

Bullying is never a single act. It's a pattern of behavior towards children who may lack support from peers or support and protection from adults at school. Children in the LGBTQ community are among the most targeted. Here's how to understand the problem and what parents can do.



A Hidden Epidemic: How Bullying Affects LGBTQ Youth

"Bullying is the most common form of violence among young people," says Stuart Green, DMH, LCSW, a behavioral scientist at Atlantic Health System. "Whether it is psychological, physical, or both, bullying starts young and exposure to it becomes a significant part of who we are in our adult lives."

Although Dr Green is talking about young people in general, he explains that LGBT and gender-questioning kids are among the most targeted populations for harsh treatment by their peers.

"Many bullied children are noticeably alone, isolated and unengaged at school," says Dr Green. "Since they're required by law to be in school, they must find ways to exist in an environment that doesn't always adequately address the issues."

How can parents help a child who's being bullied?

Dr Green says the most important way to support your child starts with two old-fashioned, well-known values: communication and relationship.

"The best thing parents can do is establish a supportive relationship with their kids," Dr Green says. "Open dialogue with your kids means they feel like they can tell you anything -- even negative experiences. When it comes to bullying, kids will 'tell' or 'not tell' depending on how they feel about who they're talking to."

At best, about half of the kids tell an adult when they're bullied. The other half won't. According to Dr Green, the difference between those who tell and those who don't is a supportive, trusting, open, relationship with a parent. He acknowledges that this can be hard to find for gender-diverse young people who don't fit into masculine or feminine stereotypes.

What can parents do if a child is bullying others?

Bullying is a pattern of negative acts and is virtually never a single incident. If you are on this side of the equation with a child who is repeatedly hurting others, the same principles apply.

"Bullying isn't a hardwired, lifelong condition. It's a behavior kids engage in, but not necessarily intractable or unchanging," Dr Green says. "With a supportive and empathic relationship -- where you really listen -- you'll be able to pick up on whether your child's ways of interacting hurts other kids."

Finding Support for Your Child

The New Jersey Anti-bullying Bill of Rights requires every school to have an anti-bullying specialist on-site -- typically a school counselor. If your child is being bullied, meet with school staff in person. Once any school staff become aware of possible bullying, the school is obligated by law to investigate and understand what's happened within 10 days. If they find harassment, intimidation, and bullying (HIB) is taking place, they are required to take action. Actions can include increasing protection and support for the targeted child and applying consequences for those bullying.

"Teachers and school leaders should be aware of children who lack friends or other supportive relationships, or who may be vulnerable 'because' of gender diversity, special needs or any minority status, although any child may be bullied," Dr Green says.

"The vulnerability of most children bullied is visible, whether it's sitting alone at lunchtime or not belonging to clubs, activities or other social groups. It's the school's obligation to address these issues and ensure peer support and school connectedness. If bullying occurs and a parent meets with an anti-bullying specialist, there are always ways to stop the patterns of violence and help a child feel safe and supported at school."

LINK: njbullying.org