

HEALTH + DEVELOPMENT/FAMILY SAFETY

Bystander Power: Teaching Kids To Stand up Against Bullying

What you – and your kid – can do to stop bullying

BY GEMMA ALEXANDER (/AUTHOR/GEMMA-ALEXANDER) |

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For a behavior that is as old as childhood itself, bullying is poorly understood by most people. It is often much more subtle than fistfights and stolen lunch money. And although it is quite common, it is not an inevitable part of growing up. Nor does bullying make kids tougher. Studies have shown that the harmful effects of bullying are much more significant and lasting than a black eye.

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Students who experience bullying are at increased risk for depression, anxiety, sleep difficulties, lower academic achievement and dropping out of school. But kids who bully also suffer; they are at higher risk for a wide range of academic and behavioral problems. Even kids who merely witness bullying suffer adverse impacts such as increased absenteeism. Bullying negatively impacts academic achievement for all three groups. And all of these impacts last into adulthood.

“

When kids stand up to bullying, we know that we can reduce bullying by more than 50 percent.

”

Bystander power

Fortunately, research has also revealed a surprising secret weapon against bullying — bystander power. Statistics vary, but it's estimated that about 13 percent of kids participate in bullying behavior, while 20 percent of kids experience bullying. But most kids — anywhere from 70–90 percent of children — witness bullying. These kids have a unique ability to change the dynamic.

“We call it bystander power because it really is a powerful position to be a bystander. Bystander power is the ability to recognize, refuse and report bullying,” says [Jasmine Williams, Ph.D.](https://www.parentmap.com/author/jasmine-williams-phd) (<https://www.parentmap.com/author/jasmine-williams-phd>), a senior research scientist at the [Committee for Children](https://www.cfchildren.org/) (<https://www.cfchildren.org/>). “When kids stand up to bullying, we know that we can reduce bullying by more than 50 percent.”

Recognize

So how do kids activate their bystander power?

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You Have the Power to Prevent Bullying

Committee for Children (<https://www.cfchildren.org/>) is teaming up once again with bullying prevention superhero Captain Compassion in support of National Bullying Prevention Month. Activate your bystander power (<https://www.cfchildren.org/resources/bullying-prevention-information/>) to receive weekly bullying prevention tips.

The majority of research has been done with older students, but studies show that the dynamics and nature of bullying in students as young as kindergarten age mirror what takes place among older students. Bullying can look like pushing, name-calling or intentional exclusion on the playground.

“Hotspots are hallways and the cafeteria — places where there is less supervision. But it can also happen in the classroom,” says Williams. A new hotspot for bullying is social media.

“We are all spending more time online, and what can be really hurtful and problematic about cyberbullying is that it only takes one post,” says Williams. An unflattering or altered picture can be shared repeatedly, accumulating new comments indefinitely. While kids who are bullied in person can at least get away from it when they come home, cyberbullying is harder to escape.

From physical aggression to mocking memes, how do you pin down what really counts as bullying?

“Bullying is intentional physical, verbal or social aggression that is often repeated over time, and it typically occurs when there is a power imbalance between the person or

people who are perpetuating the bullying and the victim who is being bullied,” explains Williams. That’s a valuable definition for parents trying to interpret the stories they hear from school, but for kids, Williams suggests a simpler metric: How would you feel if someone said or did that to you? If the answer is “bad,” then kids can recognize that there’s a problem.

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Refuse

Even when kids recognize that a behavior is bullying, they are often afraid to speak up. It’s empowering to let kids know that half the time, all it takes to shut down a bully is the disapproval of their peers. Standing up to bullying doesn’t have to be dramatic. Often something as simple as saying, “That’s not funny,” can be effective.

For some kids, speaking up in front of others under any circumstance is an intimidating proposition. And in extreme cases, it might actually put a child’s own safety at risk. But even when they can’t stand up to a bully, bystanders still have power. One of the most powerful things that a student can do is provide support to the person who is being bullied.

“It can be something as small as reaching out to a peer or friend who is being bullied and asking if they’re okay,” says Williams. Inviting someone into a group when others are excluding that person is a little harder, but it can make a powerful difference to a bullied child.

Report

The final component of bystander power is reporting. Although kids have more power than they realize to stop bullying, the myth that kids should deal with bullying themselves is still harmful. But adults can’t intervene if they don’t know that bullying is taking place. Kids need to know that reporting bullying to their parents and teachers is not the same as tattling. Parents need to believe their children and not be dismissive of the problem. If your child tells you about bullying at school — even if they were not directly involved — you should contact the school and make sure that teachers and administrators are aware of

and acting on the problem.

Captain Compassion

Captain Compassion and her sidekick Kid Kinder are the comic book heroes of the [Committee for Children's bullying prevention campaign](https://www.cfchildren.org/resources/bullying-prevention-campaign) (<https://www.cfchildren.org/resources/bullying-prevention-information/>). The Captain Compassion comics for elementary school students show Kid Kinder using bystander power in a variety of bullying situations.



Comic panel from *Captain Compassion*

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In the latest installment, Kid Kinder is himself the victim of racially motivated bullying. This focus is always relevant – Black teens experience up to five instances of racial discrimination daily. But it's especially timely this year when families of color are so disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic – through higher infection rates, more severe economic impacts and unequal access to remote learning resources. When bullying takes on a racial dimension, the impacts are compounded with these other stressors. Black and Hispanic youths who are bullied are more likely to suffer negative academic and even physical health impacts than their white peers.

“When we’re talking about racially motivated bullying, we’re really talking about harassment,” says Williams. “When children and young people experience harassment and racial discrimination, it can lead to serious lifelong consequences in terms of decreased self-esteem, self-worth and even physical health ailments.”

Besides bystanders

In addition to the Captain Compassion comics for kids, the Committee for Children website

provides [anti-bullying resources \(https://www.cfchildren.org/programs/bullying-prevention/\)](https://www.cfchildren.org/programs/bullying-prevention/) for parents that are supported by research on effective social-emotional learning strategies. A [series of videos \(https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLNjiZRTK9Gf_shZfpRqS_4c2DLixzjEOr\)](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLNjiZRTK9Gf_shZfpRqS_4c2DLixzjEOr) address what to do if you witness bullying, if your child is bullied and if your child bullies others.

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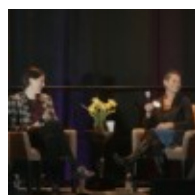
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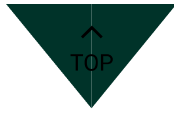
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