

# What If Your Child is the Bully?

*By CJ Scarlet, aka the "Badass Grandma"*

Many parents sheepishly admit they'd rather their child be a bully than a victim. (I'm not suggesting these parents *want* their children to be bullies, just that they'd rather have a dominant child than one who's considered a "wuss" living at the mercy of others.)

Virtually every child has the potential to act like a bully given the right circumstances. Even if you haven't been told your child is a bully, you may see behaviors that give you pause. You need to pay attention to these signs and to your gut and take action to nip those behaviors in the bud before they become a real problem.

## Signs Your Child May Be a Bully

Here's what to watch for:

- A general lack of empathy for others.
- Seeming to enjoy the pain and suffering of others.
- The need to be in control.
- Underdeveloped social and interpersonal skills which cause him to become easily frustrated.
- Engages in vicious gossip or talks disparagingly about others.
- Has been bullied or abused themselves by siblings, peers, or a parent.
- Disregards rules and doesn't stop bad behavior when told to.
- Shows little or no remorse for his actions.
- Blames others for his actions.
- Is intolerant of or shows contempt for kids who are different or "weird."
- Taunts or teases other kids.
- Seeks both positive and negative attention.
- Hangs out with known bullies.
- Hurts animals.
- Has witnessed you, the parent, doing any the above things.
- Has parents who are overly permissive or punitive.

## Believe What's in Front of You

If you see these behaviors in your child, talk with his teachers and his friend's parents to see if they've witnessed him engaging in bullying behavior. If they have seen your child behaving badly, sit down with your son (or daughter—girls can be bullies too!) and try to figure out why he's bullying others.

Ask:

- Has *he* been a victim of bullying or other kind of abuse?
- What exactly has he done (e.g., taunted, hit, harassed, cyberbullied another child)?
- Why did he do it (i.e., what led him to bully the other child(ren))?
- How long has he been bullying others?
- Is he bullying in order to avoid becoming a victim himself?
- Does he feel remorse for his actions?
- Is he willing to change his behavior?

## Yikes! My Kid *Is* a Bully. Now What?

If you find out your child is a bully, try to remain calm and not panic or act defensively. It's good that you know because you can now do something about it. Whatever led your child to act like a bully can be addressed and his behavior can be changed for the better.

Please don't use shaming as a way to get control of his behavior. There's usually an important reason kids bully others and your job is to reveal that reason(s) and address it calmly and maturely. Shaming is also a form of bullying in itself, and you don't want to be that parent.

### ***Dealing with the Victim and Her Parents***

If you find yourself confronted by an angry parent who's accusing your child of bullying theirs, your kneejerk reaction might be to automatically and even angrily defend your child. But *every* kid has the potential to act like a bully under the right circumstances, so try not to react defensively without knowing the full story.

Apologize, even before you have all the facts. That will calm the other parent down enough to talk more reasonably about what happened.

Make your kid take full responsibility for his actions by sincerely apologizing to his victim (while looking her in the eye!). A genuine apology can go a long way toward appeasing the victim and her parents.

Brainstorm ways your child can make amends (e.g., replacing any broken or stolen items, paying the victim's medical bills, etc.). It's so important to do this, not only because it will appease the victim and her family, but because it's the right thing to do.

In her book, *The Boogeyman Exists and He's In Your Child's Back Pocket: Internet Safety Tips For Keeping Your Children Safe Online, Smartphone Safety, Social Media Safety, and Gaming Safety*, Jesse Weinberger advises parents to say something to defuse the angry energy, like:

“Regardless of what occurred today, I’m sorry it happened at all. I will help you get to the bottom of it, and make sure it never happens again.” Weinberger points out that you’re not admitting guilt, but you are saying that you’re willing to help sort out the details.<sup>i</sup>

Once you’re heard the other parent’s version of what happened, Weinberger advises you to “Interrogate your own child like he knows who shot JFK.” (LOL!) Keep asking questions until you get what you believe is the closest version of the truth your child can offer.

If your kid was in fact the victim and was merely defending himself (which may reveal a chronic problem at school or online, needing to be dealt with once this initial incident is handled), communicate that to the other parent or school officials, if they get involved.

### ***Time to Parent Up!***

If, on the other hand, your not-so-innocent lamb instigated the incident, plant yourself front and center into the situation, both to protect the victim and to help your child navigate the repercussions he may face.

Talk calmly to your child about why his actions were wrong and the effect they had on the victim. Talk with him about empathy and compassion and how to treat others with respect. Tell him the full range of consequences of his behavior, including the potential that he could face criminal charges or your family could be civilly sued; and that his reputation could be severely damaged, which could affect his ability to get college scholarships, college acceptances, internships, and other opportunities.

This “talking” may not make the impact you’re hoping for, so you’ll want to back it up with appropriate consequences that bring your points home.

### **Dishing Out Consequences**

Your child may be suspended or, for more serious offenses, expelled from school. Suck it up. If you get defensive and try to shield your child from the consequences of his actions, you’re denying him an important emotional growth opportunity and necessary lessons about how to get along with others and resolve conflicts. Worse, you’ll encourage him to continue his bad behavior and create a monster who may escalate his actions and commit even more severe crimes.

It’s perfectly appropriate to punish your child, but not by hitting or physically abusing him, which just validates his belief that violence is the answer. Instead, put him on restriction and/or take away access to his favorite things, such as his phone or computer, video games, TV, music, and time with friends. You want the punishment to be unpleasant and consistent.

Taking away electronics privileges is especially important and appropriate if your child was cyberbullying someone. Losing his screen time for a lengthy period will not only be painful for him, it'll put distance between him and his victim and any cohorts who were egging on his bad behavior.

Or, if your child is into a favorite sport or activity, you could choose to suspend him from a few games or said activities. That may mean missing the big game or even the prom, but stick to your guns, Mom and Dad! Giving in to your child because he pitches a fit or because you feel sorry for him and don't want him to miss out on a cherished activity will only validate his bad behavior.

Your goal is to stop it. Hard. Make the consequences swift and painful and immovable and teach your child that you mean business. It's the quickest and most effective way to teach him that there are consequences for his actions and that it doesn't pay to be a bully.

This is one of my favorite punishments for kids who bully: Make him read a book about bullying (or cyberbullying, if that was the case) AND write an essay on what he learned to show he actually read and absorbed the information.

WeAreTeacher.com has a list of books about bullying for kids from pre-k to high school. The length of the essay should be based on your child's age (ranging from, say, an oral report for a pre-k child, to 200 words for an 8-year-old, to 500 words for a teenager). You can find this list at <https://www.weareteachers.com/14-must-read-anti-bullying-books-for-kids/>.

Let the victim's parents and your son's school know that you're applying strong punishments and encourage them to call you if anything else occurs. Again, it makes the injured party feel better AND it's the right thing to do.

## Teach Better Behavior

Your child may lack the positive social skills needed to interact easily with other kids. If he has anger management issues, you need to find out why. Is it something he's learning from home? From YOU?

Be honest here. If you or your partner are a bully, it's understandable that your kid will emulate what he experiences at home. If this is the case, work on your own anger issues while you work with your child to manage his. Be a good role model and show your kid how it's done!

If the issue is impulse control, which is often the case with children with developmental disabilities, work with your child to teach him better ways of interacting with others so he has a list of ways he can react if he's provoked or excited.

In either case (anger issues or poor impulse control), consider getting your child into counseling to help him—and you—get a handle on his bullying behavior.

It could also be that your child doesn't know how to make friends and be a good friend. In my books, *Badass Parenting: An Irreverent Guide to Raising Safe, Savvy, Confident Kids* and it's

“cleaner” version, *Heroic Parenting: An Essential Guide to Raising Safe, Savvy, Confident Kids*, I have a whole section on how to teach “friending” skills to your child.<sup>ii</sup>

### ***How to Steer Your Child Toward Good Behavior***

There are a number of proactive steps you can take to guide your little bully to better behavior:

- Nurture his empathy by talking about how people feel when they’re suffering. You can use almost any story from the news, from crimes to catastrophes, to point out the victims’ suffering and ask your child to imagine how the victims must feel.
- Encourage your child to perform random acts of kindness. This is one of THE most powerful ways to raise a good-hearted, non-violent child. When he does things to help others, whether its volunteering at a homeless shelter or helping a student who’s fallen to pick up his books and get back on his feet, he’ll feel great about himself, increasing his self-esteem and making him want to do more nice things. It has the added benefit of helping change others’ perception of him from being “bad” to being kind. (You can find tons of examples of ways to be kind on the Internet.)
- Teach him how to be a good friend.
- Get him involved in positive activities like team sports or other youth activities that align with his aptitude and interests.
- Encourage him to read books on bullying for kids that are appropriate for his age.
- Limit or stop his exposure to violent TV shows, movies, and video games which can desensitize him to violence.
- Use roleplay, taking turns with your child being the victim and bully to help him better appreciate what it must be like for the victim.
- Be on the lookout for good behavior and positively reinforce it with praise or rewards.
- Set a good example by practicing all of the above yourself. Be an “upstander” and come to the defense of others when you see them being bullied, then talk to your child about how he can be an upstander too.
- To help your son navigate this tricky world of popularity and bullies, keep the lines of communication open. Talk to him about what’s going on at school and about the “mean kids.” Get to know your child’s friends and their parents and create a social safety network.

### **Love Your Child**

Help your child find his footing and become a kinder, more compassionate and empathetic human being. Again, modeling this behavior for him through your own actions is the most important way to teach him these.

Praise him when he does kind things and gently correct him when he veers in the wrong direction. Positive reinforcement really helps and is often a more effective way to alter behavior than punishment.

But be realistic. It takes time to change one's behavior and your child may experience setbacks. Be consistent with your consequences and positive reinforcement and be patient as your kid works to find new ways to interact with his peers.

In all case, you want to act out of love. Your son (or daughter) is your cherished child and deserves to be treated with respect and dignity and love—all of which teach him to treat others in the same manner.

So, be proactive, be consistent, be patient, and be loving. You and your child will get there!

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<sup>i</sup> Weinberger, Jesse. *The Boogeyman Exists; And He's In Your Child's Back Pocket: Internet Safety Tips For Keeping Your Children Safe Online, Smartphone Safety, Social Media Safety, and Gaming Safety.*

<sup>ii</sup> Check out these books at [www.Amazon.com](http://www.Amazon.com).