“Bully Proofing” Your Child

By Kathryn Kvols

Tears drip through hands that cover his reddened face. Shoulders slumped and lip quivering, he shuffles his way home. This is not his first altercation with this bully. He has been victimized several times - twice over lunch money, once over homework and now losing his favorite pokeman card. Embarrassed and ashamed he slowly walks home alone hoping his mother won’t notice his dirty face.

Thousands of children are bullied every day in some form or another. Situations can vary from more violent acts of bullying to children who get teased. Bullying can be devastating to the recipient no matter what degree it is “dished out.”

Children tease because they enjoy being able to push another child’s buttons. The key here is to teach your child not to react by crying, getting angry, or shrinking back. Telling the teacher may be effective between the ages of 3-8. After this age, the child runs the risk of being considered a “tattletale.” Here are some tools to arm your child with:

1. Inform your child that the child who is teasing is looking for a reaction. Sometimes ignoring or walking away from the situation helps.
2. Role-play with your child some unexpected responses to teasing such as giving the teaser a compliment followed by a question, “I like your watch. Where did you get it?” Or, “If you are trying to offend me, you’re going to have to try a little harder. What else have you got?” When you role-play with your child, make sure your child is using a tone of voice that is neither provocative nor “wimpy.” Instruct your child to stand straight and to look the teaser directly in the eyes. If your child is unable to look the teaser in the eyes, have him look in the middle of his forehead. The teaser will not know the difference.
3. Victims are never happy people. It is imperative that your child realizes although he may not have control whether someone teases him or not, he does have a choice in how he reacts. He chooses whether to be proactive or to be a victim.

Children often don’t tell parents or teachers they are getting bullied because they are embarrassed and humiliated, they are afraid of negative parental response or because they are being threatened something bad will happen if they tell. Here are some signs that may indicate your child is being bullied:

1. Your child does not want to go school or complains about having headaches or stomach aches.
2. Your child demonstrates unusual behavior around certain parts of the day where he may be getting bullied. For example, the teacher may mention that he is staying in from recess to help her.
3. Money may be missing from your purse or he may ask for extra lunch money.
4. His clothes may be torn or dirty or have unexplained cuts or bruises.

If you see signs listed above or if you have any suspicion that your child is being bullied, it is important that it is stopped before it gets severe. Generally these situations escalate as time passes.

What can you do as parents to “bully proof” your child. Here are some suggestions:

1. It is important that you are a calm and non-reactive as possible when you talk to your child. Becoming angry or overly protective may discourage him from telling you the truth.
2. Talk with your child’s teacher. Talk with the principle or school psychologist if you do not get the results you want with the teacher. Make sure that you follow up with the school in person or by phone.
3. Instruct your child walk with a group of children at all times. Bullies usually pick on children who are alone.

Seek professional help if you have tried the suggestions above without success, Children need to feel emotionally and physically safe in order to learn. If your child is thinking about the kid who will tease him at recess or the bully who will be demanding his dessert at lunchtime, your child will have a hard time concentrating on his lesson. Your child is learning patterns now about how to handle conflict in the future. He needs a safe advocate who will “go to bat for him” and more importantly, he needs the skills to handle life’s curves to build his self-esteem.

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