

BULLYING: STRATEGIES TO PROTECT YOUR CHILD

Bullying is an unfortunate social reality that many children experience. Nationally, research reflects that between 20 – 30% of children report being the victims of bullying. Bullying, unlike normal peer conflict, is characterized by three key factors: 1) It is intentional acts of aggression or harm, 2) carried out repeatedly overtime, and 3) within a relationship that involves a perceived or actual imbalance of power. Bullying can be direct (e.g. physical acts of aggression), indirect (e.g. spreading of rumors, purposeful exclusion) or occur online or through social media. Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are up to four times more likely to be victims of bullying due to the social difficulties that they experience such as struggles with social interactions, challenges in understanding verbal and nonverbal social cues, and restricted and repetitive interest or patterns of behaviors which are often interpreted by their peers as “odd”. Children with ASD are also at a greater risk due to their social isolation and lack of a supportive peer group, which often serves as a protective factor against bullying.

Bullying can negatively impact the mental health of young children and adolescents and lead to increased depression or anxiety, poor self-esteem, difficulties sleeping or eating and decreased academic achievement. It is important that parents provide protection and safety for their children through increased awareness and understanding of bullying behavior and the supports that are available to protect against it. Here are some helpful strategies on supporting your child with ASD who is experiencing bullying:

1. Be Curious – Be aware of subtle changes in your child’s mood and behaviors. Don’t be afraid to ask questions. Although your child might not give you

direct answers, express an interest in their day and take what they say seriously. Don’t be afraid to follow-up with teachers to gain details about what they report.

2. Increase protection and safety – Work with your child to come up with strategies to address the bullying. Remember it is not your child’s job to solve this problem alone. Work closely with school staff to bring their awareness to the issue and develop an effective plan to keep your child safe. Also consider seeking out mental health supports if your child needs a safe place to process their emotions or experiences.

3. Be a model – Develop clear family values and rules around bullying and respect for others. Children with ASD may misread bullying behaviors so help your child to understand when other children are not “just playing around”. Ignoring the bully or fighting back is often ineffective. Teach them appropriate responses in these tough situations and strategies for seeking help.

4. Create opportunities for positive social interactions – Build your child’s support group through positive peer interactions. This includes play dates with trusted peers or involvement in social outings. This will help your child to experience genuine peer interactions and better distinguish bullying behaviors.

** This is a two part series on bullying in children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Next month we will address school based supports. Kristen Joyner, Psy. D is a licensed clinical psychologist and Jeanne Anne Carriere, Ph.D is an educational psychologist at The Center for Autism & Neurodevelopmental Disorders.*

