Schoolyard Bullying

Bullying is a common experience for many children and adolescents. Surveys indicate that as many as half of all children are bullied at some time during their school years, and at least 10% are bullied on a regular basis.

Bullying behaviour can be physical or verbal. Boys tend to use physical intimidation or threats, regardless of the gender of their victim. Bullying by girls is more often verbal, usually with another girl as the target. Recently, bullying has been reported in online chat rooms and through email.

Children who are bullied experience real suffering that can interfere with their social and emotional development, as well as with their school performance. Some victims of bullying have even attempted suicide rather than continue to endure such harassment and punishment.

Definition: Deliberate psychological, emotional and/or physical harassment of one student by another, or a group, occurring at school or in transit between school and home. Includes exclusion from peer group, intimidation, extortion and violence.

HOW DOES A BULLY BECOME A BULLY?

- They are angry. Someone might have bullied them in the past.
- They have low self-esteem. They think controlling you will help them feel better about themselves.
- They might have been exposed to a lot of violence in the media. (TV, books etc). A lot of movies make violence look cool. But if you look more closely, the "good guy" is always cooler!
- Their caregivers might have lacked skills in supervision. They might have been too busy to teach the child how wrong it is to hurt others. Or perhaps they spoiled them, making the bully think they can do anything they want, including bullying!

WHAT YOUR CHILD CAN DO TO AVOID BULLYING

- Travel to school or social events in groups. Don't walk alone.
- Avoid the bully.
- Ignore them. That will take away the power they think they have over your child. They'll get bored, and look for someone else to pick on.
- Confront the bully with the problem. Do this only if the bullying is mental, not physical. Maybe you can explain how it makes you feel. If they don’t care, and continue to bully you, report them and start avoiding them.
- Take a safety-training workshop. This should only be used as a last resort (in self-defence). Using this to show off for your friends, or simply because someone made you angry, could lead to lawsuits, and YOU becoming a bully!

WHAT CAN YOU DO AS A PARENT?

- Listen to your child and make it clear that it is not their fault.
- Inform their teachers. If the bullying is physical or violent, tell them not to give your name. That could make the bully angrier, and then s/he might come after your child harder.
- Talk to other parents, or a support group, about strategies that might help.
- Raise the issue of bullying with your child’s school. Find out what the school intends to do and what the current bullying policy is. If not satisfied with the actions of this school, make this clear to the relevant authorities.
Help your child develop strategies to deal with the bullying. These include communication skills and assertiveness. Encourage the implementation of these strategies. Help them to find ways to change things - help them to see what they can change. Become aware of your own reactions. Your children should not be expected to handle bullying on their own.

WHAT CAN THE SCHOOL DO?

- Encourage students to report bullying in a confidential and easy manner, without being judged.
- Increase staff knowledge and awareness of bullying issues.
- Gather information about the current situation and other school’s strategies.
- Develop a “common understanding” of bullying within the school.
- Consult with parents, community groups and students to develop an anti-bullying program.
- Develop advice/information pamphlets and dissemination.
- Intervene in ways that do not model the actions that are unacceptable eg. punishment, blaming or excluding.
- If the school is not doing anything about the bullying, complain to the Department of Education or get legal advice.

If your child becomes withdrawn, depressed or reluctant to go to school, or if you see a decline in school performance, additional consultation or intervention may be required. A child and adolescent psychiatrist or other mental health professional can help your child, family and school develop a strategy to deal with the bullying. Seeking professional assistance earlier can lessen the risk of lasting emotional consequences for your child.

WHERE TO GET HELP?

- Kids Helpline 1800 551 800
- Lifeline 131 114
- Youth Line 02 9951 5522 or 02 9633 3666
- Parent Line 132 055
- www.reachout.com.au
- www.kidshelp.com.au
- Your local GP
- School Counsellor
- Counsellor (see Counselling in the Yellow Pages)
- Department of Education (see Education Department in the White Pages)
- Mental Health Information Service 02 9816 5688 or 1800 674 200 (Country NSW) (for services in your area)

Sources:
Kids Helpline www.kidshelp.com.au
Schoolyard Bullies www.canadianparents.com
American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry www.aacap.org