

# BULLYING

IN

## SECONDARY SCHOOLS



What parents need to know

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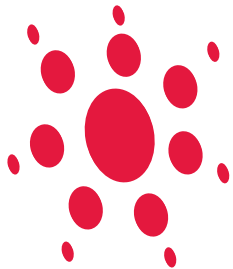
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# Acknowledgements

We wish to thank the following North Eastern Health Board personnel for supporting The Cool School Programme:

Aidan Browne, Assistant CEO.  
Co. Meath Child Psychiatry Team.  
Nuala Doherty, Director of Childcare.  
Dr. Nazih Eldin, Health Promotion.

We also wish to acknowledge the support of:  
Mr. Noel Dempsey, Minister for Education and Science.  
The In-Career Development Unit of The Department of Education and Science.  
MGI Airproducts Medical.

*Special thanks to Alana Conroy and Dara Flynn*

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## Introduction

As parents of school going adolescents you may be concerned not only with their academic performance but also with how they are managing socially. You may be worried about the possibility of your teenager being bullied while at school and wonder what you can do to prevent it or how to deal with it if it occurs. Indeed you might already be in the process of grappling with the effects of bullying and have personal experience of just how difficult it is to address this problem. While it is very unlikely that bullying will ever be completely eradicated, there is much you can do as parents to prevent it happening and to manage it where it has already occurred.

This book, “Bullying in Secondary School: What Parents Need to Know” is written with just those concerns in mind. It offers advice on how to prevent and manage bullying, whether your child is a target of bullying, or has a tendency to engage in bullying behaviour. It is the third in a series produced by the Cool School Programme, an Anti-Bullying initiative for Irish post-primary schools developed within the North Eastern Health Board’s Child Psychiatric Services. The first two booklets “Responding to Bullying” and “Investigating and Resolving Bullying in School” were written for teachers.

The Cool School Programme includes a whole school approach to policy development, teacher training,

development of materials, a web site and group therapy for those victimized by bullying and individual intervention for those who use bullying behaviour. There is also a research component to the Cool School Programme which has resulted in a number of publications. All aspects of the programme are being evaluated. The focus of ongoing research is on curriculum, girl bullying, teacher/pupil bullying and the impact of bullying on the whole school community.

The Cool School Programme aims to provide a support service for schools to facilitate implementation of the Irish Department of Education and Science *Guidelines on Countering Bullying in Primary and Post-Primary Schools (1993)*.

Bullying in schools has become the focus for international research in recent decades and it is clear that the bullying problem is widespread (Smith et al 1999). Recent studies in Ireland indicate that about 15% of secondary school students are bullied while at school (James et al 2002, O’Moore et al 1997). Many initiatives to deal with the problem have been undertaken internationally by governments, education authorities and by individual schools. In Scandinavia, an important conclusion has been drawn from research into bullying which suggests that the attitudes and behaviour of teachers are of major significance for the extent of bullying problems in schools

(Olweus, 1993). Adult help is almost always needed to solve bullying problems. Parents and teachers are ideally placed to influence attitudes and change behaviour and the best way forward is for close cooperation between schools and parents.

The biggest challenge facing adults is that many adolescent victims of bullying are reluctant to tell anyone about it. According to two studies in Ireland, only one in five students who were frequently bullied told their teachers (O'Moore et al., 1997), and only one in three told their parents (James et al 2002).

This book provides information for you as parents about different aspects of bullying. It will help you identify if your teenager is being bullied or is bullying others and explore how you can support them. Finally it offers suggestions on how you can communicate effectively with teachers and schools and your own children.

You may find it useful to read some sections of this book with your child.

**Note:** For the purposes of this publication the term “parent” is interchangeable with “guardian”. Gender references are also interchangeable.

## Chapter 1: What is bullying?

### *A Definition and Some Examples.*

There are many definitions of bullying available. The Cool School Programme defines bullying as:

Aggressive behaviour which is an abuse of power by an individual or group of individuals against others. It may be physical, verbal or psychological, and is usually deliberate and repeated. Bullying can often be racist, sexual or relational in nature, and those targeted often find it difficult to defend themselves against it.

*Examples of types of bullying are listed below:*

**Physical Bullying:** Hitting or beating, kicking, pushing, pinching, tripping, choking, spitting, stealing, vandalising or damaging property.

**Verbal Bullying:** Name-calling, jeering, teasing, taunting, slugging, threatening, daring others to do things they know to be dangerous or wrong.

**Psychological Bullying:** Excluding, isolating, demeaning, ridiculing, malicious gossip, spreading rumours, passing notes, using peer pressure to intimidate, scapegoating, setting others up for humiliation, threatening gestures or looks.

**Sexual Bullying:** Unwelcome sexual comments, unwelcome touching,

spreading rumours about a person's sexual orientation.

**Racist Bullying:** Discrimination, prejudice, comments about colour, nationality, ethnic, or traveller background.

**Relational Bullying:** Manipulating relationships as a means of bullying e.g. ignoring, excluding from the peer group, ostracising, spreading rumours, breaking confidences, huddling together to exclude others, talking loudly enough so that the victim can hear their name being mentioned, demeaning dismissive looks, abusive messages, notes, letters, or drawings, abusive text-messages, e-mails and phone calls.

### *Who Is Likely to Become a Target of Bullying?*



Anyone can become a victim of bullying. Even children who do not stand out as being different from others can suffer serious bullying. All it takes is to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. The bully will find something about the child to be the focus of negative attention, or may invent a reason. It can happen to anyone.

However, certain factors may set some children apart as being more vulnerable to name-calling and slugging, which is often how bullying starts.

#### Factors can include:

- Physical differences.
- Being new to the school or class.
- Being adopted.
- Recent family stress e.g. bereavement or parental separation.
- Coming from a different cultural background.
- Being a loner.
- Having a different accent.
- Needing to wear spectacles or hearing aid.
- Having special needs, e.g. learning difficulties or health problems.
- Being very timid or shy.
- Having different interests to the main group.
- Lacking social skills.

Children who are particularly anxious are more prone to being bullied by their peers as are those who lack the ability to make and keep friends. Being a loner and tending to avoid others confers greater vulnerability. Young people with social communication difficulties, e.g. Asperger Syndrome, are particularly vulnerable to victimisation.

All children need positive attention from parents and while discouraging habits like bragging or boasting, parents should find genuine reasons to affirm their children regularly, and take special care to talk to them on a daily basis about their experience in school.



Some students with behavioural problems may unwittingly provoke bullying behaviour from others. In particular those with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) are often at risk. Their impulsive overactive behaviour is seen as provocative. However on

most occasions it is not intentional but is often perceived as such by other students and teachers. The behaviour of people with ADHD may be very annoying to others and they can best be described as provocative victims. It is important to remember that these behaviours are not deliberate. These children with ADHD require patient reminders and prompting in order to address the repetitive nature of their difficult behaviours.

The following is a list of some of the signs or behaviours to look out for if you are concerned your child may have ADHD. These behaviours occur in all children sometimes, but if most of them occur on an almost constant basis, it is possible that your child has ADHD. You may need to request a psychological assessment through the school or discuss with your GP the need for a referral to the Child Psychiatry Services .

### *The signs of ADHD:*

- Difficulty in playing or engaging in leisure activities quietly.
- Not being able to sit still.
- Talking excessively.
- Blurting out answers.
- Being easily distracted.
- Interrupting or intruding on others.
- Having difficulty with turn-taking.
- Leaving their seat in the classroom or in situations where remaining seated is expected.
- Not listening when spoken to directly.
- Running or climbing excessively in

- situations that are not appropriate.
- Inability to be organised.

### *Effects Of Bullying*

Being subjected to bullying has been shown to have long-term and wide-ranging effects on young people who may experience some of the following:

- Stress
- Anger
- Fear
- Anxiety
- Powerlessness
- Loneliness
- Depression
- Low achievement
- Loss of confidence
- Ideas of suicide and self-harm



Many victims feel depressed and anxious. A study of adolescent victims of school bullying indicated that one in five victims reported feeling very suicidal as a result of bullying (James et al 2002). Those who experienced psychological bullying and social exclusion were the most distressed.

Also, as the frequency of bullying increased the victims felt worse. In fact half of the students who were persistently bullied reported that it made them feel suicidal. Persistent bullying can lead to hopelessness, low self esteem and depression - all of which are predictors of suicide attempts. If your child seems to have lost interest in life, doesn't seem to

be enjoying anything and/or expresses suicidal thoughts or feelings you should consult your GP for advice as your child may need psychological or psychiatric help (Lawlor, 2001).

## *Young People Don't Tell*

There is a culture of secrecy surrounding the whole issue of bullying especially among adolescent students in secondary schools. Research in Scandinavia, Japan and Ireland indicates that very few tell a parent and fewer still tell a teacher when they are being bullied. There are complex and understandable reasons why this is so. The fear of retaliation is a legitimate reason not to disclose bullying as is the fear of others seeing that you can't cope with the normal cut and thrust of interacting with your peers. Children often decide to put up with bullying rather than confront the possibility of the whole class or school knowing about it. Furthermore, the culture of silence in school is so strong that reporting bullying is understood to be the same thing as telling tales. You as a parent will need to teach your children that there is a difference between telling tales and telling to be safe from bullying. You might like to put it this way: "Telling tales is telling to get someone into trouble, telling to be safe is telling to get someone out of trouble".

Young people may also be confused by conflicting advice from parents about

what to do. Students who have been given mixed messages about standing up for themselves are often ashamed of the fact that they cannot seem to do so, even though they may have a parent who expects this of them. For this reason, it is crucially important for parents to be in agreement when giving advice to their children about coping with aggression from others. By expressing your concern, showing your willingness to help and by being patient and supportive, you will be more likely to get your children to confide in you. Get to know your children's friends and make a point of knowing their parents' phone numbers. Shared social activities may also give you the opportunity to meet their parents who may be able to throw some light on what is happening.

Bystanders who witness bullying often remain silent because they believe it is not their business to intervene. Others may not know how to intervene effectively or are too afraid to do anything about what they are witnessing. Those who remain silent through fear or collusion are affected. They may be afraid that they will be targeted next or be feeling guilty that they did nothing to stop the bullying. It should be pointed out that bullying is unacceptable. It is right and acceptable to show compassion for and take the side of the weaker party. It is crucially important for parents to encourage children to tell if they witness bullying so that the culture of silence can be changed.

## How Can I Know If My Teenager Is Being Bullied?

All bullying situations are different. What makes it difficult for parents to establish whether their teenager is being bullied is that a young person's response to bullying may have similarities to normal adolescent behaviour, some of which may be caused by stresses other than bullying. For example, being less talkative at home, showing variations in mood, becoming sensitive about appearance, demanding more money and showing signs of being hungry are often part of normal adolescence. However sudden unexplained changes in your child's behaviour are important signs of distress and should be checked out.

### Physical signs:

- Unexplained bruising, cuts, scratches, sprains or torn clothing.
- Loss of property or damage to personal belongings.
- Hunger or thirst due to loss of lunch money to a bully.
- Frequent minor illnesses, headaches and/or stomach aches, nervous rashes.
- Bedwetting.
- Not eating.
- Being obsessive about appearance and cleanliness.
- Stammering.
- Asking for extra money or stealing (to pay off a bully).



### Emotional and psychological signs:

- Fearfulness.
- Acute anxiety.
- Panic attacks.



- Avoiding friends and other children.
- Uncharacteristic bullying of siblings and/or other students.
- Uncharacteristic outbursts of anger.
- Refusal to discuss what is wrong.
- Change of sleeping or eating pattern.
- Becoming withdrawn or moody.



- Dropping usual hobbies and interests.
- Loss of confidence or self-esteem.
- Excessive tearfulness or crying themselves to sleep.
- Nightmares.
- Excessive sensitivity to criticism.
- Seeking to be alone.
- Implied or overt threats of suicide.

### Signs related to school:

- Returning from school in a very bad mood and showing reluctance to talk about it.
- Unwillingness to go to school or asking to be accompanied.
- Changing school route.
- Avoiding certain days or lessons.
- Uncharacteristic nervousness in class.
- Staying close to teachers.
- Punctuality problems.



- Poor concentration and a deterioration in school work.
- Expressions of hopelessness in school work e.g essays, poems or artwork.
- A reduction in phone calls, friends calling, or invitations to social events.
- Being excluded from groups.

- Never being chosen for sports teams.
- A reluctance to take part in previously enjoyed activities.
- Abusive phone calls.
- Abusive text messages or e-mail.

Your child may experience one or more of the above. There are no hard and fast rules. However, if your child reports even one of these it is important to listen carefully so you can decide on the seriousness of the situation.

Parents should be aware that many bullied children DO NOT show outward signs of being bullied, and may be unable to tell parents or teachers for a variety of reasons, e.g., fear of retaliation or shame that they cannot seem to cope. Parents who communicate on a daily basis with their children about their experience in school, are more likely to notice any slight changes in attitude, or mood.

### *Is It Bullying?*

If you are unsure that your teenager is being bullied, considering the following may help you decide.

- Is verbal, psychological or physical aggression being used?
- Is there an imbalance of power because of a wide discrepancy in age, size, strength, or ability to articulate?
- Is the bullying behaviour deliberate?
- Is the person so upset that they feel unable to handle the bullying situation?

## What Can I Do If My Teenager Is Being Bullied?



On discovering that bullying is happening you are likely to experience a range of emotions which may include:

**Anger** - you may want to punish the bully.

**Helplessness** - you may feel there is nothing you can do.

**Isolation** - you may be unaware of others who have had the same experience.

**Confusion** - you don't know what to do.

**Anxiety** - you may be overwhelmed by an instinct to protect your child and find that the problem is all consuming.

**Disappointment** - that your child failed to stand up for himself.



It is important that you stay calm and avoid over-reacting. Convey that you are confident about providing help and support and that you will do whatever is necessary to stop the bullying. This is a time to show unconditional love and acceptance. Praise your teenager for volunteering the information about the bullying because they have taken the most important step in solving the problem. It is important that they are given whatever time and support is necessary to express their pent-up feelings.

Sometimes parents “under-react” when a young person tells about being bullied. They may not recognise the significance of the incident for their son/daughter, or the extent to which they have been distressed. Parents need to take bullying seriously, and take steps to support and protect young people at the earliest possible opportunity.

The following are messages your child needs to hear from you for reassurance:

"We are going to sort this out".

"Bullying can happen to anyone".

"The bullying should not have happened, and you are not expected to put up with it".

"It is not your fault".

*"You do not have to face this on your own".*

"There is nothing wrong with you".



Don't underestimate the importance of giving your child these messages

### *Safety First.*

If there has been a physical attack, or threat of one, the school should be contacted before the young person returns to class. Your child should not be encouraged to retaliate, as there may be a risk of injury especially if there is a gang involved. If the incident took place at school, the principal may report it to the police as a matter of policy. You yourself may wish to report the incident to the police, particularly if the assault took place outside the school grounds. Any physical injuries should be treated by a doctor or at a hospital. When considering the young person's safety, you may wish to ask an older brother, sister or friend to keep an eye on them on the way to and from school and within the school itself.

You may wish to give the following advice depending on the situation:

- If attacked or in danger-run away and get help.
- Stay with a group of friends, and never be last to leave a building or room. There is safety in numbers.
- Avoid places where bullying is known to happen, e.g., isolated areas.
- Stay in sight of teachers and adults where possible.
- Think about varying the times of arrival or departure from school.
- Change route to school.
- Leave valuable items at home and do not brag about possessions or money.
- Do not provoke a bully.
- Look the bully in the eye, stand straight and look confident. Stay calm.
- Keep a diary of bullying incidents. Record days, dates, times, those involved and what happened.
- Shout loudly for help if under physical attack, break free if possible, and run away. Go to the nearest adult for help. Sometimes shouting "NO!" and getting away may be enough to prevent an attack.
- If you are cornered and subjected to a physical attack you can try protecting vulnerable parts of the body, especially your head.



### ***Fighting Back?***

Parents vary in their views on this question. Some believe that the simplest solution is that their child should “fight back” and that this is the best advice to give. Others feel that this should be avoided at all costs. Parents or guardians need to be in agreement about what advice to give to a child in this regard. Lack of consistency leads to confusion for the young person. In reality this is a complex issue with a number of dilemmas, which should be borne in mind. The risk of injury to the child or another person if things go wrong is a serious consideration. Although your teenager may emerge on top from a physical fight, there is no guarantee that he will not be attacked later in revenge, thus escalating the violence. It may be totally unrealistic to expect young people who have been hurt or bullied to fight back. There are

other implications also such as disciplinary action from schools, which usually have an absolute ban on fighting.

Because fighting can lead to injury a young person who fights back in self-defence may run the risk of being accused of assault. For these reasons the general advice would be that the young person should get away to safety and seek support from a responsible adult. While it is understandable to want to get back at somebody who has hurt you, it would be more constructive to look at ways of stopping the bullying than to cause harm to anyone else.



### ***What If My Child is Adamant They Don't Want the School Involved?***

You will need to sit down and discuss with your child how you are going to manage the situation. Explain to them that you may have to contact the school.

As a parent you will need to gauge when a bullying situation has gone on too long. It can be hard to find a delicate balance between over-reacting and under-reacting. While there are situations where parents can deal with bullying problems without enlisting the support of the school, this is probably more the exception than the rule.

A young person who is reluctant to tell a teacher for fear of making the situation worse may need to be coaxed. Remember that keeping bullying secret only allows it to continue. Discuss their worst fears about telling, and assure them you will take whatever steps are necessary to ensure basic safety. This may mean driving them to school instead of taking the bus, collecting them on time after school, etc. If your teenager continues to be adamant, you may need to make a parental decision to override this if their physical well-being or their mental health is compromised. This can be compared with a situation where a child needs urgent medical treatment, e.g., a broken limb. In that instance a parent needs to take control of the situation in the child's best interest.

### ***Approaching the School***

Parents are sometimes reluctant to complain to schools about their children being bullied. You may be concerned about how the problem will be handled, e.g., will complaining make matters worse? What about confidentiality? Will you be

seen merely as a fussy parent or a crank? Will teachers take it as a criticism of their management skills or their professionalism?



While these are understandable concerns, it is important to remember that adult intervention is almost always required to stop bullying when there is an imbalance of power between bully and victim. Because by its nature, bullying happens in secret, you may find that teachers are unaware of the problem. You may also feel impatient if the bullying is not being investigated as fast as you would wish. This might not necessarily mean that the school is dragging its heels. As well as focusing on the needs of your child, teachers may also be interviewing other students and managing the bullying situation within the school's anti-bullying procedures. All this takes time.

The following are general guidelines for parents who need to make a complaint about bullying.

The school's anti-bullying policy should state clearly who your first point of contact should be. Possible helpful contacts in the school could be: the principal, deputy principal, year-head, tutor, counsellor or an anti-bullying co-ordinator if one exists.

### *Preparing for a Meeting With the School*

Telephone the school and request an appointment with the principal, deputy principal or your child's class tutor. Prepare for the meeting by making a note of the circumstances from your child's point of view. Focus on:

**Who?** Names of children involved and of witnesses. Your son/daughter may not be the only one being bullied and there may be several pupils bullying.

**What?** The nature of the incident/s and the behaviours involved.

**When?** Dates and times of incidents.

**Where?** Location of incidents e.g. corridors, classrooms, school bus.

**Why?** Are you or your child aware of any reasons for the bullying?

**At the meeting:**

**Ask** to have the incident investigated.

**Ask** what support the school can offer your son/daughter, e.g. counselling or supervised mediation between the parties

if appropriate.

**What** action will be taken to protect your child from retaliation?

**How** will the situation be monitored, for how long and by whom?

**Ask** to be kept informed about progress. Set a date for this.

**Establish** who you should contact and when.

**Keep** a written record of the details and outcome.

### *What Can I Expect From the School?*

In Ireland schools are encouraged to have an anti-bullying policy (See Appendix 1). Check that your school has this and ask for a copy. The policy document should clarify the procedures which are in place for dealing with complaints. Most incidents will be dealt with in meetings between the teacher and the accused student/s. Verbal warnings are often sufficient to end the bullying if followed up by frequent monitoring. If the bullying persists or if it is serious enough to warrant it, the parents of the bully may be required to attend a meeting with the principal. In general it is not advisable that you approach the parents of the bully directly.

When the problem has been resolved to your satisfaction and the satisfaction of your child, encourage the young person to

go out, make new friends, and avoid brooding. However, he/she will need plenty of encouragement from you at this time to help them come to terms with what has happened. Taking up a new interest or developing a new skill will help your teenager to move on.



### ***What Happens If the School Does Not Respond to My Concerns?***

Some parents have had the unfortunate experience of having brought bullying to the attention of a teacher or school yet the bullying persists. It may be that the school is unwilling or does not know how to confront a particularly aggressive pupil. It may be because the nature of the bullying is particularly difficult to address e.g. relational bullying or that the school has no effective procedures for

investigating bullying incidents.

If you find yourself faced with a situation where the school claims that they have done all they can to help even though your child is still being bullied, you may have to consider other options.

In some situations you may need to take the problem to the Board of Management or to the Education authorities. In this event it will be important to put all complaints in writing.

- Address your complaint to the Chairman of the Board of Management, outlining the problem, what steps you have taken so far and what outcome you are seeking.
- You may be asked to attend a meeting of the Board of Management to discuss the issue. If so, make notes of points you wish to address and keep a written record of the proceedings.
- If you are still unhappy with the outcome, you may write to the Divisional Inspector of the area. You will need to find out the name of this official by telephoning the Department of Education & Science.

In rare circumstances you may decide to consider changing schools or alternatively teach the child at home. These are difficult decisions for any parent and you may need to seek advice and guidance from the Department of Education and Science or from

education professionals such as the school principal or counsellor. It is important for you as a parent to be sure that a change of school will have the desired result. There are some issues to be considered, particularly the stress that changing school during a school year will put on your already stressed child. Also there is the possibility that your child may not settle well or that she may be bullied again in her new school. Nevertheless there are some children who benefit greatly from a well planned fresh start. If the situation is serious enough to warrant a change of school and you see no other option, then it is important to prepare your son/daughter well for the move.

Points to consider:

- Talk to them and listen to their fears.
- Reassure them that you will be there to support them at all times.
- Discuss the anti-bullying procedures with the new principal, making him aware that your child has been victimised in the past.
- Encourage your son/daughter to approach the new move with a positive attitude, leaving the previous negative experiences in the past and setting out to make new friends.

## Chapter 2: Nipping Bullying in the Bud

### *How to Build Confidence*

There is a great deal that you as parents can do to lessen the likelihood of your teenager being bullied in school.

Confident young people are more likely to stand up for themselves if they are bullied. Confidence grows when a child is praised regularly. Remember an ounce of praise is worth a ton of criticism. It is important to be patient with your children and praise them generously for achievements in different areas of their lives. Building confidence will help your children feel good about themselves and can promote the development of skills for deal with difficult situations.

Parents who communicate with their children on an ongoing basis, will find that they are more likely to discuss difficulties as they arise. Being taken seriously and being listened to without fear of criticism or ridicule, will increase self-confidence. Supportive conversation with adults helps children to develop their understanding of other people's reactions, facial expressions and body language. This enables them to better interpret moods and to understand the different attitudes, perspectives and intentions of others.

Ensure that your son or daughter has basic information such as the facts of life so that they do not find themselves ill-prepared for the normal changes of puberty.

Parents should seek medical advice if there are health or emotional problems.

Appropriate social behaviour should be taught, e.g. good table manners and personal hygiene.

Self-image and physical appearance are very important in adolescence. Teenagers often don't want to appear different from the group and generally want to have the 'in look' which is popular at the time. This may mean that you come under unreasonable pressure to buy expensive brand name clothes and shoes. Without succumbing to this pressure, it may still be possible to allow your child a choice within the budget you can afford.



## Teaching Social skills

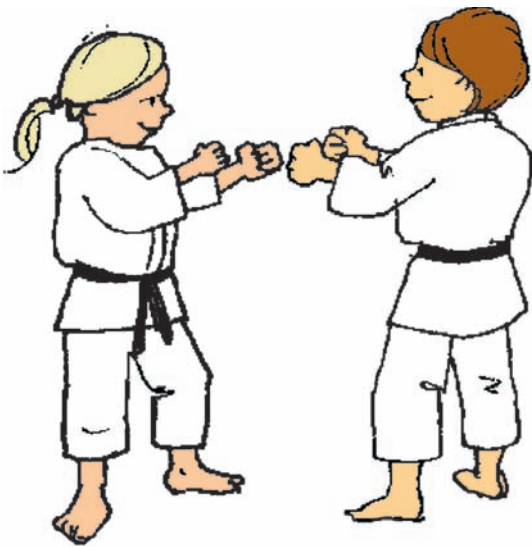
Youngsters who are popular with their peers tend to be confident, independent and are able to take some responsibility for themselves. They are cheerful, sensitive to others and can organize and participate in a range of games and activities. They have an ability to manage their interactions with peers without aggression and can resolve conflicts verbally and rationally, offering suitable alternative solutions for a better outcome (Besag, 1989). In general children learn these friendship skills through imitation and observation. You can help your child develop these skills. Teach your child that being respectful to people does not mean being submissive. Young people can be taught the basic forms of politeness and small talk. They may need to practise basic greetings in order to open a conversation, e.g., “Hi, do you mind if I sit here? What did you watch on TV last night?” If your son/ daughter is particularly shy, encourage them to watch how other children join in and help them to practise on a one-to-one basis before approaching the group.

A more withdrawn child may need to choose one friendly student to approach first. Children sometimes believe that the established friendships around them are fixed, and closed off to new members, when in reality this may not be the case.

Encourage your child to speak clearly and in a relaxed way about subjects which interest them. Discourage mumbling or speaking so quietly that they are constantly being asked to repeat themselves. It may be helpful to practise reading aloud from a book or newspaper, and record the voice. Habits which should be discouraged include: interrupting all the time, being noisy or shrill, showing off, being a know-all, and not listening to others.



Let them know that it is good to have friends in more than one area of their lives, for instance in their neighbourhood, and in hobby or sports groups, so that if things go wrong in one area, they will have other friends. Hobbies or interest groups, music lessons, dance classes, swimming clubs, self-defence or other one-to-one activities, can pave the way for involvement in wider group activities such as team sports, parties or discos. For quieter children, fan club membership or having a pen-pal, provides an opportunity for one-to-one communication.



Teenagers need to be aware of what is happening in the world around them, be familiar with T.V. programmes, current pop music, and suitable teen magazines, so that they can relate confidently with others. However, television should not be used as a substitute for having fun with friends.

Encourage your child to develop a sense of humour. The best way to do so is to have a good sense of humour yourself. Humour is a useful tool for dealing with verbal bullying and can reduce tensions between people.

Tell your teenager that looking happy, smiling, joining in, having a laugh, not taking things too seriously, and being open to what is happening at the moment, will encourage others to accept them into the group. In general a friendly attitude will go a long way.

### **Coping With Fear**

It is important for parents to convey that overcoming fears is a part of growing up. The following measures may not be enough for a child who is paralysed by fear. In this event you may need to seek professional support.

An aggressive person may focus on a young person whose body language is submissive. You can help your teenager by encouraging them to walk tall and straight in a confident way, rather than looking scared and uncertain. It can be helpful to role-play making direct and relaxed eye contact when speaking with others, even in a bullying situation when they are fearful.

Encourage them to practise looking in the mirror and saying “No!” or “Leave me alone!” in a clear voice, looking into their own eyes as they say it.

The best advice to give in case of physical attack is to tell the young person to get away if possible and get help. If surrounded by a gang they should try to stay on their feet for as long as possible. They can protect themselves by turning sideways to the attacker, raising their leg and arm to deflect blows. If pulled to the ground they can protect the head and vulnerable parts of the body by rolling into a ball.

Encourage your child to protect their personal space by:

- Staying with the same group of friendly students when in corridors or lining up for classes.
- Taking reasonable care of personal belongings e.g. placing their coats and schoolbags where they will be safe. This reduces the chance of unnecessary conflict over belongings.



Parents should take seriously complaints from young people that others are giving them “the look.” Menacing or

threatening looks are sometimes used to bully others. You can suggest breaking off eye contact slowly and avoiding looking directly at that person afterwards. If it continues, it should be reported as bullying to a teacher.

## Relaxation - How It Helps

Relaxation is a skill that you as a parent can learn and teach your children. It will help them to cope with feelings of anxiety and worry in their lives and also teach them how to cope with their own reactions in anxious situations.



There are a variety of techniques for dealing with anxiety. One of the most effective is deep breathing which works by encouraging our bodies to slow down thus reducing anxious feelings and responses.

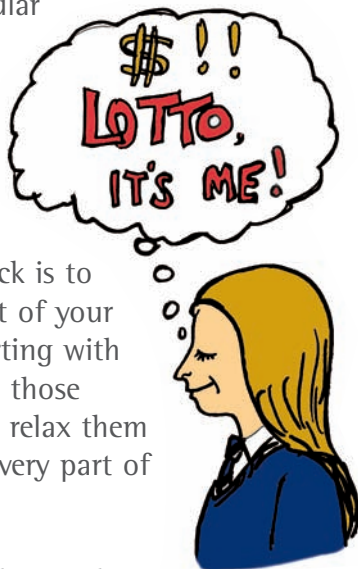
## Deep Breathing Exercise

- Sit comfortably in a chair with both feet on the floor and your back well supported. Close your eyes.
- Breathe in slowly through your nose to the count of three (one...two...three).
- Hold the breath for a moment.
- Breathe out slowly through your mouth to the count of three (one...two...three)
- Repeat three times. Then breathe normally and check how you feel. If you are still feeling tense, take three more deep breaths. With daily practice, this exercise can considerably reduce tension and anxiety. It can be accompanied by soft slow meditative music or by burning lavender oil or other calming aromatherapy oils.

Other effective methods of relaxation are progressive muscular relaxation and visualisation.

Progressive muscular relaxation relaxes your whole body bit by bit. The trick is to think of each part of your body in turn, starting with your feet, tighten those muscles and then relax them until eventually every part of you is relaxed.

Visualisation involves making pictures in your mind of pleasant places or situations and allowing your mind to



dwell on them. This helps you to calm down and distracts your mind from anxious thoughts and feelings. As in all relaxation exercises it requires daily practice in order for it to be effective when you most need it.

## Assertiveness

Being assertive means standing up for yourself without being aggressive or apologetic. When it is practised at an early stage before the situation has deteriorated into bullying, it may serve to prevent bullying altogether. The following points are important:

- Know what you want to say.
- Say it, concisely and clearly.
- Be specific and keep to the point.
- Look the person in the eye.
- Keep calm and relaxed.
- Don't laugh nervously.
- Be persistent but don't whine.

Most bullying begins with some form of verbal comment or aggression, usually name-calling or jeering. A number of techniques can be used either alone or together, which can help a young person deal with difficulties. Practising the following strategies will help young people to use them convincingly. As a parent however, you should be realistic about what your child is capable of doing in a bullying situation. Try to develop confidence by selecting a technique that is manageable and suitable to their capabilities and personality. Emphasise also, that if they find

these techniques are not working for them, they should seek additional help from a parent or teacher.

## Learning to Use the Assertive “I” Response

Using brief “I” statements is an effective way to challenge bullying, provided it is used convincingly and with good eye contact. Examples are: “I don’t like your attitude”; “I don’t have to put up with you doing this”; “I want you to stop hassling me”; “I don’t interfere with you so please leave me alone”.

## Making An Assertive Statement

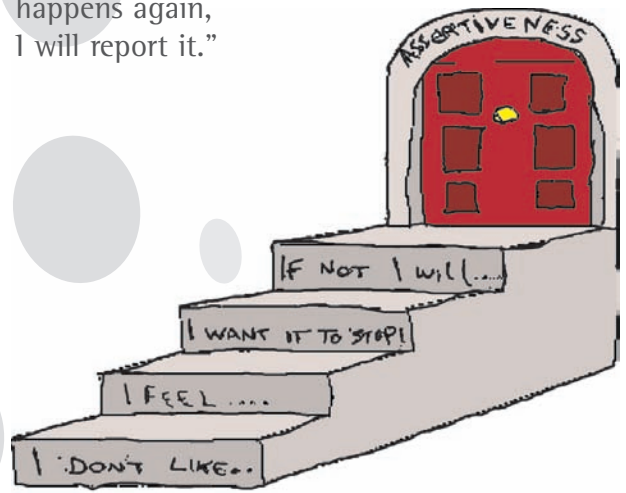
The following four-step approach using “I” statements may be more effective where bullying persists.

- Step 1.** Say what you don’t like about the person’s behaviour. Stick to the facts, and be calm.
- Step 2.** Say how it makes you feel.
- Step 3.** Say that you want it to stop.
- Step 4.** Say what action you are going to take if the behaviour does not change.

Here is an example:

“I don’t like you calling me names every time I pass by you in the corridor. It annoys me”. Allow time for the other person to respond. You may get an immediate apology because the person involved may not fully realise how hurtful

their behaviour has been. If a positive reaction does not emerge, continue with: “I want the name-calling to stop. If it happens again, I will report it.”



However this is not a strategy to be used in case of a physical attack. In this event the safest option is to get away.

## Saying “No”

If your teenager is being pressured to engage in bullying or other anti-social behaviour, you may need to help them practise saying “No” assertively. Be polite but firm and clear, e.g., “No, I don’t want to do that” or “No, I am not getting involved in that”. This skill is very necessary when faced with a variety of situations including being offered drugs, drink or unwanted sexual activity.



### Broken Record

Broken record means using the same statement over and over again to reinforce a point in a situation where you are under pressure to do something you don't want to do e.g. bullying another person. Some of the following responses may be useful. Repeat the statement "I don't want to do this" or "I don't agree with this" or "I refuse to be involved here". Encourage them to speak politely but firmly. The advantage of this method is that the young person is not making an apology or excuse and does not have to think of clever things to say.



### Fogging

Fogging is making a neutral comment which conveys the message that the young person has not been bothered by what has been said. Its purpose is to deflect the effect of the comment and give time to think. For example if the bully calls out a name or makes a very nasty personal comment, a fogging response like "So What!" or "Whatever!" or "I'm not bothered!" might be effective. The comment should then be completely ignored.

Having a sense of humour is a sign that the young person can take things in their stride. If someone makes a joke, try laughing it off as a first response. Here are a few examples of clever retorts that can be used in a bullying situation.

"Hey, give us your lunch or else!" -  
"Certainly but I dropped it in the toilet on the way in!"  
"We'll be waiting for you after school"-  
"Sure, you won't mind if I bring along a teacher as well"

The bully may give up if they don't provoke the negative reaction that they want. With your support, a teenager may come up with even more effective responses. However, if the bullying persists, a teacher's help will probably be needed.

While it is difficult not to take hurtful comments on board, parents can remind their teenagers that a bully who sets out to deliberately hurt and annoy them will be inclined to do more if they get the desired reaction.

### Power Phrase



A Power Phrase is positive self-talk which draws upon a young person's inner strength and helps them feel confident. Successful people such as actors, sports-people, and music stars often use this technique to support themselves. This is how it can be explained to a teenager: "First, take a few slow deep breaths to help you stay calm. Although you may find it hard to believe, this works! As you breathe out say your Power Phrase quietly to yourself. It is best to choose one which suits you or develop your own Power Phrase, and practise it."

Examples are:

I am wonderful.

I'm doing fine.

I can do this!

I'm good enough!

I don't have to put up with this!

I'm calm.

I can handle this!

That's her problem, not mine.

I'm ok and I'm cool.

### Force Field

Using imagination in times of difficulty is an excellent tool for self-protection. You can easily teach teenagers to use this technique in cases where name-calling is difficult to stop, or some other form of bullying is annoying them. You can suggest that they imagine a force-field around them like a protective circle keeping negativity out.

Imagine all that is negative and unwanted bouncing back off the circle...



...and sailing harmlessly away.

## *Dealing With Abusive Text Messages.*

A recent phenomenon of bullying by abusive text messages presents a particular difficulty for parents. Young people are unable to identify the sender because they conceal their identities by switching their mobiles into Private Number mode thus allowing the abuser to remain anonymous.

This allows them to say things that they would never say to a person's face and to send messages at any time and any place. For this reason a victim of this type of bullying can be particularly distressed because they cannot escape the bullying and may even be receiving offensive messages during the night.

Because teenagers use their mobile phones as one of the main methods of communication with their peers, it is unrealistic to remove the mobile phones from them. It is important to tell them that they must get help if they are being bullied in this way. Advise your teenager to be very careful about disclosing their phone number. Keep all abusive messages in the phone memory and keep a log of messages. If necessary, change the number and give it only to close family and friends. Young people should be advised to resist the temptation to return offensive messages. If the problem is serious enough it may be a matter for the police.

While mobile phone companies are not the moral guardians of phone users, they will cooperate with the police in tracing blocked mobile numbers used in bullying cases. In Ireland it is an offence in law to send malicious or threatening text messages, covered by the 1999 amendment to the post Office Act, 1951. If your son/ daughter is receiving threatening or malicious text messages, you should report it to the police.

## Chapter 3: Is My Child Bullying Others?

Research in Scandinavia and the UK indicates that young people who bully others are more likely to become involved in criminal activity as adults. Studies in Ireland have shown that 15% of young people in secondary school admit to bullying others (O'Moore et al 1997, James et al 2002).

An important conclusion to be drawn is that there is a one in seven chance of your teenager being involved in bullying others. If you suspect your son or daughter is one of this group, you need to take action because young people who bully are as much in need of support as their victims. Since most bullying is learned behaviour, young people can be taught to behave more appropriately. Parents can play an important role in helping their children understand the effects of bullying behaviour on others.

### *Why Do Young People Bully?*

Students who bully are often not aware of how their behaviour makes others feel. They may get pleasure and a sense of power and dominance from bullying. Contrary to common belief, research indicates that they are not always lacking in self-esteem but may have aggressive tendencies and in some cases can lack empathy for the suffering of others. Children who have a history of aggression are more prone to use bullying behaviour. They may lack positive role models either at home or among their friends. They

often believe that bullying will gain them popularity. Young people who tend to bully often have leadership potential, which needs to be channelled in a more positive direction.

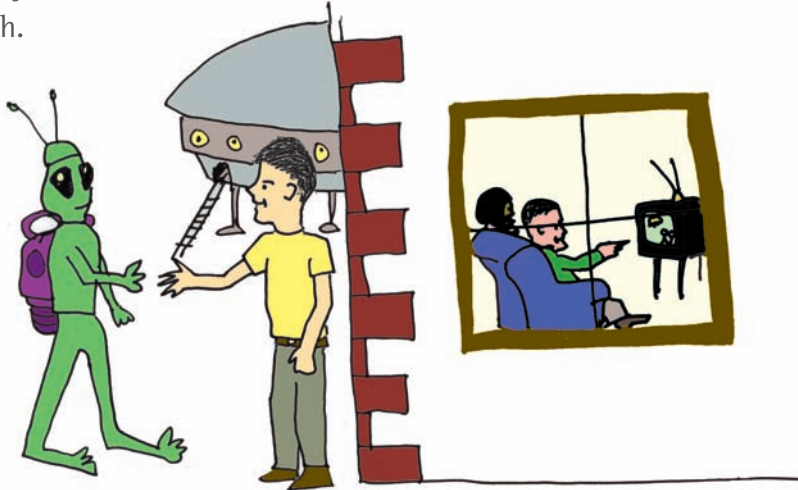
Some young people who bully may have been bullied themselves either inside or outside the family. If they are witnessing violence in other areas of their lives they may be imitating it, believing it to be acceptable. Sometimes teenagers may be reacting to family stresses by bullying others. Examples of family stresses include: bereavement, separation of parents, a new partner or baby in the family, health problems or financial difficulties.

Extremes of parenting style can lead to difficulty. Parents who have a very controlling style while showing little warmth for their children may unwittingly be creating a situation which fosters bullying. Equally, parents who are unclear about rules or boundaries may not be supplying enough support for their children to behave appropriately. Firm, consistent, warm parenting, with good communication is the happy medium.

People who bully may also be jealous of others who appear to be more successful, have more possessions or are more popular than themselves. The term "anxious bully" refers to students who may have poor social skills, may have difficulty with school-work and be unpopular with other students. Their bullying behaviour may be

a compensation for dealing with their low self-esteem and lack of popularity.

Peer pressure sometimes plays a role in causing teenagers to bully others. Some young people may be easily led and lack of supervision can lead to bullying going undetected. At all times it is important to know where your children are and who they are with.



Do you know who your kids  
are with?

### What to Look For

Check the following lists for signs that your young person may be bullying.

#### Physical signs:

- Aggressiveness towards other children, parents and teachers.
- Evidence that they have been involved in fights or picking on weaker students.
- Deliberately robust behavior such as extremely hard tackling in sports, tripping people up, or causing injuries.

- Being involved in vandalism, anti-social behaviour, or being in trouble with the police.
- Belonging to an aggressive gang and as a result spending little time at home.
- Having unexplained money or possessions.

#### Emotional and psychological signs:

- Short temper.
- Violent outbursts.
- Needing to dominate others.
- Over-reacting to criticism.
- A tendency to believe others are hostile towards them.
- Enjoying the suffering of others.
- Disrespectful attitude to others including the elderly.
- Unwillingness to include or share with others.

- Cruelty to animals.
- Lack of genuine friendships, i.e., their friendships are often based on fear.



### Signs relating to school:

- Being involved in disruptive behaviour at school.
- Being placed on detention, or suspended for fighting on a regular basis.
- Complaints from teachers about a change in behaviour.
- Requests from other pupils to be moved away from your child in class.
- Complaints from other parents.
- Lacking verbal or social skills to deal with conflict resulting in aggression or impulsive behaviour.



### What I Can Do

It is unrealistic to expect a young person to manage their anger if they are frequently witnessing adults lose control. This means that if a young person experiences violence from adults, they are more likely to use it themselves. Challenge any aggressive behaviour and insist that it is unacceptable. Explain what is acceptable behaviour and reward it with praise when you notice it. For example, you can discuss how to co-operate with others, ways of asking for things instead of taking them, and turn-taking in activities and conversation.

You can establish a basic code of conduct by setting a few important rules at home, e.g. "treat others with respect", and "do nothing to hurt yourself, others, or damage property." Know where your child is at all times, who they are with and what they are doing. Spend time with your son or daughter and talk to them about what is happening in their lives.

## Teaching Your Teenager to Manage Their Anger

Here are some tips for explaining this to your teenager.

1. Learn what triggers your anger. For instance think what was the feeling you had before you felt angry?
2. Become aware of where in your body you feel those feelings. These will be warning signs for you to start controlling your anger.
3. Have a plan of action. As soon as the angry feeling comes, here are some ideas to help you calm down:
  - Talk inwardly to yourself, e.g. “I can handle this without getting mad” or “I am staying calm and in control”.
  - Count slowly to ten.
  - Take several deep breaths.
  - Leave the situation and go for a walk until you feel calm.
  - Go to a place where you can let off steam in safety without harming anyone, e.g. thump a hard cushion or hit a punch bag.
  - Try not to slam doors, shout at or argue with others.
  - Decide to wait a while until you feel calm to deal with the difficulty.
4. Reward yourself in some way when you have succeeded. Learning to control anger takes time and effort. Change will not happen suddenly. However when you have managed a situation without losing your temper, give yourself a treat.



## What to Do When There Is a Complaint From the School

The first signal that your teenager is involved in bullying may be a telephone call from the school requesting a meeting. Your initial reaction may be one of shock, disbelief, disappointment or anger. Now is the time for a cup of tea to give yourself time to think. It is very important to remain calm and control your feelings. Do nothing for at least an hour. Tell yourself “I can handle this”. Talk with your partner or a supportive person before approaching your child. Remind yourself that this is not a topic a teenager is likely to welcome. You may encounter fear and defensiveness. Approach the issue in a gentle but firm manner without making accusations, and ask for their side of the story. The following is an example of how to open up discussion.

“I had a phone call from the school this morning about something to do with yourself and Tony. Could you tell me the story from your point of view before I go to meet the teacher.”

Don't get sidetracked by questions about who telephoned, when etc. It may be difficult for a young

person to be truthful when faced with an allegation. In the face of initial denial, repeat the information as you understand it and encourage them to tell you about their part in the reported incident. Emphasize the importance of being truthful, explaining that it will make it easier to solve the problem. If there is clear evidence from the teacher that bullying has occurred, encourage the young person to accept responsibility for their own behaviour and make them aware of the consequences. Explain that the school must apply sanctions because it has a responsibility to keep all students safe.

As bullying has serious implications for a young person's progress in school and in life, say that people will think more of him if he tells the truth and accepts the consequences. Let your child know that you care about him and that it is the behaviour that is the problem, and not the young person. Explain that the safety of others should never be at risk because of his behaviour. You could also mention that young people who bully others may not be as popular in school as they believe. Others may be pretending to like them out of fear.

Discuss ways of making amends, e.g. stopping the bullying, an apology, returning goods, etc. Let him know that you expect change and that you will support all honest efforts to change. Monitor your child's future behaviour closely. Give praise for honesty and for any efforts to improve.

### *Working With the School*

Minor bullying incidents are usually dealt with directly in school without contacting parents. However, the fact that the school is contacting you may be an indication of a more serious incident. Although you may be upset at having to go to the school to discuss a bullying incident, it is best to remain calm and focused on working together to find a solution. Do not view this as a negative encounter. Often meetings like this can provide opportunities for improving relationships between the school, parents and students. Your teenager may benefit enormously from the influence and support of a teacher who wants to improve relationships between students at school. Even though you may be feeling defensive, it is best to refrain from making negative remarks about the school or the teachers, especially in the presence of your young person. Prepare for the meeting by having written details about the incident from your son/daughter's perspective. Check if the school has an anti-bullying policy, which will explain the procedures involved and how bullying incidents are handled.

### *What Can I Expect From the School?*

In general schools are reluctant to involve parents in matters of discipline and only do so when it is absolutely necessary. For this reason it is important that you take it seriously when you are contacted by the school and that you adopt a problem solving approach.

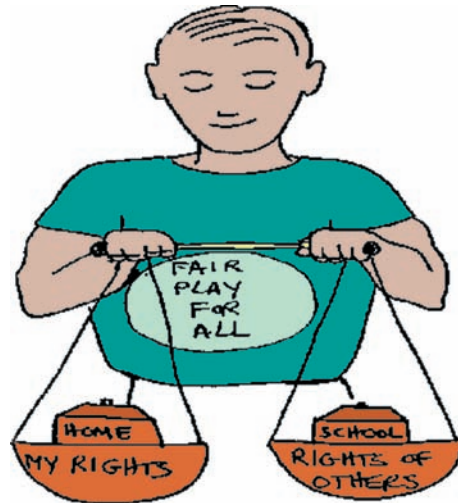
You may expect a fair hearing in which both sides of the story are brought out and clear information is given about the nature of the incident, e.g. dates and times, details of any injuries, or the type of behaviour involved.

Teachers may have direct evidence from witnesses who were present when the bullying took place. However, the school may not be free to name witnesses because of the risk of retaliation. If your child persists in denying bullying in the face of clear evidence, it is important to be realistic and support the school. Even though it is difficult to accept your teenager is in the wrong, defending inappropriate behaviour at all costs is more likely to create further problems.

The school may impose sanctions such as detention, suspension or expulsion. If it is clear your child is in the wrong, you will need to help her accept the consequences. The young person may be asked to sign an agreement that the behaviour is not to be repeated. You as a parent may be asked to co-sign.

Sometimes young people involved in bullying will promise to change simply to avoid the consequences. In this case, both the school and you the parents will need to monitor future behaviour closely. You can expect that the school will keep in contact with you while monitoring the situation.

If appropriate, schools may bring both parties together for mediation in an effort to work out a solution to the problem.



You can seek information regarding support in the form of guidance or counselling for the young person or you may wish to discuss the situation with your GP who can refer you to an appropriate agency. Consider referral to a child psychologist if your child is persistently aggressive or has difficulty with anger control.

Having considered the evidence, if you still believe your child is being accused in the wrong, you have the right to have the matter further investigated. Discussing the details in private with the school principal would be advisable. Explain why you are unhappy with what has occurred to date and what you would like the principal to do to remedy the matter. In rare cases where it has not been resolved, you may need to approach the Board of Management. It is important to put your complaint in writing.

## Chapter 4: Teacher/Student Bullying

### *Is A Teacher Bullying My Child?*

Both teachers and pupils have rights in respect of how they treat one another. The definition of bullying applies to the two-way relationship between pupils and teachers as much as it does between students themselves. The school's policy should take into account relationships within the whole school community, and put in place procedures for dealing with any complaints which may arise.

At times it may be difficult to distinguish between normal disciplinary practice in school and bullying by a teacher. Bullying has already been defined as deliberate aggression characterised by an abuse of power. If your child complains about a teacher, you need to be able to assess whether the incident is disciplinary in nature or bullying.

You need to take your child seriously if they complain about any of the following: hitting, pushing, being persistently ignored, sexual or verbal abuse, malicious threatening, labelling, ridiculing, insulting, using hurtful sarcasm or fuelling prejudice. Keep in mind however that some anxious children are more vulnerable to a teacher's style of interacting with a class than others. A very timid child may take to heart warnings that are intended for others.



It is very difficult for a parent to approach a teacher with a complaint that they may have bullied their child. It is understandable that you will feel apprehensive about it.

- Seek an appointment with the teacher concerned
- Prepare for the interview by writing down the details from your child's point of view. You may wish to have moral support with you for the interview. It will be helpful if you remember that this is not a comfortable situation for a teacher either.

While you are understandably very emotionally involved in representing your child, the problem will be resolved more easily if you can try to keep in mind that the teacher is also a human being, who may or may not have made a mistake in this instance. This stance will make it easier to keep your child's best interests in the foreground of the discussion between yourself and the teacher.

A suggested approach might be: “John is upset and unhappy in class because he feels..... Is there any way we can sort this out together? I would like to hear about it from your point of view” Allow the teacher to explain. Listen carefully without interruption. If the teacher has a reasonable explanation, it is usually possible to solve the problem on the spot.

If you are unhappy with the teacher’s explanation, you may wish to seek an appointment with the principal. If you feel under stress, it can be helpful to bring written notes as a memory aid. At all stages, remain calm and polite but assertive and keep in mind your child’s best interests. Explain what steps you have taken, making clear what is unresolved for you about the situation. The principal may wish to bring all parties together as a way of resolving the situation. Be clear about what you are seeking, e.g. an apology and/or a guarantee that the behaviour does not recur.

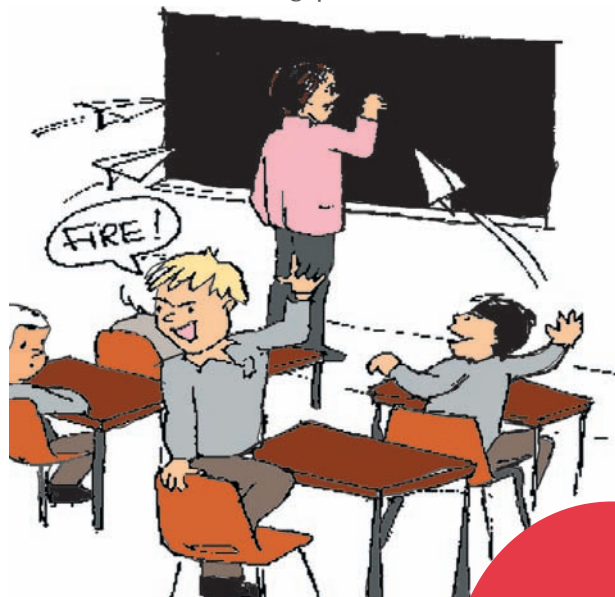
In some situations you may need to take the problem to the Board of Management or to the Education authorities. It will be important to put all complaints in writing. Address your complaint to the Chairman of the Board of Management, outlining the problem, what steps you have taken so far and what outcome you are seeking. You may be asked to attend a meeting of the Board of Management to discuss the issue. If so, make notes of points you wish to address and keep a written record of

the proceedings. If you are still unhappy with the outcome, you may write to the Divisional Inspector of the area. You will find out the name of this official by telephoning the Department of Education & Science.

### ***Is My Child Bullying a Teacher?***

Examples of bullying behaviour towards teachers are name-calling, throwing objects in class, showing contempt, ignoring instructions, lack of cooperation and undermining of teachers.

More serious examples include physical assault; sexual harassment; intimidation of new or less assertive staff; interfering with or stealing property; vandalising cars; nuisance or threatening phone calls.



Much of the advice given previously in relation to other types of bullying applies here also. Despite initial upset or disbelief, it is important that you keep calm and keep an open mind until you have time to clarify the nature of the problem. This applies both to your reaction to your child and to the teacher. You will probably be requested to come to the school to meet with the teacher or the principal. Hear the complaint as objectively as possible. Discuss the details with your son or daughter, emphasising the need for honesty.

If your teenager admits responsibility, acknowledge their truthfulness and explain the consequences. An acceptable outcome may be an apology to the teacher, an appropriate sanction and a guarantee that the behaviour will not recur.

If the evidence is clear that your child has been bullying, offer the young person a further opportunity to admit culpability. In the face of persistent denial, you may need to agree a sanction with the school and be vigilant about monitoring future behaviour.

You may need to consider the reasons why your child is behaving in an unacceptable manner towards a teacher. Is the young person experiencing some kind of problem at home or in school that is causing them to vent anger on a

vulnerable teacher? It will be important for you as a parent to discuss with the young person acceptable and unacceptable behaviours towards a teacher and what the consequences will be for breaking these boundaries.

If your child does not accept responsibility, then you may need to investigate further. While it can be difficult to reach an agreed solution, keeping the lines of communication open between you and the school is of crucial importance. Request a further meeting with the teacher to discuss the matter.

If the evidence is not clear, it is important to emphasise and agree upon the standards of behaviour that are expected and remain in contact with the school regarding future behaviour. Discuss and agree what the consequences will be if there are any lapses.

## Chapter 5: Other Forms Of Bullying

This section will discuss some other problematic bullying behaviour. These include sexual, racist and relational bullying, sometimes called girl bullying.

### *Sexual Bullying*

Sexual bullying presents itself in physical, verbal and psychological forms. Physically it can take the form of deliberately brushing up against another, touching breasts or genitals or circulating explicit images from magazines or obscene drawings. On a verbal level, it frequently takes the form of name-calling, text messages, graffiti or unwelcome comments about sexuality, general appearance or attractiveness.



Psychologically, it can be an attack on the person's reputation, spreading malicious rumours or gossip about sexual orientation, experience or reputation. Sexual bullying is found among both girls and boys.

All of these behaviours can have the effect of undermining a person's sense of his or her own sexuality. Because adolescence is the stage when every young person is grappling with the development of a sexual identity, bullying of a sexual nature can be particularly destructive and distressing. Young people who may be confused about their sexual orientation are particularly vulnerable to being bullied by name-calling and exclusion.

Sexuality can be a difficult area to discuss and this highlights the need for good communication between parents and young people. Both boys and girls can be vulnerable to unwanted sexual advances from their peers and from adults. Children and young people who have already experienced sexual abuse may be particularly vulnerable. It is important to teach your child to say "NO" to any inappropriate behaviour. This makes it easier to reinforce the message and to emphasise the importance of telling a responsible adult in the event of unwanted sexual advances and experiences.

It is equally important for you as parents to be vigilant about the possibility that your adolescent may be perpetrating sexual bullying on others. Your sons and daughters must be made aware of what is appropriate and inappropriate sexual behaviour, and that no one should ever be sexually abusive towards others.

### *Dealing With Homosexuality and Homophobia*

The subject of homosexuality in teenagers is a sensitive topic and is often avoided. Young people discovering that they are or could be gay or lesbian are doing so at the most difficult emotional period of their lives. Young people in this position are vulnerable to being bullied in school. Many derogatory words and phrases are commonly used in schools to refer to gay and lesbian people. These insults are used whether the person targeted is gay or not. This can be particularly distressing at the teenage stage when they are struggling to become comfortable with their sexual identity and sexual orientation.

Young people need to be supported and accepted particularly by their families, and have their questions answered without prejudice. While sex education is crucially important, it is only part of the answer. It is a myth that speaking openly to young people about homosexuality will encourage it. Refusing to talk about it will not stop people being gay; it will merely

make life for them much more difficult. Many teenagers go through a phase of being confused about their sexual orientation. Don't be afraid to bring the subject up with your teenager if they are having problems. While they may not open up immediately, letting them know that you are there to support them when they are ready will help them come to terms with their sexual orientation. There are support services and literature available for parents on the subject (See Useful Contacts). Accessing them and raising your own awareness about the issue will break down barriers and can only lead to tolerance of difference.

If you become aware that your child is being harassed in this area it is imperative that you approach the school as soon as possible to prevent the bullying from escalating.

### *Racist Bullying*

Racist bullying refers to any hostile or offensive behaviours against others because of their skin colour, cultural or religious background or ethnic origin. Traditionally, Irish schools have been mono-cultural in outlook and practice. The issue of including students from diverse ethnic or racial backgrounds did not arise with the exception of the travelling community. The recent past has seen a significant change and schools are now integrating children from a variety of different countries. This situation tests the prejudices of Irish people.

Parents have a major role to play in educating their children that differences are to be celebrated as something that can enrich the lives of their young people. Parents need to be vigilant for any early signs of intolerance or negativity towards people of a different race, colour, religion or culture.

Racism can include any of the bullying behaviours mentioned earlier. However racist name-calling differs from other forms in that there is often reference not only to the child, but also by extension to their family and their ethnic community as a whole. It can also include insulting or degrading comments, gestures, taunts or 'jokes', making fun of the customs, music, accent or dress of anyone from a different culture or refusal to co-operate with students from ethnic minorities. This is an area where role-modelling by parents is of particular importance. It is crucial that students hear parents speak respectfully about other cultures and witness positive behaviour towards them. All comments of a racist nature should be discouraged and corrected.

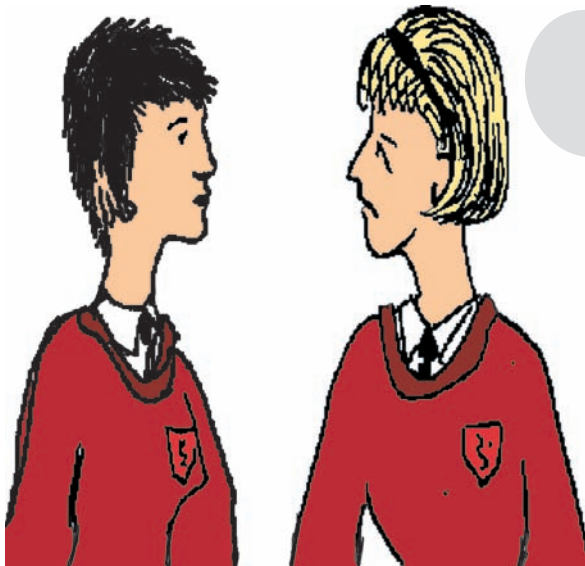
The Equal Status Act (2000) prohibits discrimination on several grounds including grounds of race, religion and belonging to the traveller community. While legislation offers some protection, it requires the co-operation of teachers, parents and the whole community to educate young people in empathy, openness and respect for difference. If

your child has been exposed to racist bullying, you should approach the school and make them aware of the problem. Ask if there are specific procedures in the school's anti-bullying policy for dealing with racism. If your child has been exposed to racist bullying or is perpetrating this behaviour, the strategies required to deal with it are similar to the steps involved in other types of bullying. These strategies are covered elsewhere in this book.

### ***Relational Bullying: What Is It?***

Recent research has identified a type of aggressive behaviour called relational bullying. It is most common among adolescent girls though not exclusively so. Relational bullying is any behaviour that sets out to deliberately damage another person's friendships or feelings of inclusion in a friendship group. Examples are deliberately withdrawing friendship or group acceptance, ostracising, spreading rumours, gossiping etc. This type of bullying is distinguished from the more overt types of school bullying such as direct physical or verbal bullying. Relational bullying is more subtle than other types of bullying and is harder to detect. However research shows that relational bullying often develops into a more blatantly physical type of aggression.

Girls who engage in relational bullying tend to belong to intimate tight-knit closed friendship groups where membership and entry is very select. Relational aggression is used to expel members at the whim of the key person in the group. The behaviours involved almost always include exclusion and isolation from the friendship group, subtle verbal aggression, gossip and rumours. The rumours may be sexual in nature and can irreparably damage a girl's reputation.



Girls who are targeted by those whom they had considered close long-term friends may have no idea why they are being treated so badly, and may make valiant but vain efforts to mend the friendships. They may even confront their friends asking for an explanation only to be told that they are imagining it or are being over-sensitive. However, the process

of subtle exclusion and isolation continues until the girl finds herself completely ostracised by her peer group. This rejection can lead to loneliness, loss of self-esteem, severe distress and depression. It requires considerable skill to handle this kind of bullying and the most effective approach seems to be for teachers and parents to cooperate to solve problems by raising awareness among girls as to its devastating effects.

### Understanding Relational Bullying

American research into this area has concluded that relational aggression is almost always preceded by gossip and rumour-spreading among the group (Talbot et al 2002). In her book on the subject "Odd Girl Out", Rachel Simmons (2002), suggests that a large part of the reason for relational bullying relates to problems of conflict resolution, resulting in a minor disagreement calling an entire relationship into question.

Simmons believes that in our culture girls are socialized into being "nice" at all costs and are not taught the skills of managing feelings of anger or jealousy. This can mean that rather than face the prospect of exclusion and loneliness, girls will stay in an abusive relationship longer than is healthy. This may result in the perpetrators of relational bullying being in a powerful position to control what happens in the friendship group. To avoid

disapproval, girls who bully in this way appear nice to teachers and other adults, while beneath the surface they may be passing covert looks and notes, turning their backs and whispering. The sugar and spice image is used to fog the radar of otherwise vigilant adults.

It is not only the victims of relational bullying who are damaged. Girls who use this type of bullying behaviour are likely to be at risk for serious adjustment difficulties. They often experience higher levels of loneliness, depression and isolation themselves (Crick and Grotpeter, 1995)

### **What Can I Do If My Daughter Is Targeted?**

As a parent you may not be aware that your child has a problem until she shows signs of severe distress or depression. As in other forms of bullying young people are reluctant to confide because it is deeply humiliating to acknowledge their difficulty in sustaining a friendship despite all efforts. It is important to remain supportive, listen attentively and let her know you accept her perception of events.

There may be denial on the part of the perpetrator. This can have the effect of undermining a person's sense of his or her own reality. If there has been conflict between the girls, suggest ways of mending the friendship. For example, making an apology if that is appropriate,

or simply telling her friend that she feels she is being left out and would like to talk about the problem.

As her parent you may need to be patient about listening to her recount incidents over and over. Even though this can be extremely repetitive for you, it will help her come to terms with the loss of her friends. This is not meant to be a substitute for taking appropriate action but long after the crisis has passed your daughter will remember the refuge of home and family as perhaps being the one thing that helped her to survive. Giving her unconditional love and support and enlisting the help of the rest of the family will make life easier for her.



## Plan Of Action

When you talk to your daughter get the facts accurately; find out who is involved, how long it has been going on, what is happening and if teachers know. Approach the school and make them aware of your daughter's distress.

Because of the nature of relational bullying and the subtlety of the behaviours involved, the usual anti-bullying measures in a school may be more difficult to implement. While schools cannot force girls into friendship, a skilled teacher may be able to bring the parties together to discuss the problem. By using a No-Blame Approach (Maines and Robinson, 1991), it may be possible to seek solutions from the girls themselves. Of course the school's procedures can ensure that the more overt bullying behaviours e.g. name-calling, rumours and harassment will stop. This is the least that can be expected.

When a student has been victimised in a relational way by former friends the friendship will probably never be the same again. While your daughter may have hoped for a better outcome, you may have to help her accept that if the bullying stops this is the best that can be expected in the situation. You may consider asking to have teachers supervise the group closely, change seating plans in class, or have your daughter moved to a different class. She may wish to be driven to and collected from school rather than

travel by bus in the company of the perpetrators. In extreme cases it may be best to consider moving to a different school and making a new start.

It is important to emphasise to your daughter that good friends do not behave in a hurtful way towards each other. Tell her that people who undermine others, exclude them, say nasty things about them are not good friends. Make it clear that people who care for you do not behave badly towards you.

Young people with low self esteem tend to compare themselves unfavourably with others. This is a bad habit which should be repeatedly challenged by you as parents. Remind your daughter regularly of her good points, her strengths and talents and that she is loved by you. By fortifying her self esteem you can help her to increase her self respect and encourage her not to accept being badly treated by others. These are important lessons for future adult relationships.



If these steps do not work, you may need to help your child build a new social circle, explaining that you understand that losing a friend is painful. It may be more constructive to put her energy into new friendships. As mentioned previously, it is protective for young people to have friends in different areas of their lives so that they are not totally devastated when one friendship breaks down. Arrange for her to join a club or youth group or get involved in an activity not connected with her social misfortune. Choose activities where children are valued more for the contribution they make rather than for what they are wearing or their physical appearance.

### **What If My Daughter Is Bullying Others?**

Normal socialisation for teenagers involves chatting about the group. However when gossiping takes on a malicious tone, it needs to be challenged to avoid a destructive situation developing.

It is important for parents of adolescent girls to be constantly vigilant about how they treat their friends. Often relational bullying starts with a girl gossiping maliciously about another. If the rest of the group does not challenge this, it can spread and fuel feelings of resentment and jealousy that lead to the group excluding or isolating a member and making life miserable for her. If you hear

your daughter discuss a friend in terms of “She thinks she’s somebody” or name-calling in a malicious way or discussing a girl’s sexual behaviour, you need to explore with her what is happening in the group. Explain to her that this behaviour can have hurtful consequences for the girl in question.

### **Helping My Daughter Deal With Jealousy.**

While acknowledging that envy and jealousy are normal human emotions, it is important to be clear that they should not fuel destructive behaviour. Acknowledging these feelings is a crucial first step to dealing with them. If you know or suspect that your daughter has problems dealing with jealousy or that she may be acting out of jealousy, you and she may find the following tips useful.

#### *Mastering the green monster*

1. Admit to yourself that you feel jealous, e.g. “I feel jealous of Mary because...”
2. Tell yourself that you are not the first or the only person in the world to feel jealous. It is a normal human emotion experienced by everyone at some stage.
3. Admit to yourself and perhaps a sympathetic other person how it feels to be jealous, e.g. “It makes me feel awful....” or “I feel

all eaten up inside and I want to hurt her..."or "I feel smaller and less important than Mary and it makes me feel awful..."

4. Tell yourself "I have talents and gifts that are different from Mary's but just as important. I am now going to list them."
5. "Humour will help me to deal with jealousy. I will try to laugh at myself..."
6. Most importantly, "I don't have to act out of jealousy. In fact, I will not act to hurt Mary or anyone else when I am jealous"
7. "Feelings of jealousy can and will go away"

When she has finished this positive self-talk, her jealous feelings may not have magically disappeared. However, she will have some control over them. Reward her with praise for all progress.

If you notice that a previously good friend is no longer part of the group, enquire about her and suggest ways of mending friendship if there has been conflict. Try to help your daughter to understand what it might feel like to be excluded by friends and point out the distress it causes when it happens.

Watch out for behaviours which may be bullying such as offensive text-messaging, phone calls or comments. Insist on respectful distance between your daughter and a girl with whom she is in conflict as a basic minimum requirement. Remember

that girls who bully relationally in adolescence often go on to bully in the workplace and in adult relationships and this will have implications for their future. Of course it is of crucial importance in this regard that you give your daughter good example by not engaging in malicious gossip yourself.

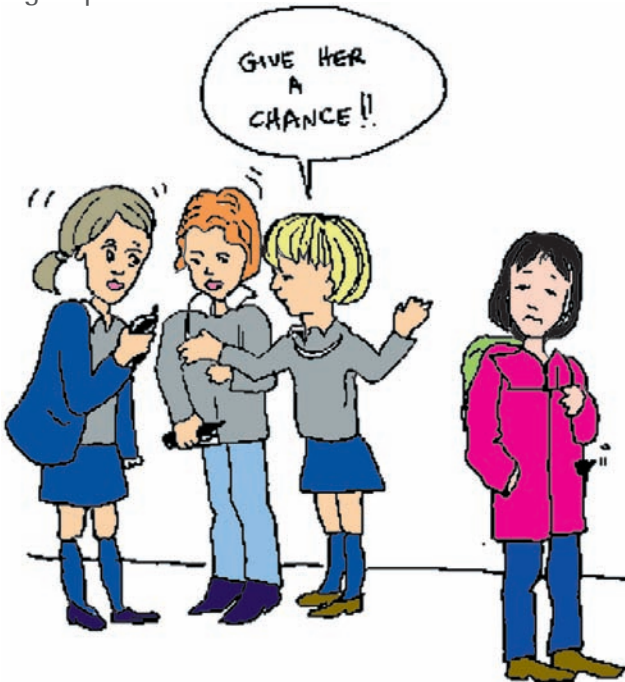


### **Bystanders**

Relational bullying very often starts by one girl manipulating a group of friends to support her against the victim. This "ganging up" happens where face-to-face aggression is feared and forbidden.

In group behaviour individuals are slow to take responsibility for bullying. They often hide behind the collective nature of the

group assuming that if everybody is involved in the bullying it must be OK. Being part of the gang offers girls a chance to be part of a clique, which gives a feeling of belonging. If the 'leader' of this gang happens to be popular, this opportunity to support her can result in bystanders improving their position in the group.



As a parent of such a bystander, you can play an important role in encouraging your daughter to move in the direction of befriending a girl who is being made to suffer bullying in this way.

Explain to her that doing nothing in the situation actually amounts to collusion. Discuss the moral issues of loyalty, cowardice, courage and kindness. Support your daughter in acting with integrity in

these difficult situations. Explain to her that supporting the targeted girl does not mean she has to be “against” other girls in the group. Having the courage to refuse to exclude or ostracise a group member will be a powerful step towards lessening the suffering of victims.

Girls need to be educated by their parents and teachers to talk openly about their hidden feelings of jealousy and competition. Parents must explain to girls that conflict-free relationships do not exist. Girls need reassurance from parents that friendship can survive conflict and may even be better when girls learn the skills of clear communication and healthy conflict resolution. Some of these skills are discussed in the section on assertiveness.

## Appendix

### Parents and School Policy on Bullying.

The Department of Education and Science document *Guidelines on Countering Bullying Behaviour in Primary and Post-Primary schools (1993)* is available on the Department's website ([www@educ.ie](http://www@educ.ie)). The Guidelines are designed to help schools develop and implement an anti-bullying policy.

The role of parents is discussed and it is suggested that "If staff, pupils and parents/guardians are involved in the development of the policy, they are more likely to actively support it" (Guidelines, 1993, p.11). One of the considerations in outlining a positive school policy is that "the school recognises the need to co-operate with, and keep parents informed on procedures to improve relationships within the school community" (Guidelines, 1993, p.17).

The Guidelines also recommend that the policy should be "promoted by the school Managerial Authorities within the school to all pupils, parents, and staff on a repeated basis with particular attention being given to incoming pupils and their parents" (Guidelines, 1993, p.9).

The Guidelines state that schools should develop policies with the following aims:

1. To create a school ethos which encourages children to disclose and discuss incidents of bullying behaviour.
2. To raise awareness of bullying as a form of unacceptable behaviour with school management, teachers, pupils, and

parents/guardians.

3. To ensure comprehensive supervision and monitoring measures through which all areas of school activity are kept under observation.
4. To develop procedures for noting and reporting incidents of bullying behaviour.
5. To develop procedures for investigating and dealing with incidents of bullying behaviour.
6. To develop a programme of support for those affected by bullying behaviour and for those involved in bullying behaviour.
7. To work with and through the various local agencies in countering all forms of bullying and anti-social behaviour.
8. To evaluate the effectiveness of school policy on anti-bullying behaviour.

When discussing procedures in schools for noting and reporting an incident of bullying behaviour (No. 4 above), the Guidelines go on to suggest that:

"Parents or guardians of victims and bullies should be informed by the principal or deputy-principal earlier rather than later of incidents so that they are given the opportunity of discussing the matter. They are then in a position to help and support their children before a crisis occurs" (Guidelines, p.11).

and

"Parents/guardians must be informed of the appropriate person to whom they can make their enquiries regarding incidents of bullying behaviour which they might suspect or that have come to their attention through their children or other parents/guardians" (Guidelines, p. 11).

## Suggested Reading

Alexander, Jenny (1998). *Your Child, Bullying: Practical and easy to follow advice*. Shaftesbury: Element Books.

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Train, A. (1995). *The Bullying Problem: How to Deal with Difficult Children*. U.K.: Souvenir Press.

Wiseman, R. (2002). *Queen Bees and Wannabees*. London: Piatkus.

## Useful Contacts

Parents who have serious concerns about their children should contact their GP for advice. Some of the organisations mentioned below have Websites and/or Helplines which offer advice and guidance. These are referenced in brackets.

Anti-Bullying Centre, Room 3125, Arts Building, Trinity College, Dublin, 2. Phone 01-6082573. (Advice and guidance). ([www.abc.tcd.ie](http://www.abc.tcd.ie)).

Barnardo's Children's Resource Centre, Christchurch Square, Dublin, 8. Phone: 01-4530355, (Helpline). ([www.barnardos.ie](http://www.barnardos.ie)).

Campaign Against Bullying, 72 Lakelands Avenue, Stillorgan, Co. Dublin. Phone: 2887976.

Citizen Information Centres (Comhairle). Phone: 01-6059000. ([www.comhairle.ie](http://www.comhairle.ie))

Child Abuse Prevention Programme (Stay Safe). Phone: 01-6232358.

Childline. Phone: 1800-666-666, (Helpline). ([www.ispcc.ie](http://www.ispcc.ie)).

Cool School Programme. ([www.coolschoolbullyfree.ie](http://www.coolschoolbullyfree.ie)) - (Has links to many other websites on bullying).

Equality Authority, Clonmel Street, Dublin, 2. Phone: 01-4173333. ([www.equality.ie](http://www.equality.ie)).

Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. 20 Molesworth Street, Dublin, 2. Phone: 01-6794944, (Helpline). ([www.ispcc.ie](http://www.ispcc.ie)).

Mental Health Association of Ireland (Information service), Mensana House, 6 Adelaide Street, Dun Laoghaire, Co. Dublin. Phone: 01-2841166. ([www.mentalhealthireland.ie](http://www.mentalhealthireland.ie)).

National Educational Psychological Services, (NEPS) 24-27 North Frederick Street, Dublin, 1. Phone: 01-8892700. ([www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie)).

National Parents Council Post-Primary. Unit 5 Glasnevin Business Centre, Ballyboggan Road, Dublin 11. Phone: 01-8302740, (Helpline). ([www.npcpp.ie](http://www.npcpp.ie)).

Parentline, (Parents Under Stress), Carmichael House, North Brunswick Street, Dublin 7. Phone: 01-8733500, (Helpline). ([www.parentline.ie](http://www.parentline.ie)).

Parents Support (Run by parents of gay and lesbian children). Booklet: *If Your Child is Lesbian or Gay*. Phone: 01-8721055 (Helpline).

Victim Support. Haliday House, 32 Aran Quay, Dublin, 2. Phone: 01-8780870. Also 1850-661-771, (Helpline). ([www.victimsupport.ie](http://www.victimsupport.ie)).

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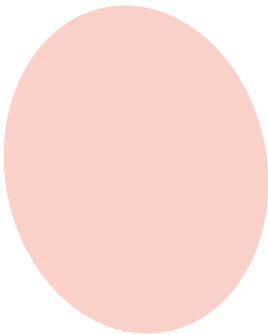
Notes



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North Bord  
Eastern Sláinte  
Health An Oir  
Board Thuaiscirt