

How parents can help children with ADHD deal with bullies

Opinion

The challenge of raising children with ADHD often requires helping them contend with one of today's pervasive social problems: bullying. Several factors place ADHD children at greater risk for being unsuspecting targets. The tendency to behave in an attention-seeking and/or immature fashion, coupled with decreased social awareness of the impact of their actions, leaves ADHD children more susceptible to bullying and less equipped for appropriate responses. This vulnerability makes it critical for parents to be proactive in coaching ADHD children in ways to become "bully-wise."

The first step is for parents to become educated about bullying in today's world. Bullying takes the form of verbal teasing and name-calling, excluding or spreading ugly rumours, or actual physical contact, such as pushing, tripping, or other aggression, such as shooting rubber bands at another child. Children who hurt their peers often don't fit the stereotyped profile associated with bullies in the past. Instead of being the unhappy, isolated figure with low self-esteem, they may appear as the friendly, popular and good student. Perhaps most daunting is that today's bully can be very adept at concealing the mistreatment of others, thereby leaving intact their reputation as a "nice kid." These circumstances may confuse and confound your ADHD child, further contributing to their difficulties. Therefore, parents must explain these realities to children in order to build greater awareness and start a dialogue about bullying.

All children need to safely confide in parents and teachers if bullying is taking place, but ADHD children may be slow to do so. This may be due to the perception that their "ADHD behavior" warrants mistreatment or that reporting it will make it worse. Parents can help dispel this belief by explaining that nothing legitimizes bullying, and that reporting it to others in authority is the first step in making it stop. Explain that schools have strategies to correct the problem. Another reason that ADHD kids may not reveal concerns about bullying is rooted in their tendency to put things out of their mind ("out of sight - out of mind"). Gentle probing about the social and behavior dynamics in the classroom can help them remember specific incidents that may signal to parents that bullying is present. Sometimes the ADHD child is unaware that they are being targeted unless the parent conducts such inquiries. Periodic contact with the teacher about your child's social position in the classroom will provide insight into the issues and specific classmates to privately discuss with your child.

Key to this dialogue is a sensitive examination of the ADHD-related factors that may draw them into the bully "firing zone." While not excusing the bully's actions, explain to your child that certain behaviors draw negative attention and increase the potential for bullying. Impulsive behavior is a prime example; talking too much, silliness or clowning around at inopportune times, or blurting out random or ill-chosen remarks can elicit a bully's ire. Since some

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ADHD children do not inhibit discussion of embarrassing topics, such as private family matters or personal fears, parents should regularly emphasize the importance of protecting privacy. Social life is another area where ADHD may set children up for unexpected trouble. Over-eagerness to gain acceptance or a tendency to violate social boundaries, such as in answering for others or touching another's property, can precipitate bullying. Excited and reckless reactions to similar behavior in peers can quickly backfire if your ADHD child does not "read" the unwritten rules within the group. These and other out-of-sync behaviors, if present in your ADHD child, are important to review, since sometimes the child may perceive them to be nothing more than friendly actions.

If you discover that your child is the target of bullying, quick, comforting and decisive action is necessary. Validate their feelings and perceptions, and support their right to feel safe in school or the community. Promise them that you will do whatever is necessary to restore their safety. Report the bullying to the teacher and school principal, and provide as much detail as possible as to the exact words and actions attributed to the bully. If your child is aware of peers who have witnessed the mistreatment, supply those names. Request that your child not be questioned in the presence of the bully. This can be particularly intimidating to ADHD children, but a procedure sometimes employed by schools. Should you suspect that ADHD is related to the bullying, clarify the contribution. Ask the principal to call the bully's parents but be prepared to follow-up with a call on your own. Suggest to the parents that you are calling as a gesture of good will since you would want to be similarly informed if they were calling the school to complain about your child. Parents of bullies have the most pointed impact upon bullying behavior, but only if we can stand up and let them know about it.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.