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*A Guide for Parents*

by Gail Matthews

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## About the Author

Gail Matthews is a concerned parent, not an academic. Gail is been concerned about the problem of bullying in schools which her children attended.

She started to look for further information and was surprised at the extent and serious effects that were linked to bullying from children and also adults who had been bullied or were bullied in their adult lives.

Gail decided to focus her book on bullying of children because that was the area she has had some direct experience with.

She felt there was a need for a simple, non-technical guide with suggestions that could be used by parents like herself wherever they were located.

She believes that this book will help people to assist their children by encouraging them not to bully others and how to best deal with bullies they encounter.

Gail also shows parents some signs that may indicate that children are being silent about bullying they encounter.

She also includes some suggestions about how to support the efforts of their schools and other groups to reduce bullying and deal with its effects.

Gail believes the information which she has gathered will be useful to people, whatever their situation and location. She says that bullying is a world-wide, growing epidemic.

She hopes her book will encourage parents and other interested people to take action about bullying and support its victims so that we can reduce the effects which bullying has on our society and our children's future.

## **Introduction**

This book is intended to show parents who care how to help their children and also how you might be able to make a positive difference in the lives of all the children at the schools which they attend.

I will help you to understand, prepare for and deal with the most common types of bullying.

All parents have a personal stake in reducing and, where possible, preventing bullying in their children's schools and their neighborhood.

The effects of bullying can be very deeply felt and long-lasting.

Some victims never fully recover. There have been some incidents where bullying has resulted in someone taking their own life and even those of other people who were not ever part of the bullying itself.

The rapid growth of the Internet and high-speed communication by mobile phones and other easily available methods has seen a huge increase in bullying where the bully and the victim may be miles apart. But, the effects can be just as bad.

We cannot prevent all bullying and I don't believe that we can stamp it out.

But, for the sake of our children and communities, we need to take an active part in reducing its effects and helping our children.

Gail Matthews 2009

## What Is Bullying?



Most people know that bullying involves physical or emotional abuse of someone by another person who is more powerful. That person may be stronger physically or emotionally or have a position which gives them the opportunity to dominate the victim.

A bully is not interested in a physical or mental contest. A bully acts against someone that they believe cannot or will not be able to stop them doing whatever they want to.

Most bullies make repeated attacks and demands on their victims but even a single incident can be harmful to the person that is targeted.

Bullying usually occurs when the bully tries to demonstrate that they or their group are superior in some way to the person they victimize.

They look for a target that is likely to offer little resistance and to react in a way which will make the bully feel superior.

Bullies often browse the school yard near the beginning of the year, looking for potential victims.

Most bullies seek to feed their own ego, some seek power over the victim to get them to do their bidding and a dangerous few actually enjoy hurting their victims.

But, all bullying in whatever form can and usually does inflict damage which can affect the victim and also sometimes those close to them for years.

Bullies may approach their victims in any part of the school, even in areas where adults may be present. But, most attacks occur when adults are not about.

Boys are likely to bully both sexes while girls mostly bully other girls.

Bullies will probably have other potential victims in mind and will switch to another target on their mental list when and if the current victim gets help or starts to assert themselves.

Victims may be targets of the same bully over a long period and are also likely to be targeted by other bullies in later years that also recognize the vulnerability.

## Types of Bullying

Bullying occurs in schools, businesses, all kinds of organizations and groups and, unfortunately, also in many homes.

It can take many forms, physical or psychological and each can result in long-term negative effects which may not be obvious until long after the actual bullying episodes.

The most common types of bullying are explained below.

**Verbal harassment:** This could range from teasing to deeply offensive insults. Be aware that teasing, which many people regard as a minor annoyance, can inflict real hurt on the victims.

The bully will usually target the other child's ethnic background, clothing, speech, appearance, mode of speech or sexuality. The venom in the words will have added sting because of the bully's manner and implied physical threat.

**Violence:** This is probably the most common type of bullying behavior. It can vary from:

**Theft:** Bullies might steal their victim's property just to upset them, because they want the item or so they can sell or trade it with other children.





**Physical harassment:** This may range from annoying pushes and pokes to actual sexual assault. The amount of sexual harassment experienced by older school children has surprised researchers.

**Damage to personal property:** Bullies will sometimes destroy personal property as a means of intimidating their victim. Sometimes they will target the victim's homework, textbooks and other study material which can cause trouble for the victim with their teachers when they are unwilling to explain why their work is not up to standard and their books are damaged.

**Threats:** The victim may be threatened with physical attack or other punishment just for the effect on them or it may be used as a means to get the victim to agree to do something which they would not normally do, such as stealing or whatever else the bully wants them to.

When the child does what the bully has demanded, they think they have no option but to do whatever the bully demands of them later on because they fear exposure of the original theft they were forced to do.

**Social exclusion:** This is where the bully and the group which supports him or her prevent the victim from enjoying their company or taking part in their activities.

This discrimination in social situations by actions or threats which exclude the victim from a group or activity without good cause was described as one of the most hurtful forms of bullying.

There is no physical damage but the emotional impact is intense and continuing.

It is commonly accepted that girls may use this more often than actual physical attacks.



The victim has to watch the interaction of the group every day while knowing that they cannot take part.

It can be equally devastating for a male victim as the desire to be part of the group is very strong for both sexes.

The enforced loneliness is made worse by the knowledge that there is no good reason for them being excluded.

**Hazing:** Some groups require anyone that wishes to become a member to submit to rituals or activities, sometimes called "hazing", that may be degrading, involve violence and even be dangerous.

The successful participants endure the experience for the chance to be accepted in the group. Then, they take part in the initiation of future prospective members.

This may be regarded by some people as a form of ritualized bullying but the members would say it is "just a tradition".

**Long distance intimidation:**

Most bullying occurs in face-to-face situations but there has always been some bullying which was done over a distance.

Some bullies used to mail poison-pen letters or secretly insert notes with similar content into their victims' bags or lockers. That way, they could be far away when the target opened and read the message.

But, the development and spread of low-cost technology has encouraged a significant and growing amount of bullying where the target or victim is contacted on their own mobile phone or similar device or over the Internet with a text or verbal message.



The bully can deliver threats or lies and slurs with, usually, much less chance of being called to account.

The letters and scrawled notes could be just torn up and disposed of, but the electronic messages are much harder to ignore and their vile contents can be sent to hundreds of people in a few minutes. Sometimes, a bully will send dozens of messages in a short period of time, aiming to cause maximum distress.

A related form of harassment which is affecting more children, and even adults, each year is the spreading of malicious and usually untrue comments and stories about them through messages to third parties in internet chat rooms.

This can be particularly hard to deal with because the victim may not even know that this is happening until a friend tells them about a message they've seen.

By that time, the messages and rumors could have been read by hundreds of people and spread even more widely.

## Who are the Bullies?

It's disappointing but true that almost every child or adult has the potential within them to be a bully. Even if they do not take that role, they could become part of a group that support a bully, either actively or passively, in their attacks.

Some children or adults that may not usually try to intimidate anyone will bully others when they get an opportunity to exert power over another individual and believe they have little chance of ever having to be accountable for their actions.



This is like people that are honest in all their day-to-day activities but might take money from a wallet or purse which they find in the street if they believe that there is little chance that they could be found out.

Sometimes, a child may use bully tactics on another child to gain some advantage without understanding that they are bullying them. They might say, "It was just a bit of fun" because they do not realize or care about the possible negative effect on their victim.

In a later section, I will explain some ways that you might use to help your children learn how to recognize and avoid using these tactics in their interactions with other children.

No form of bullying is ever excusable because there are always negative effects on the person who is targeted.

Children who bully others are more likely to become involved in petty crime in their adolescence and adult lives. They may also bully their friends and partners in later life.

Some children, who themselves have been bullied by other children or in their home environment, may react by starting to use the same tactics themselves on other children or their own younger siblings.

Most bullies prey on other children because:

- It gives them a feeling of power.
- They attract other children into their group who support their actions. They will then also manipulate these other children to do what they want.



### ***Where do Adult Bullies come from?***

According to the research I've seen, bullying is supposed to decrease as people move through their teen years and on into adult life.

But, it does not disappear. Bullying occurs through all areas of adult life, personal and business.

Some of it is the work of people that were bullies when they were young, but there is another group who bully other people when they have a chance to; people that bear the scars from being a victim and later on begin to use the tactics which were used on them against others. This includes their partners and often their children as well.

## Causes of Bullying

There is no definitive list of factors which cause children to become bullies.

For every bully whose parents or carers were indifferent to their needs or insensitive to their desires, there is also a person whose early home-life was similar but who grew up with a more balanced and caring attitude.

But, most researchers believe that parents are the most powerful influence in the development of bullying behaviors in children.



The first and most important way is by the example they set in how they treat other people and, of course, their own family.

Parents who commit themselves to finding time to listen to and support their children while providing a safe environment with clear and consistent rules will give their children a great start in life.

Parents and other people that influence children may encourage the development of bully characteristics if they:

- Express racist or other anti-social views.
- Give one of their children more favorable treatment than others.
- Ignore aggressive acts by a child against their siblings or other children
- Demonstrate by actions or words that they have a low opinion of a child's abilities.
- Put family time at the bottom of their priority list.
- Make sarcastic comments about their child's ideas and accomplishments.
- Bully their partners, children or friends.

- Fail to set guidelines for their children when they are dealing with family members or other people.

Parents and other role models are a major influence on the child's developing attitudes and actions.

A school which tolerates or ignores any bullying incidents will encourage the development of systematic bullying that will become very hard to remove.

Children who have been bullied at school sometimes become bullies themselves.

### ***Violent Games and Movies***

Children have always been entertained with stories that involved violence and other anti-social behavior.

Over many years, a multitude of books, comics, radio shows, movies, television programs and computer games have, in their turn, been criticized as unsuitable or even harmful to children.

Through the years, almost all boys and many girls have copied the actions and attitudes of their favorite fictional characters in games with their friends at school and in their homes.

This usually has not had any negative affect on them but there have always been a few incidents where particularly aggressive children have upset or deliberately harmed others while acting out their own versions of the stories they had seen.

It's probably no surprise that some researchers say that children feel more assertive just after they have seen a violent story. But, they are usually able to release the pent-up energy in games with their friends.

It's possible that children who do not have friends and spend their time mostly using their computer or watching television may be more negatively affected by their bottled-up hostility.

During the time that home computers and the Internet have become more easily accessible to most families, the technology behind computer games and movies has improved and they now are able to affect the viewers' emotions with greater force.

More people have started asking if these forms of entertainment might exert a strong negative influence on very impressionable people, especially children, to copy the aggression which they see being used to achieve successful outcomes with minimum effort or risk.

The claim is often heard that many movies and computer games encourage bullying and other antisocial behavior.

There was actually a game called "Bully" released in 2006 by an American videogame company called Rockstar Games. In the original game, the teenage "hero" used bullying tactics against other pupils and teachers. He pushed other characters heads into toilets, assaulted them in various ways and also took compromising photos of some of them.

After pressure from teachers and parents, some stores did decide not to sell the game. But, that did not prevent "bully" winning awards. The publicity probably helped the game to achieve a higher level of sales than it might have otherwise.

Sales were so good that an updated version was released in 2008.

The later version was released in the United Kingdom with a rating that allowed it to be sold to children 15 years and over.

The major retailers said that they would abide by the rating but none refused to sell the new version.

Critics said that this would mean that much younger children would also be able to get hold of the game fairly easily. Even if their own parents refused to let them get their own copy, many would get access when they visited the homes of their friends who had the game.

The updated version is also available for use on the newer game consoles, such as the Xbox and Wii.

It was described by a spokesman for the Rock star Games software company as "one of the funniest games you will play."

A review on a web site described it as a "light-hearted depiction of high school".



Tactics used by the main character in the new version include hand to hand fighting, exploding firecrackers on the face of another character as well as using itching powder and stink bombs.

While the market-place rewards producers of games like this with substantial profits, some companies will continue to produce and market them.

Criticism that does not result in restrictions is seen by the companies as valuable free publicity.

There is, as far as I know, no proof that this sort of entertainment encourages the average player to use the same tactics in their own schools and other places.

But, the effect of this material on less well adjusted players is claimed by some researchers and parents to be an unacceptable risk.

They say that the problem is greater because:

- The violent characters are the most successful and suffer no penalty for their activities.
- The blood, pain and other physical effects on the victims is not shown or is minimized to comply with current legislation. That can give the viewers the impression that the effects from even the most violent incidents are only minor. I remember seeing many Westerns when I was young where almost everybody who was killed by bullet or arrow usually died smiling without the slightest hint of discomfort!
- The amount of this kind of entertainment which many children see is much greater than it was even a few years ago. Television is sometimes referred to as the "electronic babysitter". The new computer games and other similar devices are fulfilling the same function in many homes because it's becoming more common for both parents to have to work to support their family.
- There is less parental involvement or supervision of what children are exposed to. Many children have their own televisions,

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