

Emerging Minds Families

FACT SHEET

Protecting your child from bullying harm

Definition

Emerging Minds acknowledges that families come in many forms. For the purposes of easy reading, the term 'parent' encompasses the biological, adoptive, foster and kinship carers of a child, as well as individuals who have chosen to take up primary or shared responsibility in raising that child.

There are many ways you can protect your child from the most harmful impacts of bullying and help them to rebuild their self-worth and confidence.

We know from research and from families who've been where you are now that the following strategies help children cope better and come out of the experience feeling stronger, while reducing the risk of serious impacts of bullying including depression or anxiety.

What you can do

- Help your child form their support team
- Encourage and support your child to build positive connections
- Remind your child of their strengths and best qualities
- Talk about mental health and things that support it

With your help your child can build the skills and supports that everyone needs to navigate difficult times in life.



Help your child form their support team

At all ages and stages of life it's important to have people around us who provide support when we need it.

There's lots of evidence that feeling connected and supported helps protect children from the harmful effects of bullying.

Help your child build a team around them that includes their peers (friends and siblings around their age) as well as trusted adults. They know best which people (or places or things) in their lives they feel most connected to and who gives them the support they need.

If your child has trouble identifying or choosing people, brainstorm together. Try asking them:

- 'Who do you feel safe with? Who can you tell what's happening and you know they will help you?'
- 'Who at school can you talk to?' Remind them it doesn't have to be their current homeroom teacher – it might be a previous teacher, the school counsellor, a year coordinator or someone else they feel comfortable talking to.

- 'Who do you most want to be with when you feel sad?'
- 'Is there a friend, or maybe a cousin, who's been through something similar that you can talk to?'

Talk about the different roles the people in their team have. For example, Grandma might be the person they go to when they don't want to talk about problems, they just want a hug and to watch TV together; while their older sister might be the person they talk to when they want advice about how to deal with stuff at school. Show your child [our video with young people talking about the 'super heroes' in their lives](#) who support them in different ways.

With preschoolers or young children, ask them to hold out their hand and tuck in a finger each time they name someone who is safe, someone they can trust, someone who is kind, and so on. See if they can think of enough people to 'fill' both their hands. You might trace around their hand on a piece of paper and write the names of those people on the fingers, then stick it up on the fridge or in their bedroom as a reminder of who's in their support team.



Draw around their hand and write the names of the people in their support team.

Help your child build positive connections

Children who experience bullying cope better if they have good relationships with their family and their peers (other children around the same age).

Some children who experience bullying start to believe they're unlikeable. They might wonder if the people they think are their friends are 'real' or true friends, or worry about making friends in the future. It's common for these kids to avoid social situations. So it's important to help your child build up their confidence and to focus on the positive relationships they have.

Think about the things you're already doing to help boost your child's confidence that you can build on.

“

I like to help a child understand that everybody is worthy of having a bag full of healthy relationships. And that when they surround themselves with these kind of relationships, ones where they feel safe and just free to be themselves, that's when they actually shine.

If you are a peach and you are trying to be an apple, that's not going to go well. Because the fact is that you are a peach. And actually, not everybody likes peaches and that's fine. Many people love peaches. Your job is to be the best peach that you can be for those people who love peaches. And not to try to make yourself an apple, which is impossible.

MIRIAM WEBB, CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST

What you can do

- Spend time with your child and show them you're interested in what they are doing, or talking about, by paying attention and asking questions. That lets them know they are likable.
- Remind your child what is great about them as a friend. That can help them challenge negative thoughts about themselves or feeling that the bullying is their fault. Ask questions like:
 - 'Why do you think your friends like you?'
 - 'What kind of friend do you want to be?'

- ‘So that’s the type of friend you would like to have too?’
- ‘How would your friends at soccer feel about the way you’ve been treated at school?’
‘Would they be OK with it? Why not?’
- If the bullying is happening at school, support your child to stay engaged in activities outside of school, like sport, where they have other friends.
- Encourage and help them to socialise and build more, or new, connections with their peers. Depending on their age, some ways to do this include:
 - spending time with extended family and/or family friends who have children of similar ages
 - organising after school play dates at your home or in the park
 - asking your child to think about other children at school they have noticed have similar interests or think they might like to be friends with – and brainstorm ways they could spend time getting to know them a bit better, like working on an assignment together
 - finding out if there are clubs or activities at school they might be interested in; and
 - encouraging them to play a team sport or get involved in neighbourhood or community groups or events.

Making new friends can be challenging at any age, and really hard for a child who’s had their confidence rocked. It’s understandable that they feel anxious about putting themselves out there socially.



Ways you can help

- Encourage them gently and start where they feel safe. Try something that’s not focused on socialising, but gives them an opportunity to meet other kids with shared interests and maybe form friendships over time.
- Check out your local library or council for free activities for kids. Or suggest a new interest or hobby such as an art class or learning taekwondo.
- If they’re starting a new activity, meet the group leader or coach first so you know that they’re going to look out for your child, and your child feels comfortable and safe. Or try to find a group or club where your child knows someone that they think they could be friends with.
- Model positivity. Remind your child of what they offer as a friend – that they are kind, funny or have great ideas for games – and that they will make new friends as they grow and go through different stages of life.
- Remind your child that quality is better than quantity: it’s not about having lots of friends, but knowing the ones they have are positive friendships. Also let them know that it’s OK to not be friends with everyone. Encourage them to be kind to everyone, but that doesn’t mean compromising who they are in order to be liked.

Remind them of their strengths and best qualities

If a child believes the bullying they have experienced is their fault, or that it’s because of something wrong with them, their self-worth can be damaged.

Self-worth is different to self-esteem. Self-esteem is how you feel about yourself and can be influenced by praise or approval of others. Self-worth is what you think you deserve; whether you believe in your worth as a person and feel you belong just as you are.

Remind your child of their best qualities, strengths and the things they are good at. Hearing someone they trust talking about what makes them special helps boost their feelings of self-worth.

What you can do

- Tell your child what you and other family members appreciate about them.
 - Are they kind?
 - Do they make you laugh?
 - Are they a great big sister or brother?

- Help your child focus on the things that they are good at and that make them feel good. Depending on their age and experiences, you could ask and talk about:
 - What did they love doing when they were younger?
 - What are they most proud of doing?
 - What's something they have learned or got better at?
 - What is something they want to try?

Teens may not want to talk to you about these things so you could suggest they think about it and maybe write them in a journal. There is lots of evidence that writing down thoughts and feelings in a journal boosts mental health.

Talk about mental health and wellbeing

Experiencing bullying, especially cyberbullying (or online bullying), can be really harmful for kids. Children who experience bullying often feel embarrassed, angry, hurt, isolated or stressed, and sadly some even think about suicide.

Make sure your child knows it's completely OK to feel whatever they are feeling, and that you are there to support them – and get help if they need it – so they can get back to feeling good about themselves and enjoying life.

It's important to seek help if you notice changes in your child's mood, behaviour or appetite, or if they stop wanting to do things they used to enjoy or are refusing to go to school. Speaking to your family doctor/GP or another mental health care professional is a great place to start.

What you can do

- Remind your child what is special about them, the positive things in their life and things they have to look forward to.
- Talk with your child about what makes them feel happy or positive or stronger. It could be a pet, watching a favourite movie, going to see a grandparent or cousin. Encourage or enable them to do those things more often.
- If they are using social networks like Snapchat and TikTok suggest they check out the wellbeing resources on those apps.
- Also suggest they take a break from social media or gaming. Gently remind them that spending a lot of time online can negatively affect their mood and that doing something offline like getting out in nature or spending time with friends will boost their mental health.
- Give them contact details for services that support kids who have been through what they are experiencing right now:
 - Kids Helpline offers free 24/7 support for both parents and children – call 1800 55 1800, [chat with a counsellor online](#), or [send an email](#).
 - headspace has a range of [free online and phone support services](#) to help young people.

Dealing with bullying is tough. Helping your child build their social skills and connections will not only help protect them from harmful impacts of bullying, but also boost their mental health and resilience so they can deal with challenges throughout life.

Immediate support and advice

If you are worried your child might harm themselves, [contact a mental health crisis service](#).

