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Helping Your Child If They Bully: Action Steps for Parents

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A reporter recently asked me to whittle down my action steps to three main points. That was an interesting process, as it's a complex issue, made more complicated by the emotional toll for all involved. So, here goes:

1. Remain calm and gather as much information as you can.

- When you receive the call, most likely from the school or another parent, take a deep breath and try not to overreact. It's a natural reaction to defend your child or raise your voice, particularly if the person on the other end of the line is upset.
- Find out what your child is accused of doing to another child.
- Let the person know that you are taking this seriously and will get back to them.
- Meet with your child to find out his/her version of the situation. Try not to accuse your child. Instead, ask the child what happened that day and what parts of the story that you heard were true.
- Try to find out if your child was bullied and if they bullied in retaliation.
- Rule out that your child's actions are due to any type of developmental challenges.

2. Hold your child accountable and help develop their capacity for empathy.

- This sounds challenging, and it is! Hurting others either through physical actions, spoken words, texting or email is simply unacceptable. Talk to them about having the situation reversed and they were the one being targeted. How would they feel? Set up ground rules for privileges that will be withheld due to this instance and the consequences going forward.
- Once you determine that they are ready, have them apologize and make amends to the child that they bullied.
- Use teachable moments on the news. Unfortunately, bullying is regularly in the news after a child commits suicide. Take these opportunities to reinforce the harm caused by bullying.
- Teach positive behaviors. Model empathic, kind behavior. Try to get them engaged in an activity that helps others. They can volunteer to help with a toy drive, a food or clothing drive, help out with their younger siblings. Caring for pets can work too.
- Try to eliminate the amount of violence that they take in each day. Children are constantly exposed to violence on TV, movies, the Internet and video games. Often, the perpetrator is viewed as the victor. This constant feed of violence may also make them numb to the suffering of others.

3. Be a hands-on parent at school.

- Learn about the policies regarding bullying prevention that are in force at the school.

- Find out what training there is for parents. If it isn't available, ask the guidance counselor at the school or the Parent Association leader to arrange one.
- Communicate regularly with your child's teachers to find out how he/she is progressing both with school tasks and interactions with other children.
- Find out if the school offers conflict resolution workshops for the children and how they address these issues.
- Find out if there are extra-curricular activities that your child would enjoy that might help build a sense of teamwork and cooperation.

Remember that a child is not born a bully. Change is possible once the problem is identified and your attention is given to help them change their behaviors.

For more information about bullying and other child safety issues, please visit www.nyspcc.org.