

Kind Kids are Cool Kids. Making sure your child isn't the bully.



Along the way to being the best grown up version of themselves they can be, all kids will make plenty of mistakes. If we adults are healthy and flourishing, we'll make plenty too. It's how we learn and grow. Mistakes just set us all up for the wisdom, insight and strength that it takes to lead a beautiful, full life, free from regret and stagnation.

Finding out that your child is a bully can trigger all sorts of feelings – shame, self-doubt, confusion, fear. The temptation can be to hurl your parenting badge into the fire – ‘It's not them, it's me. I'm a crap parent and where did I go wrong and why is this happening and what did I miss?’

Maybe you missed something and maybe you didn't. One thing is for sure though, we all miss things with our kids now and then – even the parents who look like they have it all figured out (they don't by the way – none of us do). It is one of our rights as parents to stuff things up now and then, to miss things, to get it wrong. It's in our job description, so really, it's a necessity that you fall short of perfect.

Now that we've cleared that up, you need to know that kids who bully aren't bad kids and they don't necessarily have bad parents, though it will always feel that way if your child is the one on the receiving end of their cruelty. Somewhere along the way, the children who bully have learnt bad behaviour, sometimes from the bad things that happen to them or around them, but it can be unlearnt.

If yours is the child who is making life miserable for another, the most important thing is to catch it and respond to it. Feeling guilty, sad or defensive won't help because there's important work to do. All kids deserve to know when they're doing something that will set them up to be miserable one day – and bullying will do for sure. The people they deserve to hear it from are the people who love them. The rest of the world tends to deliver these types of messages in a way that is pretty awful to hear.

The difference between the bullying kids who get through and grow into amazing humans and the ones who don't lies in how their parents respond. It makes all the difference, and that's not overstating it. Parents who ignore the behaviour are effectively steering their kids into an anti-social ditch. They are setting them up for loneliness, unhappiness and the excruciating pain of wondering why people don't like them – because people won't.

Here's the kicker though, eventually, those parents who don't make kindness a priority for their children will one day wonder why their children are awful to them. On the other hand, those who notice anti social behaviour (and let's face it, all kids will go there at some point) and respond to it in a way the children can grow from, will be well on the way to building awesome little humans that the world will be grateful for.

Despite parents saying that kindness is one of the most important qualities they want their children to have, Harvard psychologist, Richard Weissbourd, has found that kids tend to be

more focussed on how well they're doing, rather than how they treat the people. 80% of the kids he surveyed reported that achievement or happiness was the most important thing to their parents – and the most important thing to them. Only 20% said that caring for others was their top priority.

That's not to say that caring doesn't matter for our kids – it does – it's just overshadowed by the push towards good grades and personal happiness. All of these things are important, but there's a gap between what parents report as being a top priority for their children and what the children perceive those priorities to be.

Bearing in mind that all parents do the best with what they have, there are a few risk factors that can lean kids towards bullying behaviour. If any of these look familiar, don't feel put down, feel empowered, because nothing is permanent and everything can be turned around once you know what that 'thing' is. The risk factors are:

- lack of warmth and involvement from the parents towards the child. Kids need attention, love and guidance. They'll always struggle without it. Parents who don't openly show that they care will have kids who don't care.
- parenting that is overly permissive. Kids need to know where the edges are, and they'll keep pushing against boundaries until they find them. The further away the boundaries, the the harder they'll push to find them.
- a parenting style that's authoritarian and uses physical or emotional punishment (shaming, withdrawal of love). Parents who try to control kids by being physical, shaming or by withdrawing love ('I can't believe you did that. Just go away from me.') will have kids who try to control other kids using the same measures.
- older siblings who bully the child. Well if it works for the older ones ...
- friends who are bullies. We all want to feel a part of something bigger and kids are no different. For them, belonging to a group can be the most important thing – even more important than the approval of parents and teachers. Kids will model what they see and they'll do what they need to do to be accepted by the people who are important to them.

The good news is that kids really do want to do the right thing. They really do. They'll get confused about what the right thing is or the most effective way to meet their needs, and if there's no guidance, this confusion can send them off track. Bullying behaviour can always be unlearned. With the strong presence and gentle guidance of a loving, attentive parent, kids who bully can always be steered towards being the kind, empathic and socially savvy humans they're all capable of being.. Here's how to do that:

- 1. Make kindness a priority.**

It's not enough to tell kids that kindness is important – they need to hear that it's the *most* important. Make sure that everyone in the family is held to high standards in relation to the way they treat each other. They can be angry, grumpy, stressed or tired, but speaking to anyone disrespectfully is a no-go. They'll slip up and so will you – none of us are beacons of kindness all the time, but when you snap or hiss, apologise as soon as you can so they can see how it's done and that it's really okay to admit that you get it wrong sometimes.

- 2. Encourage them to think of what other people need.**

You don't want to raise a narcissist – the world has plenty – so help them learn how to turn the focus away from themselves and their own needs, to others and what they might need. Sometimes these will conflict. Knowing how to look after your own needs while respecting the needs of others is a such an important skill. Teach them this and you'll be nurturing them along to happy, healthy relationships and a strong sense of self.

3. Encourage gratitude.

Research has shown that people who practice being grateful are more likely to be helpful, generous, compassionate and forgiving. Ask your kids to name three things they're grateful for. Then let them know three things you appreciate – make sure at least one of them is about them and something they've done that is kind or generous. The little things are just as important as the big things. Turn it into a bedtime ritual or a dinner time ritual. Kids love hearing the things about themselves that you're proud of, so you'll have them well on board for this one.

4. Provide opportunities to care about people (or pets!) they're close to.

Ask them to help with dinner, feed the family pet, read a story to a younger sibling, help with lunches. Then, make sure they are also looked after and shown nurturing by others in the family so they can feel the kindness coming back to them.

5. Then widen the circle.

It's easy for kids to care about the people who are firmly established as members of their tribe – parents, siblings, friends – but it's important for them to care about people outside that circle too. They need to notice the people they are close to, and then zoom out and notice those people who are more distant. It helps them to be aware of their shared humanity and it's important. Talk to them about what's happening in different cities, countries and cultures and about different social issues. Let them see you show concern when kids on the other team get hurt, or ask them how the new child in class is going and what they can do to help them feel included, even if it's just making an effort to say hello. Make sure they're friendly and grateful to everyone who helps them, whether it's the waiter, the bus driver, the tuckshop lady or the young guy who packs your groceries.

6. What need is it meeting?

Everything we do is to meet a need, even if it's a spectacularly ineffective way to meet that need. Try to understand what need your child is meeting – there will be one and it will be a valid, important one. The behaviour can't be redirected in any meaningful way until there's some understanding of the need it's meeting. Needs don't just disappear when you ignore them – they actually tend to push harder. To get to the need, ask 'what', rather than 'why'. What does your child get from doing what they're doing? What happens in them? To them? For them? What good feelings come and what bad feelings disappear when they do what they do? Is it retaliation – does your child's behaviour even up the feeling of power? Is he or she feeling insecure or disempowered at home and is trying to make up for this at school? Are there some big changes at home – a new baby, moving school – that might be causing your child to feel as though things are a bit out of control and pushing a need to control people at

school? Ask – what’s one thing you would change if you could to make your life different? But make sure you say it’s a serious question, otherwise don’t be surprised if you get, ‘well, like being allowed to sleep on the roof would be fun’.

7. Kindness is a muscle.

Kindness is like a muscle. Use it or lose it. Kindness with strength is one of the greatest things we can nurture in our kids. That means being kind to others, expecting kindness from others, and being kind to themselves. If they can get that sorted, they’re pretty much well on their way to ruling the world, their part of it anyway.

8. Conversation is key. And kind of magic.

Conversation changes things. It changes people, lives, paths. Everything. And it’s not all about the big conversations – the incidental ones you have along the way can be just as important – in the car, while you’re cooking dinner, while they’re playing outside as you peg the washing. Talk about the things you see or hear in the news that show people being kind or uncaring. Anything to get them thinking about how other people do kindness. Or how they don’t do it.

9. Be open. They can handle it.

Chat to them about any ethical dilemmas you might be having and how you’re dealing with them. Make sure the dilemmas are age appropriate of course, but invite them to think things through with you. Any insight you have into the way their minds are working is a great thing. Same with any insight you can give them into yours. Talk to them about people saying or doing mean things about other people at work or maybe about people taking credit for something someone else has done. What do they think? what do you think? What should you do?

10. Talk about you.

Talk to them about any experiences you’ve had of people being unkind. Talk to them openly about what it was like for you. Also let talk to them about times you’ve been unkind and what you’ve done about it when you’ve realised what you’ve done. Nobody is perfect, and there’s so much wisdom and freedom that comes with understanding this. You’ll be giving your kids something wonderful if you talk to them about the mistakes you’ve made, what made you realise they were mistakes, and what you did to make things right.

11. Be the person you want them to be.

Role model kindness and empathy. Be careful with things you say about others, even the throw away things you say in passing. Kids pick up on everything! The context won’t matter – if you’re unkind or judgemental, it will give them permission to be the same.

12. So pretend you’re watching movie ...

Invite kids to look at a situation as though they’re looking at a movie. What do they see. What are people feeling?

13. How would they feel?

Explore with your child what it would be like if someone teased him or her. Empathy is an important social skill and is key in relationships. Helping your child to put this into words will help him or her to identify the fact that other people have feelings which are different to theirs.

14. Try a visual.

Take a piece of fruit that bruises easily on the inside. An apple, a banana, a pear. Drop it a couple of times – hard enough to bruise the flesh but not hard enough to be visible from the outside. Then, open the fruit to make the bruises visible. Explain that this is what bullying does. Just because you can't see the damage on the outside, without a doubt it's doing damage from the inside. Explain that bullying makes people depressed ('which is when people are so sad that they can't stop being sad, even when they're doing things that used to be fun for them') and that it can make people hurt so much that they hate themselves and their lives. Tell them you never want them to be the reason someone changes in that way, because you know that they're better than that.

15. 'Catch' their feelings.

Catch their feelings as though the landing in your palm of your hand, safe and sound and ready to have a look at gently and with an open heart and an open mind. If you're child is angry, let them know that you can see this and hold them in the space without having to change it or solve the original problem. Just hold the feeling. 'I can see that you're angry. I understand that. It can be frustrating when people won't do what you want them to do, can't it.' This validates what your child is feeling and takes away the need to defend or explain the feeling. It also lets them know that when they share their feelings with you, you'll understand. This is a powerful thing, and is a wonderful way to model empathy and compassion. Children need to know that what they are feeling is okay, because it is – so okay! The feeling isn't the problem, the behaviour is. Once they are able to accept what their feeling without having to defend or change it, they can start to either let the feeling go, or turn their attention to what other people are feeling. This in itself will encourage healthier behaviour. Feelings don't disappear until they've been felt.

16. Be consistent and attentive.

The more attentive you are to your child, the more open they'll be to looking at their feelings and experimenting with a different way to be.

17. Anger never exists by itself. What's the feeling that's holding it there?

Anger is the emotion people grab on to in order to avoid feeling other more difficult emotions. People use anger as a way to keep those other feelings buried. Common ones are jealousy, insecurity, fear, anxiety, confusion, grief. Look at what is happening around the child and offer some words for feelings that might be underneath, but be quick to move on if your child doesn't grab it as feeling right for them, 'It's exciting having a new baby in the house but it can be a bit scary too. Is there anything that you worry might change with a new baby in the house?' 'I

understand that it's a big change having Daddy not live here any more. Do you feel sad about that? Are you worried about what else might change?' Telling a child not to be angry without finding what's driving the anger can be a bit like telling them not to breathe. Let them know that what they're feeling is absolutely fine, but what they're doing with it isn't okay and that you'll work with them to find a better way to do that.

18. Don't over-inflate them.

People used to think that bullies were kids with low self-esteem, but now there is evidence to suggest that many children who are bullies actually have an inflated view of themselves. As parents we're told to build our kids up, and absolutely we do, but this needs to be tempered with having compassion and kindness for others. Self-esteem without that is the early beginnings of narcissism. Take the focus away from self-esteem, which puts emphasis on achievement and comparison with others, and turn it more towards self-respect and self-compassion, which is behaving with grace, dignity and kindness to themselves and to others. Teach your child that they are a good person, that one of the best things about them is that they treat other people well, that they are wonderful, but not superior and that like anyone else, they have their limits and their challenges but that they also have the resources to deal with those.

There's no shame in having a child who is a bully – no shame at all. The shame lies in suspecting your child is a bully and ignoring it. All kids deserve someone who loves them enough to steer them back on course when they start to veer off – and bullying is one of the sharpest veers of all. With love, attention and guidance, even the harshest bully can become someone kind of wonderful.