

Harassment: How can parents help?

All children will meet harassment of some kind. Our task as parents is to make them inwardly strong enough to not invite harassment and to be able to deal with harassment in healthy, prompt ways when it arises. This article provides some suggestions in brief.

Preparing firm ground to minimize harassment.

The best defence against, and strategy for dealing with, harassment is to be inwardly strong and outwardly respectful and firm. The basis for this is respect and concern for oneself and respect and compassion for others—i.e. to have healthy self esteem.

Parents can help to nurture self esteem in children by helping them to learn to love, respect, care for and accept every aspect of themselves; their thinking, feelings, their capacities, their bodies and their essential selves – their individualities. This is helped by children feeling certain that you feel unconditional recognition, acceptance and love for them. In practical terms this could mean ensuring that you are regularly praising your child where they deserve it, trusting them in appropriate areas, and supporting them in new learning. They also need to learn that they have the right and deserve to feel safe. This should include clear rules banning all insults, put-downs or hurtful comments or actions within the family.

In everyday life, as parents and teachers, we can encourage behaviours which can both help to minimise and to deal with harassment when it happens. Consider the following:

- We can encourage our children to listen when their hearts or gut feelings are saying a situation is unsafe or threatening ("no!" feelings).
- We can help them to find ways to listen to but also control their feelings, particularly of fear, anger and aggressiveness.
- We can encourage them to practise their courage and to find ways to stay calm.
- We can help them to give powerful body messages, by standing tall, square and centred.
- We can show them that slumping posture and cringing can invite further bullying and that puffing out the chest can further challenge the bully's lust for power.
- We can encourage clear objective thinking and problem solving.
- We can teach them how to speak with a strong clear, firm, powerful, and respectful voice.
- We can insist that children give us firm answers, both yes and no, as if they mean it! "YES! I WOULD like a cake please!" "NO! Please stop that, NOW!"
- We can refuse to accept high pitched communications, whinging and whining.

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- We can teach them to use a direct gaze. With our eyes we can see into the soul. With gentle gaze we can touch that soul, and reach out to what is most human in the other.
- We can teach our children to be courteous, respectful and friendly to all people, not just their own friends. This also means emphasizing they should not join in with any harassment of others by their peers. They should also be taught the power of the bystander in preventing harassment of others. Diplomacy and centred inner strength are clearly also needed in this.

All of these are ways by which we can help our children to protect themselves even when they are quite young. Without even mentioning harassment, we can teach them respect for themselves and for others. We can teach them how to carry themselves so that they are less likely to become victims, or if they do, are more likely to eventually come through the experience relatively unscathed. All children are teased, good-heartedly or vindictively! Whether they go on being teased often depends on their reaction to the teasing.

Preparing firm ground for preventing sexual abuse

Strategies for preventing sexual abuse can also strengthen children against general harassment particularly in children's right to feel safe and to report harassment to adults. Specific 'indirect' strategies to protect young children against sexual abuse without damaging their trust in older people can be found in the following family safety guidelines. To maximise the protection of

young children from sexual abuse, parents also need to familiarise themselves with further information on sexual abuse. See the work of Freda Briggs in books and online and also the article *Prevention of sexual abuse in young children*.

If these guidelines are worked with and placed on a family's noticeboard, it makes clear that your children will not be easy targets for child abuse.

Our Family Safety Guidelines

- In our house, feelings are important and may tell you what to do.
- We always have the right and deserve to feel safe
- Privacy is respected. I am boss of my body.
- Everyone always has the right to say no if they are asked to do something that they think is wrong or do not understand.
- We do not keep bad secrets in our house, only good surprises.
- We have a loving circle of friends who would help us if we needed it.
- We can say NO and YES strongly when we mean it.
- We can be persistent to get what we need.

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- We do not like bad tricks, bribes or blackmail in our house.

Some strategies for dealing with harassment when it happens.

As children get older, we can teach them to use other strategies more consciously to deal with harassment. There are many specific strategies which have been suggested to help children to deal with harassment. Parents can help by discussing these strategies with children, perhaps role playing them if needed. The strategy used will depend on where the harassment or bullying takes place, for example in school or on the street. Children need to know how to avoid aggravating the situation if possible. Children themselves have often observed who gets bullied and may be able to tell you why. Parents can work with the child's experience of this as well.

Consider the following strategies:

- Stand up to the bully, using your own inner authority. Be direct, respectful, firm, polite and mean what you say! Stay centred physically and in your thinking and feeling.
- Reason, talk it out, respectfully.
- Make friends with the bully. This approach recognises "the good" in the bully. Often children bully others because they feel insecure or are socially incompetent. Genuine friendship is valuable to each one of us and bullies need it particularly.
- Agree with the bully when an accusation is true. "Shorty!" "Yes I am short." "You're right! I don't like to fight!" Disagree politely when an accusation is not true.
- Use humour, but not at the expense of another person, especially the bully, him or herself!
- Ignore the bullying, teasing behaviour, but try to reach out to the person if appropriate.
- Refuse to fight/argue/enter into a bullying "game".
- Get away from the bully. Walk away.
- Make a loud noise to attract help. Yell "NO!", "DON'T DO THAT!" loudly, especially if you need help or to show you can get help. Some advice suggests yelling "Fire!" if you need help and no one takes any notice.
- Get friends to help or support you.
- Use the authority of some more powerful person than yourself... an older child, an adult, parent or teacher. Telling another person is okay. NO ONE has the right to bully you. Be persistent in getting help.
- Learn a martial art. This can give inner confidence and physical centredness, which gives out a 'body language' message to bullies: "Don't harass me!"
- Practice making yourself 'invisible'! This can be used in public situations where there are aggressive people but no escape route, for example on a train. Pull all your thoughts into yourself and visualise a barrier between you and the world. Imagine yourself as part of the

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furniture. People used this to avoid detection in the war!

- If you believe in the spiritual world, pray for help and pray for the bully! They say angels
- The basis for preventing or minimising harassment is self esteem. In cases of 'non-personal' harassment, where harassment is aggravated by prejudice against a particular group characteristic (e.g. ethnic group, sex, sexual

can help better when they are asked and acknowledged!

preference, disability, skin colour, race) self esteem is even more essential for survival, because these children can get a double dose of harassment. More on helping build self esteem can be found in *Building Self- Esteem*.

Further reading

See the work of Barbara Coloroso, including her very helpful, compassionate book, *The Bully, the Bullied and the Bystander*. The updated 2009 edition includes help on cyber-bullying. Her book on building self esteem *Kids are worth it!* is also highly recommended.

Other articles on the website

Building self esteem,

Strategies for healthy living in the family—help to keep your children strong and centred

Prevention of sexual abuse in young children.

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