

KIDS' HEALTH

Tough Call

WHAT DOES BULLYING LOOK LIKE? IT'S NOT JUST PHYSICAL AGGRESSION—VERBAL BULLYING IS NOW MORE COMMON

By *Stephanie Watson*

● There's a definite pecking order on the playground, and some children learn early on that one way to get to the top is to become the queen or king of mean. But where does typical kid nastiness cross the line into bullying?

"Currently, there's a lot of confusion about what bullying is. The word is so overused that it's come to mean almost anything that hurts your feelings," explains Elizabeth Englander, PhD, professor of psychology at Bridgewater State University, and founder and director of the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center.

True bullying involves more than a few isolated instances of mean behavior. It's a repeated pattern of taunting, teasing, and other aggressive actions. "It's a situation where [the bully is] setting out on a campaign to make the target's life miserable," Englander says.

Over the past few decades, the face of bullying has changed. Today bullying is less about punching and hitting, and more about teasing and name-calling. The forum has also shifted, from school into cyberspace. A 2011 survey found that nearly 20% of U.S. high-school students had been bullied through social media, texts, and other electronic communications.

What should you do if you suspect your child is being bullied? First, says Englander, don't freak out. You always want kids to feel like they can cope. "We've absorbed this value now that if you're a good parent, you leap up and get involved. But the truth is, everyone has to learn to deal with small meannesses."

Listen to your child without overreacting. "You can coach them on how to respond, but let them feel capable,"



TALK IT OUT

IT'S EASY TO BE OUTRAGED IF YOUR CHILD IS BEING BULLIED—BUT WHAT IF YOUR CHILD IS THE AGGRESSOR? BULLYING EXPERT ELIZABETH ENGLANDER, PHD, HELPS YOU SPOT THE SIGNS—AND OFFERS ADVICE ON STOPPING THE BEHAVIOR.

Look for bullying red flags. "One of the big tip-offs that we often see is in how these kids treat their siblings," she says. Siblings almost always bicker, but if one child is particularly nasty or aggressive to another, that attitude could be spilling over into school.

Teach good values. "The families that really push being a good person, where that's the most important value, are the ones whose kids are the least likely to turn around and mistreat their peers," Englander says.

Englander says. Try role-playing, offering your child different ways to respond to the bully—these might include walking away, looking the person in the eye and saying, "Cut it out," or using humor to lighten the situation. Don't step in further unless your child shows increased moodiness, slipping grades, trouble sleeping, or new problem behaviors like drinking or using drugs. However, if you are concerned about physical interactions or altercations, definitely get your school involved.

If the situation doesn't blow over on its own, contact the school. All schools are required to address behavior that creates a hostile environment.

Reviewed by **Hansa Bhargava, MD**
WebMD Medical Editor