

## **Talking to your children about bullying -The three B's Bullying, being Bullied and being a Bystander**

**Michelle Roberts**

Bullying is when a person deliberately hurts someone else; it can be physical, emotional, relationship based and/or cyber related. Bullying may be a 'one off' event or occur repeatedly. The severity of the bullying and the frequency can make the outcome more damaging.

### **The damaging effects of bullying**

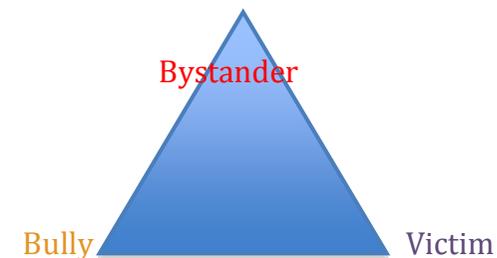
There are short term and long term possible effects of bullying that include sadness, despair, stress, anxiety, inability to trust, truancy, depression, poor academic performance, increasing aggression, relationship and friendship problems, loneliness, poor self esteem, clinginess and separation anxiety, self harming behaviour, suicidal and homicidal thoughts or action.

Speaking with your children about bullying is an opportunity to make clear statements about what is acceptable and unacceptable social behaviour. It allows for making good use of 'teachable' moments as a parent, where you can practise healthy decisions, responses and social survival skills with your child. It's the type of conversation where you need to have thought through beforehand your own views and strategies in relation to bullies and those who are bullied .

Talking about bullying, what it is, why it's damaging, hurtful and wrong and how to withstand it, stop it and avoid doing it is part of the job of being a responsible adult in the lives of children.

Bullying is damaging for both the person who is bullied and the person who bullies. Research into bullying- both being the bully and being bullied- clearly indicates the potential for significant and severe psychological, social and mental health problems that have long term damaging effects on relationships, wellbeing and success.

There is a third participant in the bullying scene and that is the bystander. The likelihood that your child will be at some stage one of these is high, teaching your child how best to manage such a situation is one way to protect them and to develop their social self.



“Bullies will only do what bystanders allow”. Dr. Stuart Tremlow and Dr Frank Sacco<sup>1</sup>, researchers in the area of school, children, violence and bullying note that the solution doesn't lie with the bully or the victim alone but that adult guidance must help children to find the solution and to become 'upstanders' rather than passive bystanders.

By encouraging children to speak out against bullying behaviours, and by teaching them 'tools' to create a peaceful community and relationships, parents are empowering their child to become more mentally strong. “ *Mentalistiation* is a term that Sacco and Tremlow use to describe giving children the tools of thinking before they act, being able to empathise with others, control storms of anger and self regulate their emotions. These things don't come naturally to all children and need to be taught.

### **When parents need to become 'upstanders' too**

Signs that a child is being bullied may be hard to detect. Some children hide their upset; others might be quick to ask for help. In school situations, students report that they are less likely to speak out about bullying because they are concerned that doing so will make matters worse or that adults won't help, or will make it worse.

Unexplained changes in behaviour, attendance at school or pre-school, unusual emotional responses, behaviour or

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<sup>1</sup> [www.backoffbully.com](http://www.backoffbully.com)

academic performance should always be a trigger for any parent, teacher or carer to observe the child carefully and to ask the child individually if anything is bothering them. Simply asking the question and listening to the answer carefully is the first step in helping your child, whether they are being bullied, are bullying or are being a bystander to someone else's distress.

**The toolkit of positive social strategies** includes problem-solving strategies such as:

- Being able to self calm and think about what is happening, using calming breathing can help to reduce anxiety or aggression and allow clearer thinking
- Teach your child, to 'stop and think' before they 'act', think about three or more alternative steps to solving the problem before choosing what to do, encourage them to develop the skills of mentalisation
- Role play asking for help, imagining being the 'other' person and brainstorm 'when' help should be sought (guide your child in their ability to recognize when the problem is more than they can or should be trying to cope with)
- Check back with your child periodically to see if things have got better or worse, what strategies have worked and what need work

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