

Bully-Proof

A GUIDE TO HELP YOUR TEEN BE MORE
SKILLFUL, RESILIENT AND SAFE*

**in-person and online*



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Introduction

Chances are if you've downloaded this booklet, you or someone you love is experiencing or has experienced bullying. I wish I could wave a magic wand and forever eradicate that kind of harmful behavior, but in lieu of any special mystical powers, I offer you the next best thing: a simple resource with the most effective, tested and proven tactics to deflect bullying.

Our work at IRL Social Skills supports neurodivergent youth and adults who often have underdeveloped social skills, with a focus on autistic and ADHD neurotypes. Research shows us that neurodivergent individuals of all ages are more likely to be bullied than their neurotypical peers.

Bullying can result in physical injury, social anxiety, emotional distress, self-harm, and even death¹. It increases the risk for poor mental health outcomes—contributing to depression, sleep difficulties, lower academic achievement, and drop-out rates.

Bullying is increasingly a problem in our society for everyone, with roughly 20% of youth ages 12-18 experiencing bullying or other aggressive behavior. For autistic and ADHD individuals the reported rates of bullying, threats, or assault increases exponentially—with three times the number of autistic youth reporting bullying, and over 40% of teens with ADHD.

We've assembled this booklet to help you or your teen learn the best tactics for dealing with verbal, physical, relational, and electronic or virtual bullying.

We recommend setting aside some time every week to review and practice these tips and techniques until they're integrated into your child's social skills toolkit.

We wish you luck, joy, and a safe, happy, and healthy child.

Different types of bullying

Teasing. Punching. Spreading rumors and gossip. Exclusion and shunning. Cyberbullying. All of these hurtful behaviors—and more—fall under the umbrella of bullying. And each of them require a specific set of skills to manage successfully.

Bullying is defined as a type of aggressive behavior in which a person or a group of people humiliates, repeatedly attacks, or excludes another. Being a victim of bullying presents a risk to the academic and social lives of children and adults, alike. Bullying also entails an unequal power dynamic in which the bullied victim is relatively powerless compared to the individual or the group doing the bullying.

Why do people bully?

An attempt to achieve higher social status and popularity, respect, dominance, and power are often key motivations behind bullying. The overwhelming majority of bullying instances happen in the presence of other peers. Bullies want to appear cool, powerful, and popular. They take pleasure in their victim's discomfort and seek to elicit a reaction from them.

Who do bullies pick on?

Like the pride of lions that attacks the lone gazelle, bullies tend to pick on those who present as physically weaker, submissive, insecure, introverted, and already in a low status or socially rejected position by peers.

The advice regularly given by earlier generations—to ignore it, walk away, tell an adult—is outdated and ineffective. Being effective is doing what works to ease or eliminate the pain of bullying. Therefore, each type of bullying must be handled strategically, with a clear understanding of the bullies' motivation and specific tactics to use with each type of bullying.

In this booklet, we'll guide you through the different types of bullying and the specific strategies and tactics to use for each.

1. Teasing

Socially accepted teens and young adults can handle teasing, easily taking it in stride and handling it using humor, confidence, and an assertive attitude. However, those who are peer rejected and socially isolated tend to get angry, upset, and even physically aggressive.

In-person verbal abuse—such as name-calling or disparaging remarks—requires the targeted individual not to ignore it, walk away, or tell an adult.

Strategy for handling teasing

Your child should:

- **NOT** show that they're upset or tease back.
- Act like what the person said **doesn't bother them**.
- Give a **short, snappy comeback** to show that what the person said was lame or stupid, such as:
 - Whatever.
 - Anyways...
 - So what?
 - Big deal!
 - Who cares?
 - Yeah, and?
 - What's your point?
 - Is that supposed to be funny?
 - Oh-kay.
- Offer a nonverbal response—like rolling their eyes or shrugging their shoulders—but only if those actions come easily. Not everyone does nonverbal expression well.
- **Walk away only after responding with a verbal brush-off or clap-back; you don't want the bully to think you're running away.**

This strategy, known as *Tease the Tease* (not “Tease the Tease-er”), takes power out of the teasing and makes it less fun for the bully. Since one of the motivations for the bully is to derive pleasure from the victim’s discomfort, don’t give them the satisfaction.

Suppose in the past your teen or young adult has responded by getting upset when teased. While such a reaction is normal and valid, it has the unfortunate effect of encouraging the bully to continue provoking.

Practice comebacks

Have your child practice two or three verbal comebacks so that when the need arises, they're prepared. Be sure that their response is short and makes sense.

The shorter and snappier the comeback, the better. Practice with your loved one, preferably with a benign tease, like, "That's an ugly shirt." Have your child deliver their comeback and walk away with their back straight and their head held high.

PRO TIP! Video modeling is a highly effective way to improve one's social and bully-proofing skills. Take a video of this practice and have your child watch it to see how well they did.

Expect the bully to try to tease your kid again. In fact, once challenged, they may try even harder to get a reaction out of your child. This behavior is called an "extinction burst." Remind your child to stay strong and resolute, and use their favorite clap-back phrases. Once the bully realizes their teasing isn't having the same effect, they are much more likely to cease their provocations.

Your child should not use snappy comebacks with people in authority, like parents, teachers, or law enforcement. Comebacks should also **not** be used with physical bullies. (We'll get into the correct strategies for handling physical aggression in the next chapter.)

If your teen or young adult is not open to discussing this topic, do some quiet observations. Watch their interactions with peers at school pick-up or drop-off. Attend open houses with teachers and initiate discussions about the school's policies around bullying. Ask a sibling who attends the same school what they see in terms of bullying.

For individuals with communication processing difficulties, sometimes feedback that is difficult to receive can be construed as bullying.

For example, suppose your child is told they are too loud—or too quiet. A peer saying “Stop shouting” or “I can’t hear you” emphatically can be received as an attack by some. But in fact, it is feedback that points to your child’s volume or clarity when speaking. These are common issues for neurodivergent people—especially youth. If this is feedback your child receives often, research free decibel-measuring smartphone apps to help them see the impact of talking too loudly or quietly based on the environment.

Additionally, remarks like, “Your breath stinks” or “you smell” may indicate that your teen or young adult needs more support with personal hygiene. In this case, providing a written checklist of the steps to brush their teeth, bathe, and apply deodorant can help analyze these daily activities. Good hygiene involves many steps; following them may be challenging when executive functioning skills are underdeveloped.

Teens and young adults are often teased about their clothing. In that case, it helps if parents notice the style of their child’s peers and can ask friends or same-age relatives about what people are wearing these days.

We vote for self-expression. A t-shirt representing something your child is excited about—anime, music, or something related to social justice—lets them make a statement without having to announce it verbally. It can also serve as a signal to help them attract people who share their interests.

Although we cannot control other people’s behavior—as long as a bully gets what they want, they’ll likely continue bullying—we can help our loved ones take responsibility for their reactions to triggers and provocations. Remind your child that being bullied is *never* through any fault of their own.

2. Physical Bullying

Hitting, kicking, slapping, spitting, pushing, stealing, tripping, pranking, and threats of violence—unprovoked and systematic intimidation of a weaker individual—fall under physical bullying.

The objective of the perpetrators is to inflict pain and suffering. This form of physical abuse often happens out of sight of adults in roles of authority, such as parents, school personnel, or managers. Physical bullies often are not considered troublemakers by those in charge. They may even be well-regarded by teachers and supervisors.

PRO TIP! *Bullies don't make good friends! They will often financially exploit or manipulate the weaker and more socially gullible person into committing illegal acts. Our 16-week PEERS Course teaches social skills to strengthen discernment around choosing appropriate friends.*

Many families report that those in positions of authority look the other way when it comes to physical bullying, doing nothing to stop it—even when there are laws that prohibit dismissing such reports. In cases of severe, chronic physical bullying, we recommend families seek legal help. Often just the mention of a lawyer or police involvement will spur action on the part of the administration in school or workplace settings.

Often, neurodivergent teens and young adults mistakenly believe that if they try and make friends with their bully, the attacks will stop. However, research shows that is not the case.

Neurodivergent youth or adults who struggle to assess a person's intent often need help identifying, initiating, and maintaining appropriate friendships with peers. Appropriate friendships with people who model care and mutual support help teens and young adults understand healthy boundaries—and promote seeking help when bullying occurs.

Strategies for handling physical bullying

Your child should:

- **Lay low**
 - Keep a low profile, and don't draw attention to themselves.
If the bully doesn't notice your child, it's less likely they will attack.
- **Avoid the bully**
 - Stay out of their reach. Remind your child to stay away from their locker, lunch table, desk, or work area.
- **Hang out with other people**
 - Bullies like to pick on people who are alone.
 - Stay in the proximity of supportive peers or people in authority.
- **NOT provoke, tease, act silly or report them for something unrelated**
 - Provocation may make them retaliate more aggressively.

NOTE: If a bully is doing something that could seriously injure someone, it is appropriate to report them. Suppose they bring a weapon to school or threaten to beat someone up. In that case, your child should report this behavior **privately**, away from peers, to minimize leaks that could provoke retaliation. If your child does report bullying, they should keep it between themselves, whatever authority they reported to, and parents. Sharing such information with peers opens the door to rumors getting leaked which could make matters worse.

OUR EXPERT ADVICE

Suppose the bully has already physically assaulted your teen or young adult—punched, kicked, or hit them—or is threatening to do so. In that case, they should **get help from an adult in authority as soon as possible**.

3. Relational / Social Bullying

Relational or social bullying includes spreading gossip and rumors, as well as social exclusion and shunning. Bullying of this type is very impactful, and it is important not to underestimate it. Brain scans have found that social bullying activates the same parts of the brain associated with physical pain. It is as serious as any other type of bullying.

Gossip is a form of relational bullying. It is ubiquitous among social groups. It is mean-spirited and used to help gossips to feel important and get attention, as a form of retaliation or revenge, and even blackmail. Spreading rumors and gossip constitutes a form of communication and is usually harmful. The theory behind why people gossip is that we learn from the mistakes of others and can avoid making them ourselves.

PRO TIP! *Rumors start as gossip. The best way to dispel rumors is to deny them by making a solid argument as to why the story is not valid and discredit the source of the gossip.*

Exclusion and shunning are social phenomena that often result from a lack of compassion and understanding of different neurotypes and perspectives. They indicate a lack of empathy or curiosity.

Confronting the person or people who gossip or start rumors about your child is ineffective and may only lead to more of the same problem behavior. The natural response for humans is to want to defend ourselves against any false allegations, but this instinct doesn't work when dealing with people who are invested in causing harm for some emotional reward.

The following strategies are very effective—but they require practice.

Strategies for handling gossip and rumors

Your child should...

- **NOT try to be friends with gossips**
 - This includes casual socializing. Even if the gossiping isn't directed at them, people who gossip are often indiscriminate about their targets and your child's reputation could be damaged by association.
- **NOT spread gossip or rumors about others**
 - Your child should avoid retaliating against those spreading rumors about them—it almost never works and could backfire
 - Gossipping is harmful behavior, and peers who are not targeted by bullies may withdraw friendship as a result.
- **NOT not show that they are upset**
 - They will look defensive, which can provoke the bully.
 - It will add fuel to the rumor mill.
 - People will start gossiping about how upset they are.
- **NOT confront the source of the gossip**
 - It may result in an argument or even a physical altercation.
 - The gossiper will feel justified in spreading the gossip.
- **AVOID the source of the gossip**
 - The bully may be hoping for a confrontation. Don't give them satisfaction. Confrontation will only add fuel to the rumor mill.
- **ACT surprised**
 - Your child should act surprised—as though they can't believe anyone would believe the rumors—even if they hold some truth. Rather than outright denying the gossip (which often entrenches it even further), this tactic indirectly refutes its legitimacy.
 - Acting amazed discredits the source without confronting them, making it less likely that others will spread the rumor.
 - Acting as though the gossip itself is absurd discredits the source and diminishes their social power.

Phases your child should practice include:

“I can’t believe anyone would believe that.”
 “People are so gullible.”
 “People will believe anything.”
 “Can you believe anyone cares about that?”
 Pfft...No one believes that.”

- **ACKNOWLEDGE the rumor — and it's absurdity**

- Acknowledge that the rumor/gossip is out there, but tell everyone how ridiculous it is. For example::
“Have you heard this rumor going around about me? It’s ridiculous!”
- This tactic indirectly denies the story is true, discrediting the source and making it less likely the rumor will spread.
- Talking openly about the absurdity of the rumor in front of an audience—where others will overhear—claims agency and power. Encourage your child to narrate their own story, their way, without defending themselves.

Strategies for handling shunning and exclusion:

Your child should...

- **ENGAGE in positive self-talk**

- “I deserve to have meaningful and supportive friendships.”
- “I am worthy of kindness and respect.”
- Remind your child to repeat phrases like these daily to fortify their mental health, mood, and sense of agency.

- **FIND a source of friends based on shared interests**

- Whatever your child is into, others share that interest.
- Help your child initiate, cultivate, and maintain friendships with people who validate and accept them.

- **DISREGARD those who shun and exclude them**

- Let your child know it is appropriate and wise to avoid people who shun them.

- **SEEK trauma-informed mental health support** to help them better understand healthy boundaries and relationships.

4. Cyberbullying

Bullying in online spaces is rampant, cowardly, and comes in many forms, including:

- Lies and false accusations
- Judgment around one's socioeconomic status
- Creating false profiles
- Jealousy bullying
- Identity bullying (LGBTQIA+)
- Doxxing
- Trolling
- Sending harassing texts, DMs, IMs
- Nude photo sharing (sexploitation, blackmail)
- Encouraging self-harm or suicide

Most people are told to ignore cyberbullying. After all, cyberbullies are trying to elicit a response from you and are "only online". However, this form of bullying is just as harmful as any other—with often disastrous outcomes.

Strategies to minimize cyberbullying

Your child should...

- **NOT feed the trolls**
 - Help your child resist the impulse to react to trolls.
 - Ask friends or family members near their age (siblings, cousins) to defend them (bystander support).
- **KEEP a low profile**
 - Encourage your child to take a break from social media; unplugging completely for a set period. If that's not possible, have them commit to not engaging, posting, or commenting, until the drama passes.
- **BLOCK bullies**
 - Make sure your child understands that they don't owe anyone their time or attention—and that not everyone deserves access to them.

- **SAVE the evidence**
 - Make sure your child knows how to take a screenshot and save it, before deleting offensive messages, comments, or posts.
 - Get help from supportive adults or people in authority.

- **REPORT cyberbullying to the proper authorities**

This includes:

- Moderators
- In-app reporting
- Service providers, health or social workers
- School faculty or leadership
- Managers (or HR staff) at work
- Law enforcement (in extreme cases)

Bully-proof your child with social skills coaching

Many neurodivergent youth—and adults—haven't received the social skills education they need to successfully navigate complex, difficult, or harmful social situations—like bullying. Available resources dwindle after grade school, leaving young people and their parents grasping for straws in an effort to create a thriving, connected, safe, and social life.

IRL Social Skills workshops and classes work with you and your teen or young adult to learn and practice these and other social skills in a group setting. Our 16-week course is based on UCLA's PEERS curriculum—recognized as the only evidence-based social skills curriculum. Together, we help those who struggle to understand social behavior and prepare them for college, work, intimate and family life in a way that recognizes their strengths and gifts.

This booklet is intended as a resource. If you need support advocating for your child, please get in touch. We are available for individual coaching sessions as well as consultations.

Reach out to us at hello@irlsocialskills.com, to set up a complimentary call and discuss how our programs can support your family..