking has made it easier for tweens to continue harassing each other outside of school. Also, the problem is getting more attention as we learn about its serious consequences

for both bullies and victims. For instance, a child who bullies is more likely to get into trouble with the law as an adult. And being a victim can lead to increased school absences, falling grades, depression, low self-esteem, and dropping out. In some tragic cases, bullying has been tied to school violence and even suicide.

Q What motivates a bully?

A Experts used to believe that most bullies had low self-esteem and that they hurt others to feel better about themselves. While

this does happen, popular children can also be bullies. They’re motivated by social power, and they take advantage of less popular children to gain even more power. For example, a well-liked middle schooler might decide who gets invited to parties or where other kids can sit at lunch. If a classmate doesn’t do what she says, she might push or threaten the other child or call her names.

Q Now that my son is in middle school, he doesn’t confide in me very often. How will I know if he is bullied?

A It’s not unusual for children to keep bullying a secret. That’s because they’re afraid the bully will punish them for telling or because they’re ashamed of themselves for being picked on. Try bringing up the subject with your son. You might show him a newspaper or magazine article about bullying. Mention that it’s a common problem, and ask if it’s going on at his school and whether he feels safe. Also, know the risk factors—children are bullied for being overweight, having a disability, or seeming different, or because of their sexual orientation. Finally, be aware of warning signs. A victim might begin to spend more time alone, ask to stay home from school, or even experiment with dangerous behaviors (drinking alcohol, using drugs, having sex). If you suspect your youngster is being picked on, talk to the school counselor for advice.



Q What should my child do if she sees someone being bullied?

A Bullies love a crowd, so the best thing your middle grader can do is to pay attention to the victim and ignore the bully. If someone is being physically attacked, your youngster should tell the nearest adult. If a classmate is being teased, she might walk up and give the victim an excuse to escape (“Hey, we gotta go” or “Mrs. Jackson needs to see you in her office”). Keep in mind that it’s normal to be afraid to step in. It’s important for your youngster to remember that a child who is being bullied is probably scared and upset and wants help.

Q My son’s school counselor called and said he’s part of a group that’s bullying a boy in the cafeteria. We have a meeting at school this week. How should we react?

A First, get your son’s side of the story. Tell him about the phone call, and ask for an explanation. If he admits to participating in bullying, let him know that his behavior is unacceptable, and tell him what the consequence will be at home (the school will likely have its own consequence). Also, help your child become more empathetic. Talk regularly about others’ feelings (“Your sister is disappointed that she didn’t make the drill team, so let’s try to cheer her up”), and consider getting involved in community service as a family.

Q My daughter has been unhappy lately. She finally told me it’s because some of her friends have become more popular, and now they say she isn’t “cool enough” for them. Is there anything I can do?



she can seek out other friends. For instance, she might join an after-school activity (yearbook, field hockey) where she can find classmates who share her interests. In the meantime, ask a librarian to help you find books about tweens who struggle



to make friends. Knowing that other middle schoolers go through the same thing can help her feel less alone, and she might learn about strategies for building friendships.

Q My son doesn’t want to go to school because kids tease him about his learning disability. And he doesn’t want me to talk to his teachers or school counselor about it. How can I help him?

A Let your son know this isn’t something he should have to handle alone. Perhaps he’ll let you write an email to his school counselor that doesn’t name the bullies but asks for help. (“What resources do you have for children who are bullied?”) The counselor’s reply might help him feel comfortable sharing. Also, since most bullying takes place when adults aren’t looking, encourage your son to stay with a friend or a group in “hot spots” like the bus, bathroom, cafeteria, or hallways. *Tip:* Have him practice assertive body language (standing up straight, looking others in the eye). This can send the message to the bullies that he isn’t an easy target.



A You can explain to your daughter that friendships change as kids get older. But let her know that you understand it doesn’t make things easier now. Although she might not be able to change these girls’ behavior,

Q A classmate has been spreading rumors about my daughter on Facebook. What can we do?

A The first step is to help your daughter block the student from her account. Although this won’t stop the bully from posting rumors on other people’s pages, knowing that your child is ignoring her might encourage her to stop. That’s because cyberbullies enjoy the drama of posting and getting reactions. If the problem continues, you might consider contacting the bully’s parents if you feel comfortable doing so. Or the school counselor might suggest peer mediation. In the meantime, keeping an eye on your daughter’s online activities can help protect her. Try putting your computer in a common area so you can see what she’s doing. Some parents insist that their child “friend” them as a condition of joining a social networking site. Finally, remind your daughter never to share her password with anyone.

Middle Years