



"What if my child is the bully?"

[I was recently interviewed for the Sydney Morning Herald on the topic of bullying \(http://www.smh.com.au/lifestyle/life-and-relationships/parenting/what-if-your-child-is-the-bully-20170322-gv3nir.html\).](http://www.smh.com.au/lifestyle/life-and-relationships/parenting/what-if-your-child-is-the-bully-20170322-gv3nir.html) Kasey Edwards noted in our interview that it's common to hear parents share stories of times their child has been bullied, but less common to hear parents talk about times their child did the bullying. She stated to me, "It seems we have lots of victims and no perpetrators – which I get, because nobody wants to think that their kid would bully." Surprisingly, I've had a number of parents over the years ask me for help on this exact thing and here are my thoughts:

Children don't wake up one day and decide, "I think I'd like to be a bully!" It's not something kids aspire to be – it's something that sometimes happens as a result of a number of situations and experiences that lead them to choose inappropriate actions.

There are 3 fundamental ways for parents to help a child exhibiting mean-on-purpose behaviors (Note: We don't use the term "bullying" in our program and, instead, talk about behavior that is intentionally meant to hurt – we call mean-on-purpose):

Address the Root Cause

It's important to understand that a child who chooses mean-on-purpose behavior to manage conflict is lacking skills. They are still learning! They are ill-equipped to put out their *Friendship Fires*® through conversation or ill-equipped to manage the big emotions they feel inside. Sometimes mean-on-purpose behavior is impulsive or even mean-by-accident, but it's generally a reaction to feeling frustrated or angry.

Children with big, explosive emotions need guidance and support to find strategies to calm themselves down. The key for parents is to recognize when their child is starting to feel angst, like a balloon blowing up with air. The goal is to help their child prevent the balloon from popping by giving their child very practical, step-by-step ideas to work their way through the emotion.

For example:

1. Validate their feelings by naming the emotion (e.g. "I can see you're getting very frustrated playing this card game with Charlie.")
2. Suggest an alternative, appropriate way to let the hot air out. (e.g. "Let's pause the game for a moment, have some watermelon, and discuss new rules that might work for both of you.")

Parents should apply this approach at all times, not just when they're playing with friends. If they notice their child struggling to zip up their backpack, jump in to name the emotion and give a suggestion.

If, however, a child's balloon pops and they're red-hot MAD, understand that constructive, rational thoughts during this time are futile. When anger strikes, a child simply needs time and space to allow the hot air to dissipate. Stay calm and simply identify what they're feeling, "You're mad. I get mad sometimes too. Let's talk about this later." Encourage your child to go for a walk, have some alone time in their bedroom, or listen to music until the 'dust settles'. Once they have calmed down, talk to them about what happened, again, validating their emotions and suggesting an alternative approach for next time. Remind them it's okay to feel the way they felt, but not okay to... [hit their friend, throw the toy, call someone a name, etc.].

Immediate Consequences

While children governing this on their own is the best approach (i.e. it's less effective when teachers/parents negatively consequence a child and more effective when children do it themselves), parents need to follow this very simple philosophy as well. If parents witness their child exhibiting mean-on-purpose behavior, they need to provide an immediate negative consequence. Getting a child to simply say sorry or apologize is insufficient, as a child who is attention-seeking will find this rewarding. Therefore, it's important that parents choose a consequence that will discourage them from doing it again. This sometimes requires *Tough Love*, but there needs to be a *Zero Tolerance*

Policy for mean-on-purpose behavior.

*For example: You're at the park and see your child get frustrated and scream at another child. Name the emotion, identify what you saw and that it's wrong, and provide an immediate negative consequence. In a firm voice, "I know you're angry, but we DO NOT scream at other children. Park time is over." Commit and follow-through, so your child understands you mean business! **

'If/Then Statements' are also helpful if you feel your child is 'walking the line'. For instance, "If I see you whip that ball at Ben's head again, **then** the ball is mine."

While immediate, logical consequences (that match the behavior) are important, not being invited to birthday parties and playdates also serve as a natural consequence for unkind behavior. As heartbreaking as it is sometimes, helping your child recognize there are consequences for their actions is essential in helping change negative behavior patterns.

Strengthening Empathy

It takes some children a long time to cognitively be capable of seeing outside of themselves. You can help your child with this by getting them to make the connection between how their actions affect others. Asking them, "How do you think Reggie felt when you said he was being a baby!? What if someone called you a baby? How would that make you feel?" Encouraging a child to think about the many ways their behaviors or actions can be perceived and/or misperceived helps them to strengthen those empathy muscles.

Parents who recognize their child is "bullying" and who address the root cause, issue immediate consequences, and focus on strengthening their child's empathy muscles will certainly be able to shift their child towards a healthier approach to conflict. What strategies do you use to calm your child down when they are angry? Share your strategies and let's all work together to guide our children towards kind, respectful interactions.

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