



Bullied Kids Can be at Risk for Later Emotional and Behavioural Problems

The good news is that by providing warmth and support, families can help promote their children's resilience to bullying lessening its impact on their children's future mental health.

Bullying in primary school has been well documented and most schools now have policies in place to deal with it. But can a family environment also equip kids with strategies to cope with the bullying experience?

The findings of a combined British/USA study, which looked at the protective role of family on children's adjustment following experiences

of bullying, have shown that warm, family relationships and positive home environments help buffer kids from the negative effects of bullying.

In this study, bullying was defined as another child saying mean and hurtful things, making fun or calling a person mean and hurtful names; completely ignoring or excluding someone from their group of friends or leaving them out of things on purpose; hitting, kicking, or shoving a person, or locking them in a room; or telling lies or spreading rumours. Bullying is when these things happen often and when it is difficult for the person being bullied to make it stop.

The researchers studied a nationally representative sample of 1,116 families with one or more children. First, from questionnaires completed by family members, the atmosphere of the family (extent of positivity, warmth) was determined. Next, they examined mothers' and children's reports of victimisation during primary school.

Finally, they asked mothers and their children's teachers to complete a questionnaire that measured the children's emotional and behavioural adjustment at ages 10 and 12.

The study showed that maternal warmth, sibling warmth and a positive atmosphere at home were particularly important in bullied children (compared to non-bullied children) in promoting emotional and behavioural adjustment. It was found that providing a warm, supportive environment helps strengthen children's resilience lessening the negative impact of bullying on children's mental health.

KEY FINDINGS

- Bullying is a risk factor for a number of adjustment difficulties in childhood, including emotional and behavioural problems.
- Not all bullied children develop adjustment difficulties – some 'resilient' children function better than would be expected given their experience of bullying victimisation.
- Warm, supportive and well-structured families help to protect children from the negative outcomes associated with bullying victimisation.
- The effect of maternal warmth on children's behavioural adaptation following bullying victimisation is environmentally-mediated. This indicates that maternal warmth protects against the development of adjustment difficulties for victims of bullying.

THINGS YOU CAN DO

- ✓ Be aware of any signs your child is being bullied: unexplained changes in mood or emotional distress (crying, sadness, acting out); withdrawal; cuts, bruises, scratches or missing or damaged clothing or possessions; lower grades at school; not wanting to attend school or finding excuses not to (sickness).
- ✓ If your child comes to you and says they are being bullied, remain calm, listen and let them tell you about the incident/s without interrupting.

- ✓ Reinforce that talking to you was the best thing to do.
- ✓ If you suspect bullying may be happening at school, contact the teacher or school principal and work together
- ✓ to get all the facts straight and put a stop to any victimisation.
- ✓ Nurture a warm and positive atmosphere at home so that your kids always feel they can come to you and rely on you for support.
- ✓ Promote and role model positive behaviours and strategies to help counteract bullying.
- ✓ Encourage your child to understand that bullies are often low in self-esteem and self-worth and that your child isn't being bullied because they did anything wrong.
- ✓ In the case of boys, encourage them not to act out in behaviourally inappropriate ways. Instead, work on strategies to use neutral language and behaviour that doesn't fuel aggression.

Source: Families promote emotional and behavioural resilience to bullying: evidence of an environmental effect, (Bowes, Maughan, Caspi, Moffitt, Arseneault), Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry 51:7 (2010), pp 809-817.

TAKEAWAY

FROM PROFESSOR MICHAEL BERNARD
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Having a positive relationship with our kids means opportunities for us as parents to guide our kids in how to cope with bullying experiences. Siblings (particular an older brother or sister) can be a source of support to a child who may be experiencing bullying. A calm, well-structured environment at home can help to alleviate symptoms of stress and provide security to a child experiencing stressful events outside the home environment.