

Talking to parents who are concerned about bullying

Project Prevent and Address Bullying (PPAB)

for students with disabilities

For Educators

Northern Illinois University | School Psychology Program

Bullying is a sensitive topic that can be difficult to talk about with parents given the emotions involved and the urgency adults feel to help those they care about. Here are some guidelines to help you handle these situations. School staff can work hard to prevent and address bullying. However, they cannot do it alone. Engaging parents is a critical step in this important task.

The do's

- Take parent concerns seriously; parents can help us recognize instances of bullying we wouldn't otherwise be able to.
- Offer support and empathy to the parents' situation. Strive to ensure that the parent knows you are a resource to them, not an enemy who is trying to get their child in trouble.
- Maintain open communication to the furthest extent possible regarding your investigation of the incident.
- Refer parents to the school rules and policies regarding bullying (assuming the policy is clear and involves helpful responses).
- Follow up with parents regarding a plan for moving forward.
- Educate parents on the warning signs of bullying or victimization.
- Encourage additional parental involvement, such as attending parent meetings/trainings and parent-teacher conferences.
- Take preventative measures within your own classroom at the beginning of each school year. (For example, send each student home with a copy of your school's bullying policy at the beginning of the year.)

The don'ts

- Do not disregard or downplay any concerns expressed by the parent(s).
- Do not discuss other children without their parents around. Particularly, do not reveal the punishment of the child who bullied. Rather, refer the parent to your school's bullying policy and ensure them that proper actions are being taken. Then, focus on their own child's plan moving forward.
- Do not use school policy as your only answer to parents' questions and concerns. You should refer to the school handbook or policies, but if you refer only to these documents it depersonalizes the situation to parents.
- Do not assume the responsibility of solving bullying problems alone. This should be a cooperative process among school staff, administration, parents, and students.

Find additional handouts on our website at go.niu.edu/PPAB



NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

Department of Psychology

College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

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What to do if a parent is concerned about a bullying situation.

STEP One: Listen to the parent.

- Take all parent concerns seriously.
- Listen with empathy and maintain open communication.
- Do not disregard or downplay any concerns expressed by the parent(s).

STEP Two: To decide if the situation is bullying or normal peer conflict, answer these 4 questions.

1. Does the behavior cause physical or psychological harm?
2. Is the behavior repeated or likely to be repeated over time?
3. Does the behavior involve a real or perceived power imbalance? (Physical, social, intellectual, etc.)
4. Is the behavior intentional and have the purpose of being mean?

- If one or more questions is answered with a No, then it may be peer conflict and is still important to address, but different steps may need to be taken.
- If all questions are answered with a Yes, then it is bullying.

STEP Three: Take action.

- Educate – Reassure that steps will be taken at school to correct the situation and explain the school's policy.
- Plan – Develop a set of steps that you, the school, the parent(s) and the student(s) will take to stop the bullying.
- Provide Resources – Send the parent(s) handouts with more information and a list of online resources.
- Track Communication – This can help you keep track of bullying incidents over time and prevent misunderstandings between you and parents. See below for some tips on tracking communication:
 - Keep a running log of the date and nature of discussions you have with the parent(s) and student(s). Save all emails and voicemails.
 - Log the date, type of communication (phone/email), who you spoke with, involved students, parent contact information, summary of bullying situation and next steps to be taken.

Don't forget about prevention.

Provide all parents with resources at the beginning of the year to help prevent bullying situations from getting out of hand. Help parents understand the warning signs of bullying, when they should get involved and how to stay involved.

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