

# Combating Bullying

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Parents have the right to expect their children will be safe at school. In recent years, we have installed cameras, locked outside doors, employed school resource officers, and practiced what to do in case an intruder intends to harm our students and teachers. As educators, we take keeping our students safe very seriously! However, there is one threat to students in our schools, we may not even realize is there. This dangerous threat is bullying. It is difficult to catch the offender in the act, and teachers often have to rely on conflicting information from two students. These “he said, she said” situations make it hard for teachers to get the facts. Bullying is especially dangerous because all children involved may have lasting and serious problems.

Bullies are not always stronger or bigger than their victims. They are not always the student who misbehaves. In fact, they may be so well behaved the teacher doesn't realize they are even capable of bullying. Most bullies do not practice their craft when adults are present, choosing instead to wait until there are no witnesses.

Some forms of bullying such as pushing and shoving are easy to detect and correct, while other types are notoriously difficult to catch. Emotional bullying is more common than physical bullying today, mostly in the form of threats, spreading rumors, or deliberately excluding a student from a group of his peers. Cyber-bullying, which is using the computer to say hurtful things or post threats or rumors on Facebook or Twitter, may happen outside of school hours but still have a dramatic impact on children at school.

You may think bullying would diminish as a child matures, but research studies show there is noticeably more bullying in middle school than in elementary or high school. The bully may believe that bullying other students will boost his own social status and make him popular. Research indicates bullies may continue the trend of abuse and violence as adults. By the age of 30, approximately 40 percent of boys identified as bullies in middle school have been arrested three times or more.

Parents are usually the first to notice signs their child is being bullied at school. Symptoms may include changes in appetite, complaints of being too sick to go to school, declining grades, and inability to sleep at night. If your child is skipping classes, missing the bus on purpose, or asking to change schools, there may be an issue with bullying.

Listen to your children. If you think they're being bullied, schedule a conference with the teacher, your best ally to ensure the bullying is stopped. Support your children, but do not tell them to solve the problem themselves or just to walk away. They often don't know why they are being bullied, and if they could handle it themselves, they would have already done so. Tell your children it is important and safe to let the teacher know when it happens. Some students hesitate because they don't want to be accused of tattling, but bullying cannot be stopped by ignoring it.

We begin teaching students in elementary school about the effects of bullying and how they can make a difference and stop bullying in their schools. Twelve Whitfield County Schools have implemented Olweus, a research-based approach proven to be effective in combating bullying. Children learn why bullying is wrong and how to effectively speak up against it.

We also use a state promoted program called PBIS (Positive Behavior Intervention Strategies), which emphasizes the need for respecting others and their differences.

In spite of the school's best efforts, bullying can take place. Schools need parents to report suspicions of bullying whether it be physical, emotional, or cyber-bullying. Discuss bullying with your children and ask if they have ever experienced it or have seen it happen to another student. Also, remember that children are children and at times, any child can act as a bully under the right circumstances, even yours.