

Stand up to bullies

 hvparent.com/bullying



Editor's note: It's hard not to agree with the [Mid-Hudson Valley Community Profiles](#) project's assessment that targeted bullying can have a negative impact on a student's self-esteem along with the ability to concentrate and learn. Or that bullying has a ripple effect, where non-bullied kids in proximity of incidents involving bullying others become afraid or insecure.

Fortunately, the assessment also shows that incidents of bullying in the region decreased by 15 percent between 2014 and 2018. Troublesome, however, is that despite the decline, there were 9.3 bullying incidents for every 1,000 students in the region in 2018.

Here, James McGuirk, Ph.D., president of the [Children's Foundation of Astor](#), looks at how kids are bullied, its harrowing effects and how to address and stop it.

Your 12-year-old son has always loved going to school. All of a sudden, he is complaining of stomach aches, headaches – any excuse to stay home. You recently heard from a friend whose child believes that your son is being verbally harassed on the bus and in the lunchroom. The friend suggests there may have been some physical abuse as well, and you are left reeling.

Bullying is a serious, pervasive issue. February 28 marks International Stand Up to Bullying Day. In our society bullying occurs in-person, in schools and at home, sometimes through the veil of computer and phone screens, away from adult supervision. According to the National Center for Education Statistics' 2017 School Crime Supplement, about 20 percent of youth ages 12-18 experience bullying, and 15 percent of students in this age group reported being bullied online or by text. Similarly, the 2017 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System shows that 21.7 percent of New York State youth ages 14-18 reported being bullied on school property, and 17.6 percent reported being electronically bullied within the prior 12 months.

Manifesting in a variety of ways, bullying can include verbally teasing, name calling, threatening or taunting someone; physically harming a person or their property, as well as socially isolating someone by excluding them; alienating them from peers or starting negative rumors. These behaviors often occur in schools or places where children gather in groups but can also follow them home due to the increasing use of technology. Modern and insidious cyberbullying can occur through SMS, texts, social media, chat rooms or gaming forums where people can view or share content online. Often causing embarrassment or humiliation, digital torment includes sending, posting or sharing negative, harmful, false or mean content about someone else.

Bullying causes widespread effects. While bullying has been an issue facing youth for ages, there has been growing recognition about the negative ways it can impact the lives of victims. Repercussions can persist through adulthood and include depression, anxiety, weight loss and decreased academic achievement, among others. Distressingly, the information reported about bullying is not always paired with actionable steps to prevent and address the torment that children may be experiencing.

According to stopbullying.gov, only about 20 to 30 percent of student victims report bullying to an adult, which makes it critical for parents and guardians to understand the signs and social dynamics of bullying, as well as ways to handle it when it effects their children. For instance, if your child begins regularly complaining of physical ailments, is increasingly reluctant to go to school, or has a change in mood or behavior, there might be something wrong and worth exploring, even if the ultimate cause is not bullying.

The most important thing parents can do when they suspect something is wrong, is to talk with and listen to their children. Check in frequently and ask them how they are feeling. If they claim to be fine, which is a common answer from youth, suggest to them that their recent behavior is unusual or concerning and that, as a parent, you are committed to protecting and supporting them. Ask direct questions, like: "Are you feeling safe?"; "What is it like to ride the school bus?"; "Is anyone treating you badly?" or "How are you getting along with your friends?" These prompts can act as catalyst for your child to begin to share or engage in a deeper conversation.

Bullied kids need support. Candidly asking your child if they have been bullied is important, similarly, to asking them if they are depressed, anxious, suicidal etc. By inquiring, you are providing them with a direct lifeline to receive help. Victims, especially youth, can struggle with asking for help and articulating painful feelings on their own. It is vital to listen without interrupting or immediately offering advice, as parents are often tempted to do.

Bullying can trigger feelings of shame or low self-esteem, so let kids know they are not alone and engage them in joint problem solving to develop some solutions they feel comfortable with. These may include: immediately reporting incidents of bullying to a teacher or administrator, such as the school principal or guidance counselor; staying safe by avoiding the people, places or activities where bullying occurs; engaging in activities they love, like sports or art-related clubs; directly telling a bully to stop, and walking away if this is not effective; speaking with a mental health counselor; staying close to adults or a trusted group of friends and, in some cases, involving the authorities if the bullying escalates further.

Do not be apprehensive about seeking professional help for you or your child if they are experiencing sadness, anxiety or other side effects of bullying. By scheduling an appointment for a consultation with your child's pediatrician or mental health expert, you can drastically improve, if not save, your child's life. If you live in Dutchess or Ulster County, you can bring your child into one of [Astor Services for Children & Families'](#) mental health clinics, no appointment necessary.

Bullying is stopped through action. Take steps combat the existence and escalation of bullying in your child's school and community by working with other parents, teachers and administrators to enforce safety, inclusion, respect and zero tolerance for any form of harassment. Stay informed and involved by spending time with your child and asking them about their school day, feelings and perceptions of, or experiences with, bullying. Encourage them to be kind to others, and to stand up for victims of bullying. By educating them about this issue from a young age, you can help build their self-confidence and better protect them from being targeted.

Both parents and children can benefit by learning more about bullying. There are several great websites to visit, including stopbullying.gov and helpguide.org/articles/bullying-and-cyberbullying.htm.

James McGuirk, Ph.D., president of the Children's Foundation of Astor, has extensive clinical experience working with high risk youth. A licensed psychologist, McGuirk previously served as CEO of Astor Services for Children & Families for 17 years. For more information on programs and services offered by Astor, please visit www.astorservices.org.

Additional bullying resources:

NATIONAL

Stopbullying.gov

[Pacer's National Bullying Prevention Center](#)

NEW YORK STATE

[Cyberbullying](#)

ORANGE COUNTY

[Safe Schools Ambassadors](#)

[Safe Homes of Orange County](#)

[America's Promise Alliance, Orange County](#)

[Cornell Cooperative Orange County, Let's Talk About Cyberbullying](#)

DUTCHESS COUNTY

[Mediation Center of Dutchess County](#)

[Mental Health America of Dutchess County, Kids on the Block](#)

[Grace Smith House, Teenagers & Peers](#)

ULSTER COUNTY

[Ulster County, Stop Bullying](#)

[Mental Health Association of Ulster County](#)

[Girls Incorporated of Ulster and Dutchess Counties](#)

[YWCA Youth & Family Services](#)

SULLIVAN COUNTY

[Frost Valley YMCA, No Room for Bullying!](#)

[Safe Homes of Orange County \(and Sullivan County\)](#)

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