

When Lerato Mda picks her daughter Dimpho up from school, she notices that Dimpho seems out of sorts. Dimpho walks towards the car head down, throws her bag on to the back seat and gets in the car without greeting her mother.

‘What’s wrong?’ enquires Lerato.

‘Nothing, mom.’ They drive in silence for a while.

‘I can see that something is wrong,’ Lerato says eventually. ‘You want to talk about it?’

Dimpho shakes her head. ‘It’s just... Miss Singh asked me to go and get something from the office. When I got back everyone was laughing... and then I found out they were sending an MMS of me around... and it said FAT COW.’ Tears start running down Dimpho’s cheeks.

Lerato looks horrified. ‘Do you know who sent it?’

Dimpho shrugs. ‘No. Well, I have an idea who it could be, but I can’t prove it. It’s those girls... they’ve always hated me. They’re always calling me names and telling me that I look stupid. And they gang up on me and make sure that I’m not included in things.’

Lerato looks surprised. ‘You’ve never told me this. Maybe I could have done something.’

‘Like what?’ asks Dimpho scornfully.

‘Well, I could have gone to see your teacher.’

‘And then? They get into trouble and then they just hate me even more and say even meaner things. It won’t help – they won’t change. It’s not like they’re hitting me, or anything like that.’

‘But you know that what they are doing is bullying you,’ Lerato says indignantly.

‘Why don’t you fill in a bullying form? Or at least speak to your teacher?’

Dimpho sniffs. ‘I’m telling you, it won’t help. They’re too clever. They’ve got it in for me and now even some of my friends are on their side. Only Cookie is still my friend – but she’s not in my class.’ She starts crying again. ‘I wish I could go to another school!’

Pay attention, get involved, and never ever look away
– Barbara Coloroso, author of *The bully, the bullied and the bystander*, quoting a Holocaust survivor



1. How will I know when my child is being bullied, emotionally or physically? She will not necessarily tell me.
2. How do I get my child to talk to me about problems she is experiencing at school or with her friends?
3. How can I protect my child from being bullied? How can I prevent bullying from happening?
4. What can I do when I find out that my child is being bullied? To what extent can I fight my child’s battles with her peers, and to what extent should I leave her to sort things out? At what point do I intervene?
5. What do I do if my child is seen to be one of the bullies?
6. Can I hold the school responsible if my child is being bullied?

Discussion

1. If your child has unexplained injuries, is consistently unhappy about going to school, becomes withdrawn, doesn’t hang out with friends, becomes more aggressive or insecure, or work deteriorates, she may be experiencing bullying at school.
Remember that bullying includes verbal and psychological forms, such as threats, teasing, mockery, ‘dissing’, racial slurs, hate speech, foul language, name-calling, rumour-mongering, ostracising, manipulation and domination. Emotional bullying is harder to pick up than physical bullying, but can be equally if not more distressing and damaging to a child – and is probably far more common.
2. If you communicate with your child on an ongoing basis there is a far better chance that she will tell you when things go wrong. Create opportunities to talk together as often as possible, while driving or preparing supper. Do things together. If she still doesn’t talk to you and you suspect that she is having a hard time at school, ask the teacher if s/he has picked up anything and ask the teacher to keep watch. Or ask someone you know your child trusts, to talk to your child. Make sure your child knows she is safe with you and can talk to you, and that you will back her up.
3. Parents can teach their children how to behave if they are being bullied. It helps if they recognise that they are not yet victims (only if they give up). They are simply targets of the bully’s bad behaviour. Teach them to follow these steps:
 - I should ask the person to stop that behaviour.
 - I should tell the person that that behaviour is unkind or makes me feel uncomfortable.
 - I should warn them that if they ever do it again I will report the behaviour.
 - I should be assertive but not aggressive. (Assertiveness involves confidence and control, stating my case, listening and then insisting on my turn to speak, walking away to safety and asking for help if the bully does not stop. Aggressive behaviour such as insulting and hitting should be avoided.)

You can also discuss what your child can do if she sees bullying happening. How can she speak up and stand up for what is right? Onlookers who don’t do anything actually support the bully and keep the cycle going. However, children are often afraid to act or unsure of what to do, so this needs to be talked about. They can tell a teacher, or they can ask the bully to stop, or, if the bully is a friend they can say, ‘Come, let’s leave x alone and go and buy our lunch,’ or they can take the targeted child out of the picture by inviting him/her to play somewhere else. They should not be expected to put themselves in danger and should not add tension to the situation.

4. First explore your child’s story with her. Check whether she is not over-reacting. If it is indeed bullying, encourage your child to challenge the bully in an assertive way (see all steps above in 3) the next time it happens.

What if it persists? You cannot confront another child on school property. Your first course of action is to suggest that your child speaks to the teacher. If she is reluctant, or if the matter has not been satisfactorily resolved, you should speak to the teacher. The next step would be to go to the head of department, and then the head. Speaking to the bully’s parents is seldom helpful, and you should rather ask the school to intervene. An aggressive attitude is not helpful, and it may work well to assume that you are all working towards the same goal – developing happier children. Try to get some corroborating evidence before you leap in and accuse (but don’t draw other children into the dispute). Remember that the other child’s story is probably very different.

Throughout the process it is very important to boost your child and give her tools to cope in an unpleasant situation – because, despite all your efforts, the situation might not change as you would want it to. Remember that the bully is most likely someone who is feeling insecure, disempowered and possibly being bullied him/herself. Remind your child of this.

continued

Follow up after the event to check that your child is not being ostracised or teased for reporting the bullying. Remind her that what she did was the right thing to do, even if there are a few others who are unhappy with her. Ask the school to be consistent in that message too.

Encourage your child to develop friendships outside the bullying gang. Having a support structure will help her to cope much better. But if she still feels unable to cope, you may have to consider removing your child from that situation, either by changing class or even changing school. The danger is that you have allowed the bully to get away with bullying behaviour, and your child has not necessarily developed coping mechanisms.

- Again, communication is key. Remember why bullies bully – it is often an issue of low self-esteem – and develop strategies within your family to deal with this behaviour. Bullies often don't know how to socialise nicely, and/or don't care about others' feelings. Bullies often have misdirected leadership potential. Help your child to use these skills constructively. Discuss ways they can

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engage with others without being the boss or calling the shots: listen, take turns include and share. Therapy or counselling might help, but most important is that your child should feel loved and valued.

- Your school should have an anti-bullying policy, which may be helpful. For instance, children might be taught about the robot: red – stop unkind behaviour; orange – take time to think; green – do something kind. Schools usually teach children how to react in bullying situations (see no 3 above). There will usually be a procedure to follow if the matter does not get resolved at any one of the stages: e.g. first follow steps as outlined above, then speak to the teacher, then fill in a bully-busting form, then approach the HOD, then go to the counsellor, etc.

You can expect teachers and even heads of school to intervene in incidences at school – if they are made aware of them. When bullying happens off campus, it is likely to be happening at school too, and you should make the school aware of this.

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Bullying

Useful contact information

Johannesburg Parent and Child Counselling Centre	011 484 1734
Depression and Anxiety Support Group	011 783 1474
	0800 567 567
Childline	08 000 55555
Victim Support Unit	011 483 4621
Famsa: Parktown	011 788 4784
Soweto	011 933 1301
Lifeline	011 728 1347
Teddy Bear Clinic	011 484 4554

Further reading

The bully, the bullied and the bystander by Barbara Coloroso, Quill, New York: 2003

Parenting with panache by Dereck Jackson, Wordsmiths, Johannesburg: 2001

Beat Bullying by Mark Potterton, CIE, Johannesburg: 2004

www.kid-safeproductions.com

<http://cfchildren.org/articlef/colorosof/colorosoprint>

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