

Catholic Parenting 101

How to Deal with Bullying and Peer Pressure

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Why do people bully others? Quite simply, because it works! Bullies get what they want, or at least what they think they want. It is that simple.

Bullying is not what it used to be. Years ago, students could physically point out the school bully who was well known to all for threatening or even beating up victims, often with little or no provocation. The agreed upon solution then was to avoid crossing the path of the bully at all costs.

Today bullying is just as likely to occur online as in public. Reports of cyber-bullying over social networking platforms or through text-messaging are common. Children, and sometimes even adults, make threats or write notes undermining the character of their intended victim.

What's a Parent to Do?

Here are four strategies you can use to teach your children how to keep themselves and others safe from bullying and negative pressure from peers who try to persuade your son or daughter to engage in harmful and inappropriate behaviors.

1. Ongoing Conversation

In addition to teaching your children skills to help keep them safe, take time each day to connect with them through in-person, face-to-face conversation—over the kitchen table for breakfast or dinner, while driving or riding in the car, checking in when they arrive home from school, or at bedtime.

Knowing your children well is one of the best ways to notice when things are not going right—when they appear withdrawn, upset, or depressed. These ongoing conversations are moments to check in and find out what is going on in their lives. Be the team member your children need and support them in dealing with bullying and other forms of negative peer pressure.

Call in other team members—teacher, principal, coach, guidance counselor—if needed, in order to have people around who can address concerns in a calm manner. Addressing situations calmly is much more likely to lead to peaceful resolution.

2. Setting Personal Boundaries

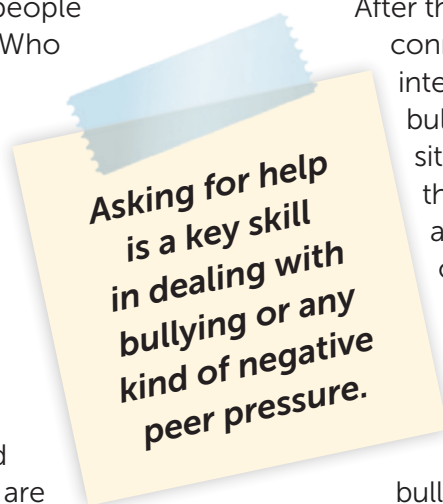
One of the most important skills we can pass on to our children is how to set appropriate boundaries. Boundaries can be both physical and emotional. Physical boundaries protect our bodies. Emotional boundaries protect our feelings and ensure the right to express our thoughts appropriately. If someone pushes or hits us or gets in our face, a physical boundary has been violated. We need to let our children know that it is okay to be verbally assertive (not physically or verbally aggressive) and to stand up for themselves and let people know that crossing physical boundaries is not okay.

Help your children understand that no one has the right to touch them in any way without the child's permission. Should this boundary be violated, or even the threat of such a violation occur—threats violate an emotional boundary—let your children know that they must remove themselves from the situation immediately and go and find help. Help your children learn to be appropriately assertive by role-playing at home such confrontations. Set up, or draw from real life situations that could happen, and practice with your children what they can do or say to someone violating a boundary.

3. Ask for Help

Asking for help is a key skill in dealing with bullying or any kind of negative peer pressure. This skill helps us to understand that we are part of a team, and that we do not have to suffer pressure alone.

Talk with your children about the people around them who can be trusted. Who can your child turn to in time of need? Who can your children rely on to listen to them and believe them? Let your children know that you are there for them, but also help them to name other allies, such as a teacher, guidance counselor, principal, or coach whom they can trust. Make a list of these people with contact information. Let the people named on this contact list know that they are on your children's lists.



Children also need to learn to gauge the threat level of every situation. You do not want your children to be afraid of the situation, just prepared to deal with it successfully and appropriately. So help your children be able to tell the difference between someone who brags and someone who threatens. Practice with your children by setting up some role-playing situations.

Teach your children what to do if there is an immediate threat of harm to them or to others. For example, go directly to an authority figure and explain the situation. At school an authority figure would be a teacher, a guidance counselor, the principal or assistant principal, or possibly a school resource officer. In the neighborhood it might be a police officer, a school-bus driver, or someone at the information counter at the mall. In such cases, the children's responsibility is to tell clearly and confidently what they saw, heard, and experienced. The adult is responsible for appropriately following up on the children's message to address threats and to protect children from harm.

If the threat is not immediate, children still need to talk with an authority figure as soon as possible. Encourage your children to speak with you about anything that concerns them.

After these conversations you may need to connect with other adults who can intervene and address concerns about bullying or other negative peer pressure situations. In doing so, be sure to keep the focus on specific behaviors, such as words or threats that were made or any other physical actions—such as pushing or hitting—that occurred. It is important to identify and address real behaviors as opposed to accusations (a child simply saying that someone or others are bullying or pressuring the child) that may or may not be true.

4. Cyber-Bullying

When it comes to cyber-bullying, be sure to stay tuned to your children's social networking sites. Make it a requirement that in order for your children to join these sites you, the parent, must have ready access to the site. You must know your child's login ID and password and be added as a "friend" on these sites. This will enable you to check in on content often to make sure that bullying or other inappropriate activity is not being posted or accessed.

Discuss with your child what is appropriate or inappropriate to post on these sites. And continue to teach as needed. Be concrete: have your children tell you what is or is not an appropriate post; fill in anything that they omit. Be sure to practice with your children what they should do if they encounter inappropriate content on the internet; namely, leave the site immediately and tell you what happened. [A resource that can be used as a complement to this curriculum for middle school age students and their parents is "Unmasking Sexual Con Games" from Boys Town Press. This resource is used in conjunction with child safety education in some parishes and dioceses.]