

I DOWNWARD DOG DARE YOU:

KIDS AND BULLIES

by Mari Pfeiffer

When Lisa* was 11, her father took a one-semester job at a northeastern university. "I was nervous about going to a new school in the middle of the year. But I figured I would be okay. And I was excited about making new friends," says Lisa.

But that excitement quickly faded. Some girls noticed Lisa's Asian mother walking her to school, and within weeks, they started calling her names like "Chink," "Gook" and "Jap." She was never invited to weekend parties. One day, alone at her locker, the bullies roughed her up, emptied her locker and stomped on its contents. The leader of the group threatened her if she told anyone what happened.

Normally friendly and sociable, Lisa withdrew. She stopped using her locker and carried all of her books with her whenever at school. She avoided the bullies whenever she could, and often visited the nurse's office with complaints of severe stomach cramps. Her parents were puzzled by her behavior, but figured it was just a phase.

Bullying at school or elsewhere can transform a child's happy life into a nightmare, and the scars it leaves may last a lifetime. Fortunately, today's school officials and parents have more tools available than in the past to help their children cope and to soften bullying's long-term impact.

WHY DO KIDS BULLY?

Eighty percent of American school children say they have been teased or bullied in the past month. "Teasing is common, even among friends, and it is generally a normal part of kid life," says Michael Thompson, PhD, and co-

author of *Best Friends/Worst Enemies: Understanding the Social Lives of Children*. But, Thompson says, when the verbal or physical teasing is repeated, chronic and comes from the same individual or group, then it is bullying, and has a destructive impact.

'WHY DIDN'T YOU SAY ANYTHING?'

Lisa said nothing until her father announced the family was moving back to Virginia. "I've never seen you so happy to move," he remarked. "You've never been bullied," she replied. The response both astonished and dismayed him. "You were bullied? By whom? Why didn't you say anything?" he said.

Kids often don't tell their parents that they're being bullied for a number of reasons. "One is they think they can't help," says Dr. Irene Goldenberg, UCLA Professor Emeritus and family therapist. "Another is that they are afraid they'll be treated worse if the bully finds out. Or they believe it's their own fault, and they internalize the problem."

WARNING SIGNS

If you suspect your child is being bullied, the most important thing to discern is whether it is true bullying or just one-time teasing. Before raising the subject, watch for these signs, typical of a bullied child:

- | He or she comes home with torn or damaged clothing, books or belongings; maybe even odd bruises or scratches
- | Has few friends
- | Is afraid of going to school or takes a circuitous route to school



- | Has trouble sleeping
- | Experiences a loss of appetite
- | Used to be upbeat about school but is now reluctant to talk about it
- | Appears anxious and suffers from low self-esteem

If this sounds familiar, ease into the subject by telling your child you're concerned and want to help. If your child tells you that he or she is being bullied, "Take it very seriously," says Dr. Goldenberg. Reassure your child you'll do everything you can to protect him. Let him know the bullying isn't his fault.

FINDING HELP

Talk to teachers, school administrators and coaches. Keep your cool. Remember, you're asking for support in helping your child, so attacking them or accusing them of incompetence won't help.

Ask them for an honest assessment of your child's behavior. "Is my son getting along with his classmates?" "Do you know who my daughter hangs out with?" "Are you aware of any bullying or tormenting going on?" A thorough investigation will usually lead to greater cooperation and getting the help you need for your child.

Whatever you do, experts say, don't confront the bully or the bully's parents. One of the worst things a parent can do is to impulsively call the other kid's parents and scream at them. "You have to take some time. You have to restrain yourself until you figure out what's going on," Thompson says.

WHAT CAN I TEACH MY CHILD?

In addition to getting help from teachers and school officials, it's important to come up with an action plan to help your child get through the school day. Teach your child confident body language, Dr. Goldenberg suggests. "Teach them how to

physically not draw into themselves and become timid and anxious." In addition, suggest the following to your child:

- | First and foremost, don't fight back
- | Avoid and ignore the bully. Bullies need a reaction. Pretend you didn't hear anything and walk to a place of safety. Sometimes this act alone stops a bully cold.
- | Use the buddy system. Walk with a classmate to school. Always have someone to sit with at lunch in the cafeteria.
- | Tell someone you trust — a teacher, the principal, a good friend. Although many kids think that telling on the bully will worsen the situation, it's usually not the case. Sometimes just telling someone can stop bullies because they're afraid of being punished by their parents or the school.

Every child has a right to feel safe, and your involvement can help your child feel as certain of that as you do. But remember: change won't happen overnight.

"Putting an end to bullying requires a sustained commitment from school officials and all the parents involved," says Ann Douglas, author of *The Mother of All Parenting Books*.

"You have to be prepared to carry that attitude through in everything the school stands for and does, from how well recess is supervised to how teams are chosen in gym class. Anything less is failing to walk the walk," says Douglas. By seeing to your own child's happiness, you can set a positive example for the entire social chain. Y

* Name changed to protect victim's identity.

For more information, visit these websites: bullying.info; nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/bullying.html; loveourchildrenusa.org; opheliaproject.org/main/index.htm; and michaelthompson-phd.com/index.htm.