

## Helping Your Children Handle Teasing and Bullying

Do you remember the school bully who went around teasing and threatening you or your classmates? Remember how you felt? Remember how you wished he would just go away? Ever wondered what happened to someone who was teased or bullied or what became of the bully himself?

According to Jennifer Page, Family and Consumer Sciences Extension Agent in Llano County, teasing and bullying is an ongoing problem for many of our children. Research reports that as many as 24 percent of middle school students reported bullying others at least once in the past year. It is estimated that almost 77 percent of students were involved in some type of moderate or frequent bullying, either as the target of the bully, as the bully, or both.

Those who are the victims of teasing and bullying can experience long-term consequences. Victims of bullying may suffer from anxiety, fear, and low self-esteem. They may avoid peers, school, and social activities where they may be exposed to teasing or bullying. In some cases, children may drop out of school to avoid being harassed or attacked. “Negative consequences for those who bully have been demonstrated as well,” says Dr. Rick Peterson, Assistant Professor and the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service Parenting Specialist. “Childhood bullies have school attendance and performance problems. Those who bully tend to become aggressive adults and are more likely to become involved in criminal activities.”

Parents and adults should not expect children to deal with bullies on their own. Children need to be taught that bullying is an unacceptable behavior. Children must be taught useful strategies to help them cope with teasing and bullying. Teasing and bullying cannot be totally prevented, but children can be taught to control their own reactions. Parents can teach their children some simple strategies to empower them and help them cope with their feelings and sometimes helplessness. Page says some strategies parents and caregivers can teach their children include:

- ✓ Self-talk. Give children things they can say to themselves when they are being teased or bullied, which can counteract the negative remarks or behaviors. A child can say to herself, “Even though I don’t like being teased, I can handle it.” Oftentimes, the teasing is not a true reflection of the child, and the child should question himself by asking, “Is the teasing

true?” In addition, the child should remind himself that his opinion of himself is more important than the teaser’s opinion.

- ✓ Ignore the teasing. Children should practice ignoring the teaser since reacting with anger or tears may invite more teasing. Parents should monitor the teasing, particularly if it turns into bullying and/or harassment, and be willing to intervene.
- ✓ “I messages” are a way for children to express their feelings and ask to be treated differently. For example, a child could say, “I feel upset when you make fun of my clothes. I would like you to stop.” This strategy may work best in a classroom or daycare setting, where adult supervision is present.
- ✓ Using humor is another way to cope with teasing. By the child laughing at the hurtful comments or put-downs, it shows that the teasing has little effect on them. Another way to show indifference is for the child to respond to the teasing with, “So.” By responding with “so” indicates that the teasing doesn’t matter. Children find this simple reply to be an effective response to teasing.
- ✓ Asking for help at times is necessary if the child is having trouble with the above strategies or if the teasing turns to bullying. Children can handle most types of teasing. However, if the teasing is repeated or occurs for a prolonged period of time, it becomes bullying and may call for an intervention by parents, teachers, and caregivers.

Source: Dr. Rick Peterson, Assistant Professor and Parenting Specialist, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service.