

# Parenting Positively

Helping teenagers to cope with

# Bullying

**TÚSLA**  
An Ghnómháireacht um  
Leanaí agus an Teaghlach  
Child and Family Agency

  
**Barnardos**



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Barnardos supports children whose well-being is under threat, by working with them, their families and communities and by campaigning for the rights of children. Barnardos was established in Ireland in 1962 and is Ireland's leading independent children's charity.

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There is information for teenagers on bullying on  
[www.barnardos.ie/teenhelp](http://www.barnardos.ie/teenhelp)

# Introduction

This booklet is for parents of teenagers who may be experiencing or be involved in bullying. It will help you to:

- Know the tell-tale signs of bullying.
- Understand the effects of bullying – short term and long term.
- Find ways to support your teenager through bullying.
- Find ways to communicate with your teenager if they are involved in bullying behaviour.
- Find out where you can get help and support.

*'Bullying is repeated aggression, verbal, psychological or physical, racial, sexual or relational, conducted by an individual or group against others.'*

*Cool School Anti Bullying Programme*

Bullying is an anti-social behavioural problem which affects thousands of Irish teenagers on a daily basis. It can take the form of verbal bullying, sexual bullying, exclusion bullying, physical bullying and cyber bullying. It may involve physical assaults, harassment or verbal abuse, theft, blackmailing, spreading rumours or deliberately excluding someone from a social group.

## **Bullying is:**

- **Intentional.** The person who bullies, deliberately sets out to target someone.
- **Repetitive.** It often happens frequently and relentlessly.
- **Abuse of power.** The person bullying has the upper hand or advantage over the other person.

**Bullying can happen in schools, your neighbourhood or even your own home. A teenager who is being bullied may be targeted by peers, people they have never met, for example via the internet, by older adolescents or by adults in a position of authority such as an older brother or sister, or member of the community.**

**Bullying is a serious problem for any child or teenager who experiences it and one which no one should have to face alone.**

***'It just takes over your life. You can't stop thinking about it and worrying – wondering what is going to happen next. You feel completely alone and like there's something wrong with you. You start to feel worthless.'***

***Carla, 16***

Bullying is a common problem.

It is a serious concern for everyone involved.

Those who engage in bullying behaviour also need support.

### Key messages

Breaking the silence is key.

People who experience bullying need support to overcome it.

No one should have to put up with bullying.

There is further information for teenagers on coping with bullying at [www.barnardos.ie/teenhelp](http://www.barnardos.ie/teenhelp)

## Teenagers needs and rights

Your teenager has a right to be safe and treated with respect.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (which Ireland signed up to in 1992) declares that every child has the right:

- To be protected and live free of violence, abuse or harm.
- To be treated with dignity, respect and fairness.
- To be free from discrimination, bullying and harassment of any kind.
- To express their views and to have them taken into account in matters that affect them.
- To have decisions that will affect them made in their best interest.



## What we know about bullying

In 2009, the Cork City Comhairle na nÓg completed a survey among teenagers between 12 and 18 years. Of the 352 students consulted, 70% reported that they had experienced bullying. The bullying reported included verbal bullying, exclusion bullying and cyber bullying (for more information visit <http://www.comhairlenanog.ie>).

## Some common myths about bullying

### **I was bullied; it never did me any harm.**

This is not true. Any type of bullying is harmful and in some cases can have long-term, damaging effects.

### **They're only teasing.**

There is a big difference between teasing and taunting. Taunting damages self esteem and confidence – it is never fun for anyone.

### **He'll have to learn how to stand up for himself.**

A person being bullied may have tried this and it hasn't worked. Teenagers who ask for help usually do so when they have exhausted all other options. Bullying should not be faced alone.

### **Fight back, stand up for yourself.**

The person who bullies often chooses someone who is more vulnerable. Encouraging someone to fight back gives the message that violence and aggression is acceptable and so the negative cycle continues.

### **It'll toughen you up and make you stronger.**

Bullying damages self esteem, causes distrust and can affect relationships with family and peers. In some cases, the person being bullied may take on bullying behaviour and target others.

## What things could be considered to be bullying?

Bullying behaviours can include:

- Physically assaulting someone, messing in a rough way or threatening assault.
- Taunting someone based on their race, culture, religious beliefs or sexual identity.
- Spreading malicious rumours, emails or text messages (see page 31 for information about cyber bullying).
- Excluding someone from a group or activity (see page 24 for information about 'cliques').
- Being insincere or fake with someone.
- Forcing or daring someone to do something against their will.
- Damaging or stealing property.
- Being a bystander to bullying or laughing at bullying behaviours.
- Pressuring someone to engage in sexual activity against their will (see page 30 for more information about sexual bullying).





# The Teenage Years – A Time of Change

For young people, the teenage years are a time of intense change occurring at many levels – physical, psychological and social. This can be a challenging time for your teenager.

## How can I tell the difference between ‘normal’ teenage behaviour and something more worrying?

The teenage years are a time of transition between childhood and adulthood and for your child, a time of great emotional change. Below are some of the expected stages of development for younger and older teenagers.

### Typical emotional and social development in early teen years (13–15 yrs)

- Will display interests and talents, for example in music/ sports.
- May begin to become self conscious about body changes.
- Can seek out role models outside of the home, e.g. music stars, sports people.
- Will want to be independent, but will ask for parental support if needed.
- Can have mood swings.

### Typical emotional and social development in late teen years (16–18 yrs)

- Can continue to display many of the behaviours as described for that of the 13 to 15 year old.
- Can be very idealistic and have a greater interest in philosophy, emotional dilemmas and moral issues.
- May fly off the handle easily and not think about others.
- May become quite self conscious and/or self critical.



**Typical emotional and social development in early teen years (13–15 yrs)**

- May begin looking for emotional support among friends.
- May prefer to be with friends rather than family.
- May begin to challenge authority.
- Will start to keep some things private.
- Will seek out more independence.
- May begin taking risks and experiment with alcohol or drugs.
- Can have strong views, some of which often oppose parents' views.
- Can appear mature one day and the opposite the next day.
- May test the limits.
- Can be supportive of friends and display empathy, trust and honesty.
- May place great value on the opinions of friends.
- May develop a specific, individual style of dress, interest in music and want to show the world who they are.

**Typical emotional and social development in late teen years (16–18 yrs)**

- Can have intelligent debates on many issues and may look for a cause or commitment to things like politics, religion, animal rights or the environment.
- Can appear mature, but have worries about adulthood.
- May have heightened sexual energy and be prone to exaggeration in this area.
- Is more exposed to alcohol, drugs and risky sexual behaviour.
- May worry about life choices and need support and guidance from parents.
- May feel a strong impact if a romantic relationship ends.

It is important to remember that every teenager is a unique individual and their day to day experiences, family life and personal circumstances will impact on their development and behaviour.

If you are concerned and notice patterns of withdrawal, anxiety, depression or illness, your teenager may be experiencing serious problems. If you notice behaviour that is uncharacteristic and outside of the 'norm', additional support may be needed. You will need to talk with your son or daughter as soon as possible. If they are unwilling to talk, it may be helpful to link in with professionals such as school staff or your GP. Check out the Finding Help section at the back of this booklet for other services that may be able to offer advice.

For more information about your teenager's emotional development and overall well-being, you may also be interested in the booklet **Teenage Well-being** in this series.



# Signs and Effects of Bullying

## What are the signs of bullying?

Here are some signs to look for. Remember though, while this list may indicate bullying, you should also be alert to other issues that may be causing problems for your teenager. Also, each of the points listed below could happen in isolation and it may not mean bullying is happening. Look out for patterns of behaviour or changes happening over time.

- Unexplained injuries – bruising, cuts, scratches. These may be kept hidden from you.
- Frequent minor illnesses – headaches, stomach aches, sleeplessness.
- Asking for extra money or stealing – your teenager may be being threatened and have to give money to those bullying them.
- Loss of confidence, low self esteem.
- Sudden disinterest in attending groups or being with friends.
- School reports describing a change in school performance.
- Less talking about friends and everyday activities.
- Change in routine around getting to and coming home from school (in an effort to avoid being bullied).
- Going straight to the bathroom or bedroom on coming home.
- Loss or damage to personal items – torn clothing, missing phone or money.
- Appearing angry or upset after receiving phone calls or using the internet.
- Aggressive behaviour and lashing out at family members.
- Bullying of brothers or sisters.
- Withdrawal, refusal to talk and wanting to be alone.
- Over sensitivity to criticism.

- Self harming due to severe emotional trauma – inflicting personal injuries like cuts, burns or hitting solid objects.
- Refusing to eat, binge eating, self induced vomiting or binge drinking.
- A reduction in the number of friends calling to the home or invitations to social activities.

## How can bullying affect my teenager?

In a 2009 report by the Department of Health and Children *Teenage Mental Health: What helps and what hurts?*, young people cited the countless ways that bullying had a negative effect on their mental health, reporting that they felt:

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>scared</b></li> <li>• <b>worthless</b></li> <li>• <b>insecure</b></li> <li>• <b>depressed</b></li> <li>• <b>isolated</b></li> <li>• <b>annoyed</b></li> <li>• <b>that they had done something wrong</b></li> <li>• <b>angry</b></li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>'what's the point?'</b></li> <li>• <b>lack of courage</b></li> <li>• <b>that they want to bully others</b></li> <li>• <b>inferior</b></li> <li>• <b>like something is wrong</b></li> <li>• <b>alone</b></li> <li>• <b>that they want to self-harm</b></li> <li>• <b>suicidal</b></li> </ul> |
|--|---|

Unsurprisingly, suicide and self-harm were considered the most serious while depression was also regularly mentioned. It was noted that bullying hurts more 'if people don't stand up for you', but that inevitably bullying simply makes you 'feel bad about' and 'question' yourself.

If bullying happens repeatedly, it can cause ongoing anxiety for your teenager. Anticipating and being fearful of bullying is as problematic and distressing as the bullying itself.

## Are there long-term effects from bullying?

Yes, long-term bullying may mean that, in adulthood, there are increased risks of:

- Depression and low self esteem
- Emotional difficulties and anxieties
- Stress-related illnesses
- Alcohol or drug use
- Low confidence, which may affect relationships

*'There is a growing body of research which indicates that individuals, whether child or adult, who are persistently subjected to abusive behaviour are at risk of stress related illness which can sometimes lead to suicide.'*

Mona O'Moore, Anti-Bullying Centre, Trinity College Dublin  
(visit [www.abc.tcd.ie](http://www.abc.tcd.ie))

## How may bullying affect my teenager's school work?

If your teenager is experiencing bullying, they may have difficulty with school work for the following reasons:

- They may feel distracted and pre-occupied with the bullying, spending time thinking of ways to avoid it.
- They may feel a lack of interest and motivation due to feelings of depression or anxiety.
- They may arrive late to classes because they are being bullied or may be hiding from the bullying between classes.
- They might avoid school, complain of regular illness or mitch from classes or activities to avoid the bullying.



## Are all teenagers who are bullied badly affected by it?

This depends on the teenager's coping skills, as well as the extent of the bullying. If your teenager feels isolated, lacks confidence and believes that taunts or insults are true, they will be more affected by it. However, with the right support and opportunities to talk about the problem, there is a better chance that your teenager will be less affected by the issue.

Whether bullying is long term or short term, it is important that your teenager gets help and is listened to. Bullying is a serious issue and should never be ignored.

## How do different parents react to bullying?

As a parent you may feel a range of emotions if you discover your teenager is being bullied.

You may feel:

- Angry that it is happening to your child.
- Helpless as it is a situation you cannot immediately resolve.
- Confused about what your options are.
- Anxious about the impact it is having on your teen.
- Isolated and unaware that other parents may experience similar situations.
- Disappointed that your child has been unable to stand up to the bullying behaviour.
- Furious at the person who has been doing the bullying.

# I Think my Teenager is Being Bullied

## I think my teenage daughter is being bullied, but she won't talk about it. Why?

Consider the following points as potential reasons why your daughter will not talk about her bullying experience:

- She is afraid the problem will escalate if adults become involved.
- She feels helpless and doesn't think anyone can help.
- She is feeling a sense of worthlessness and believes that she is somehow to blame.
- She wrongly believes that bullying is a part of growing up.
- She doesn't want to worry you.
- She wants to be 'independent' and thinks that asking for help is childish.
- She is embarrassed /ashamed of the situation.
- She has already raised the issue with an adult and her feelings and fears were not heard.
- She doesn't want to 'rat' on the person who has been doing the bullying. People who bully can sometimes be manipulative and make a person feel that they have to keep it a secret or things will get worse.



## What should I do if my teenager won't talk about it?

If you have spotted the signs of bullying and you are concerned about changes in your teenager, your feelings are probably not unfounded, even if your child says there is nothing wrong.

Try some of the following:

- Ask general questions about school activities, friendships and social outings.
- Choose a quiet time to talk when there will be no interruptions.
- Stay calm and use a gentle approach. Be patient.
- Ask your teenager if they have any worries or if there are things happening in their life that they would like to be different.
- Explain that you have noticed there are times when they seem tense, anxious or distant.
- Explain that carrying a problem alone brings stress, but talking about things makes it easier to find solutions.



- Outline some of your concerns, for example 'You look tired', 'You don't seem to be enjoying school much these days'.
- Talk to your teenager about the effects of stress and how it may impact on health. They may be unaware that tension can cause physical symptoms.
- Make the time for regular one-to-one chats or just being together, a walk in the park, a car journey, an outing or a meal out. During these times, your teenager may feel relaxed and 'open up' about what is happening.
- Suggest to your teenager that you sense there may be a problem they are unwilling to share with you. Encourage them to talk to another trusted adult. Explain that you will always be open and ready whenever they feel like talking with you.
- Explain that if they have a problem there could be information or websites that may be useful for them. Direct your child towards [www.barnardos.ie/teenhelp](http://www.barnardos.ie/teenhelp) where there is support and advice around the ups and downs of teenage life.

Try not to overwhelm your teenager with too many questions or concerns all at once, otherwise they may feel like you are bombarding them with questions. Be as patient as possible, keep calm and control your reaction to what they say. If your teenager indicates that he or she does not want to talk, you will need to take a step back and try another time.

Think about the approach that works best for your teenager. Is your teen a 'talker'? Do they prefer to listen instead of talking? Are there certain times when your teen is relaxed and more likely to open up, e.g. after a gym session, while in the car with you? Is there another adult in your family that they connect with?

Be aware of your own feelings when you talk with your teenager. If you appear stressed, emotional, impatient or anxious, this may add to their problems. Your teenager may have many worries right now and worrying about your feelings will bring more stress.



## How can I help my teenager to respond to bullying?

All teenagers will benefit from learning 'skills for life'. Many of these social skills can be learned at home when parents act as supportive, encouraging role models.

- **Demonstrate assertive behaviour.** Encourage your teen to be direct in asking for help and to also respond directly to you and others.
- **Saying 'no' is acceptable** if demands are unacceptable. Show your teen that you say no to situations you are not comfortable with.
- **Encourage your teen to express feelings positively.** If disagreements arise at home, resolve problems in a fair way ensuring everyone's point of view is acknowledged. Remember, your children learn directly from you and how you communicate as a family.
- **Show courtesy and respect for others.** How you interact and communicate with others in your home and community is a great learning tool for your teen.
- **Encourage your teenager to ignore situations if appropriate.** Some incidents of teasing may fizzle out if your teen shows little reaction or response.
- **Encourage your teenager to make new friends,** join new clubs and become involved in new activities relevant to their interests. It's important that your teenager has positive social experiences.
- **Acknowledge when your teenager is doing well** with an activity, making progress in school or doing something that helps build their confidence and self esteem.
- **Support positive peer relationships** by welcoming friends to your home or by encouraging social outings with new friends.
- **Encourage your teenager to speak confidently** and clearly during times of conflict. Ask your teenager to think about what they could say when being threatened and encourage practice at 'I' statements such as 'I need you to back off', 'I need some space here'. Practice at responding calmly and firmly may be helpful.

- **Help your teen to identify situations** where discrimination, aggression or unkind behaviour is happening. Remind your teenager that this is unfair and is not acceptable.
- **Listen to your teenager.** Ensure there are daily opportunities to talk about their day. If there is more than one child at home, set aside individual time together throughout your week. In a one-to-one, relaxed setting, your teenager may feel comfortable to talk with you.
- **Ask your teenager how you can help.** Your child may have some ideas about how you can help, for example they may want you to collect them from their school or club. Your teenager may have some suggestions about approaching school staff or they may need help getting a new phone number or email address.
- **Show your teenager that you take their problem seriously and that you want to help.**

#### What NOT to do...

- Do not ignore what your teenager is saying.
- Do not advise your child to fight back.
- Do not confront the person or people yourself that are doing the bullying (this may cause more problems for your child).
- Do not confront family members of the people or person who is bullying.

#### What can I tell my child?

- This situation is unfair and you need the help of adults.
- You are not alone, bullying happens to other young people too.
- I understand why you may feel angry, scared or hurt and all of these feelings are normal.
- It is not your fault.
- You have made the right choice by talking about this.
- We can work through this problem together.

- It is important that you can talk about what's happening and how you are feeling.
- Even if the bullying is not physical, that does not mean it's in any way less important or less painful.
- Stay with your friends as much as possible.
- Avoid isolated places or places you know the bullying may happen.
- Stay in areas supervised by adults as much as possible.
- Change routes for coming to and from school if needed.
- Try as much as possible to walk away and ignore the bullying behaviour.
- Stay calm, look confident and try not to react.
- In some situations, making a joke or laughing may throw off the other person.
- Avoid bringing money or valuable items to school.
- If there are episodes of assault, call out for help and get out of the situation as quickly as possible. Report the incident as soon as possible.
- Keep a log or diary of bullying incidents – dates, times, names of those involved, bystanders and a description of the incidents.
- Your school should have an anti-bullying policy that outlines steps to be taken when bullying happens. This will give some pointers about what to do.
- Know your rights (let your teenager know about their rights according to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child).

## Are there other strategies I could suggest?

Try giving your teenager the following advice:

- Be clear when making requests, say what you need or want.
- When you can, plan ahead and think about what you are going to say.
- Keep things short and to the point: 'That's my phone, lay off', 'You're out of order', 'Stop wasting my time', 'I really don't care what you think'.
- Remember, you can ask for things confidently without sounding angry.

- When you say 'no', say it firmly.
- Try not to get caught up in arguments or get angry if you don't get your own way.
- If someone is bugging you for an answer, you don't have to give it straight away. Say 'I need more time to think about this' or 'I haven't made my mind up yet'.
- Don't agree to do things if you feel pressured or your gut instinct says no.
- Look confident, stand up tall, look the person in the eye. If you are hunched up and look in victim mode they may keep pressing you until they get what they want.
- Use assertive statements like 'You're wasting my time', 'That's your opinion', 'Whatever you think, it doesn't bother me', 'So what?' 'Get a life'. Practise saying this and walking away.


## What should I do if my teenager is fighting back?

Fighting back will not stop the problem. Explain to your child that, while it may seem like self defence, fighting back may only cause the situation to escalate. By becoming involved in physical fights your teenager is at risk of further physical harm, or of causing harm to someone else, and is engaging in anti-social behaviour.

# Bullying and Schools

## My teenager is anxious about making reports in school. What should I do?

Your teenager may fear that there will be further bullying if adults become involved. Explain to them that bullying is an issue which all schools should take very seriously. Most schools have anti-bullying policies to help them respond to and prevent bullying. Teachers and



other professionals know a lot about this issue and how to help. Let your teenager know that the adults who become involved will take into account any feelings of fear that they have.

Explain that reports can be made with your help, or with the help of a friend who has witnessed the bullying, and that reporting bullying is the first step in ending it. Help your teenager prepare for this conversation and suggest writing down details. Ensure that this record is descriptive and that your child sticks to the facts.

Reassure your teenager that the school will want the best outcome for everyone involved and practical steps will be taken to ensure their safety, such as increased supervision during yard time or transition between classes. The school may also have a mentoring programme or 'buddy system'.

Let your teenager know that you will also need to link in with the school around the issue. Explain that you will request that your meetings with school staff are discreet and confidential.

Reassure your teen that they are not alone and the school staff will have experienced incidents of bullying in the past. Suggest that they link in with the school counsellor or year head for support.

Commend your teenager for speaking out about the situation, this may help others who are being bullied or prevent further bullying in school.

## Linking in with the school

- Bear in mind that, if you have been unaware of the bullying, chances are the school is too.
- Make an appointment with the school principal or year head. It may be more helpful to have an initial meeting without your teenager present.
- Explain the situation as calmly as possible, sharing as much information as you can.

- Explain how the bullying is impacting on your teenager. It is important that teachers are aware of your child's emotional needs at this time.
- Ask how incidents of bullying are dealt with within the school and what policies are in place. There may be an anti-bullying programme or a 'mentoring' programme run within the school.
- If your teenager reports bullying by an adult within the school, you will need to bring this to the attention of the school principal.
- Ask that the situation is monitored and make arrangements for update meetings or regular telephone contact.
- Remember that the school will have to take into account the child who bullies, other students, the school policy and management issues as well as your child so solving the problem may be a gradual process.



# I'm Worried my Teenager is Bullying Others.

If you are concerned that your teenager is bullying, there are some signs that you can look out for. If you notice a few or more of these signs, your child may be involved in bullying behaviour and you will need to talk about it.

- Regularly name calling and referring to others disrespectfully.
- Regularly bragging.
- Having a defiant or hostile attitude.
- Always wanting to be in control.
- Lacking empathy for others.
- Laughing when others get hurt or if something embarrassing happens.
- Having one small group of friends and appearing to be the dominant one in this group.
- Problems with peers – falling out with people or having difficulties maintaining friendships.
- Having new possessions, clothes or money with vague explanations of where they came from.
- Being aggressive towards you and other adults such as teachers.
- Having positive views about violence.
- Often testing the limits or breaking rules.
- Being hot tempered, impulsive or easily frustrated.
- Always having an answer or a reason not to be to blame for a situation.

If any of these things are happening in isolation you may not need to worry but, when you notice a few or more signs, or patterns of negative behaviour, these may be indicators of bullying.




## Why is my teenager bullying others?

There are many reasons why a teenager may act in an aggressive or anti-social way. A child may be being abused or neglected themselves, or they may live in a home where there is a lack of discipline. Or it could be due to increased exposure to violence, for example video games or on the internet.

Other reasons why a teenager may choose to bully:

- They are looking for a sense of power or control. The person bullying wants to dominate a situation and feels a sense of satisfaction when this happens.
- They are being bullied themselves and so take on this behaviour as a reaction.
- To feel popular in a group, for example, making jokes within a group at the expense of someone else.
- They are experiencing emotional difficulties such as depression, anxiety or behavioural issues.
- They experience inappropriate or harsh family discipline.
- They have lived in a home where conflict is resolved in an aggressive way.
- They lack empathy, which is the ability to understand things from someone else's perspective.
- They are unaware that their behaviour is bullying as they may have poor social skills.
- They may lack understanding of social norms due to a learning disability and a lack of specialised or appropriate support.
- There is lack of adult supervision and there are overly permissive or few limits in place at home.
- Their peers are engaged in bullying behaviour. Teenagers can be strongly influenced by their friends and their approval is important. Some teens may feel pressure to do things just so they fit in. In 'cliques' there may be one leader who dictates to the others.



A person who lacks in self confidence may follow their 'rules' even if they disapprove.

- They have been a passive 'bystander' to bullying and therefore support bullying behaviour.

## What is the difference between a 'clique' and a friendship group?

Being among friends is very important for teenagers and friendships circles may be based around common interests, for example sport, music or fashion. Your teenager may be part of a number of interest groups or may drift in and out of these depending on their own interests. In a healthy friendship group, teenagers feel confident about their own ideas and opinions. Everyone within the group is accepted for who they are, even if people disagree with each other. New people are welcome to join the group and it is acceptable for people to mix with other groups.

In 'cliques' there is a strict membership code and some people may be restricted from joining. These groups tend to be about being 'popular' and are more common among girls. There may be one person who takes on a leader role and dictates the rules or what is allowed. These rules can be kept hidden from others. People within a clique may bully by excluding someone, spreading rumours or being verbally abusive. The clique may choose to humiliate someone for their entertainment. People within cliques are sometimes afraid to speak their mind or walk away in case they become the next victim.

**Talk to your teenager about their friendship groups. Ask about their activities and interests. If you think your teenager may be part of a clique, discuss this and encourage your teenager to try out new things such as joining a new club.**

## My son says there is bullying at his school but it doesn't seem to affect him.

Bullying is a common problem and throughout adolescence your child may be exposed to various types of bullying. While your son may not be being bullied or acting as a ring leader in bullying, he may be a bystander.

Children who stand by and watch bullying are supporting this negative behaviour. Children who bully like to have an audience and your teenager may be part of this audience. Laughing while someone is being victimised is an indirect way of bullying and gives the message that they approve of this behaviour.

Even if your son doesn't find bullying funny, being an on-looker or doing nothing about it allows the problem to continue. Discuss this with him. Ask what he could do to help someone who is being bullied.

All teenagers should be encouraged to be responsible by either reporting the bullying or intervening and speaking up for the victim. They may say they are afraid or it is nothing to do with them but let them know that breaking the silence is the key to ending bullying. If they want they can make reports anonymously.

If you think your child is a bystander to bullying, the school will need to know about the issue. While there may be one or two ring leaders in bullying, several children can get caught up in it by being on-lookers.

## What should I do if my teenager is bullying?

If you think your child is engaging in bullying behaviour in school:

- Contact the school as soon as possible. Teachers or school counsellors who work with your child daily may be able to give you further information about what is happening on a social level.

- The school may be able to give you practical tips to work with and information about the anti-bullying programmes they run.
- The school will be able to advise you of their policies and the steps they take in responding to the bullying.
- Ensure there is regular communication between you, your child and the school. It is important that your teenager knows that adults are aware of the problem and are working consistently together in responding to it.

Remember, school staff take bullying seriously and will have a good understanding of this complex issue. As professionals, they will want to respond to this issue in a fair and respectful way for everyone involved, this includes the person who may be bullying.

## Talking with your teenager

- Remain as calm as possible.
- Find out what you can about the behaviour – when and where it happens, who is involved, how long it has been happening.
- Explain that the behaviour they are involved in is bullying (your teen may not realise this). Outline what bullying behaviour involves and give examples. Explain that being a bystander is also a type of bullying and shows approval.
- Talk with your child about who their friends are and what they like to do together. Teenagers can be easily influenced by peers. If your teenager describes bullying behaviour in peer groups, suggest new activities and a fresh start with new friends.
- Ask your teenager if they know what has brought about this behaviour, what has been happening for them to trigger this?
- Explain the impact bullying can have on the other person.
- Advise your teenager on the rights that every child has – the right to be safe and treated with respect and dignity.

- Reassure your teenager that you love them but do not like or approve of their behaviour.
- Talk to your teen about the difference between aggressive and assertive behaviour, give examples of both to ensure there is good understanding.
- Practice anger management strategies with your teenager such as taking deep breaths, counting to 10, walking away from anger triggers, engaging in other activities like sport or listening to music.
- Establish appropriate consequences for actions, take away privileges and encourage your teen to earn them back with positive behaviour.
- Model respect, kindness and empathy in your home. You are an important role model for your teenager.

Visit [www.barnardos.ie/teenhelp](http://www.barnardos.ie/teenhelp) for more information about bullying.

### **Explain the differences between being passive, assertive and aggressive.**

- Someone who is passive may give the message that other people's rights matter more than their own do. They may give in or agree to things even if they don't want to.
- Someone who is aggressive may behave as if their rights matter more than those of others. They may be unwilling to compromise and their words or actions may intimidate others.
- Someone who is assertive has respect for others, feels confident about their own opinions and believes that fairness and equality are important.

Think about your home and how you as a family communicate and interact with each other.

- Is there regular teasing and taunting in your family?
- Do people listen to each other and resolve issues in a respectful way?
- Is your style of discipline fair and consistent for all of your children?

- Do you and your partner, or other carers, have consistent ways of managing and responding to certain behaviours?
- Are there consequences when rules are broken? Are these consequences fair, reasonable, consistent and predictable for your teenager?
- Have there been recent stresses at home that may be impacting on your parenting skills such as a recent bereavement or break up?

Being a parent can be stressful and challenging at times. If you feel the need for additional support, your school, public health nurse or local community services may be able to point you in the right direction or link you with a service such as a parenting programme or parent support group. See the Finding Help section in this booklet for information about services where you can get help.

Our Parenting Positively booklet **Teenage Well-being** will provide you with more information about parenting during the teenage years.



# Types of Bullying

## What is homophobic bullying?

Homophobia is when people discriminate against lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender people (LGBT), or people they think may be LGBT. Anti-gay graffiti, spreading rumours that someone is gay, being abusive, jeering or violence towards someone who is LGBT are all types of homophobic bullying.

Sometimes people who bully may target another because their friend or a family member is LGBT. People who are heterosexual can also be victims of homophobia because others perceive them to be LGBT.


The word 'gay' can often be used by young people to describe something they dislike, e.g. 'Your phone is gay.' The use of homophobic language gives the message that being gay, lesbian or bisexual is a negative thing.

Teens who are victims of homophobic bullying may feel lonely and isolated. They may be afraid to talk about their sexual gender or identity, as well as feel pressure to be in heterosexual relationships so the bullying will stop.

Talk with your teen about respecting others and ensure they understand that everyone has the right to be treated equally and with respect. Explain that being LGBT is not just about physical attraction and sex, it also involves the basic need to be accepted, loved and love in return. All sexual and emotional relationships are private and personal and should remain between the two people involved.

Ensure that your teen understands that casually using the word 'gay' to describe something they dislike is, in fact, an offensive term.

If your teenager is LGBT and a victim of bullying, this will need to be dealt with in a respectful manner. Remember that the bullying is the



main issue, not your teenager's personal choices about who they have relationships with. This is private to your child and should be discussed only if it is his or her own choice. There is support for parents at LOOK [www.lovingouroutkids.org](http://www.lovingouroutkids.org).

As emotional and sexual relationships are a very personal issue, your teenager may not feel comfortable discussing the reasons for the bullying with you or being LGBT. Try to be sensitive to this and focus on the wrong actions of others and responding to the bullying itself.

The LGBT youth organisation BeLonG To have produced a guide for parents on LGBT issues. It can be downloaded from [www.belongto.org](http://www.belongto.org).

## What is sexual bullying?

**The legal age of sexual consent is 17 for both boys and girls; however your teenager may begin experimenting at a younger age.**

If you have an open relationship with your teenager, you can give advice about contraception, STIs or teen pregnancy. You can direct your child to [www.b4udecide.ie](http://www.b4udecide.ie) for information about sexual relationships.

When you talk with your teenager, you can describe sexual bullying by using some of the following points:

- Being forced to engage in sexual activity against your wishes.
- Being 'dared' to do something in a group.
- Being harassed, pressured or nagged about having sex by a partner.
- Being groped or grabbed by someone who tries to disguise it as a joke or rough play.
- Being given 'wedgies' (lifting someone up by their underwear), which can result in damage to genital areas.
- Receiving sexually explicit text messages or emails.
- Being forced to watch videos or internet footage of a sexual nature.



- Being photographed or recorded naked or semi-naked by a partner or a peer.
- Having these videos or pictures spread around by phone or email.
- Receiving sexual comments about your body shape, physical development or sense of dress.
- Being called names like 'slut', 'tramp', 'tight', 'gay', 'queer', 'lezzer'.
- Being targeted because of your sexuality.
- Having rumours spread about your sexual activities by a partner or ex partner.


Advise your son or daughter that being forced to do something of a sexual nature against their will is a criminal offence and is known as sexual assault or in some incidents, rape.

Tell your teen they have the right to say no and that in a healthy relationship their wishes should be respected.

Advise your teen that really liking someone or having a crush on someone does not mean that they have to give in and always do what that person says. If a person really cares for them, they will respect their needs and wishes.

## What is cyber bullying?

- Cyber bullying is the use of technology to threaten, harass or embarrass another person.
- Cyber bullying usually occurs among young people though not exclusively.
- Personal intimidation may involve threatening text messages, posting abusive comments on webpages or making threats through instant online messages (IMs).
- Impersonation includes setting up fake profiles or webpages and pretending to be the person they are bullying. It may also involve



gaining access to someone's account and sending threatening messages to their friends.

- Exclusion involves blocking an individual from a popular group online.
- Personal humiliation can include the sharing of embarrassing photographs or videos by phone, email or on webpages.
- False reporting is when someone makes a false report to a web provider resulting in another person's account being deleted.

## What are the effects of cyber bullying?

As with any type of bullying your teenager may feel anxiety and distress, but with cyber bullying there can be added stresses.

- The people who choose to cyber bully may hide their identity, so the person being bullied does not know who is doing it.
- The use of technology brings with it the freedom to communicate instantly with large groups of people without any type of adult supervision.
- People who cyber bully can hide behind internet anonymity. Young people who post cruel messages may not feel as responsible for their actions as they do in real life. They may choose to say or do things that they would never do in the 'real world'.
- For your teenager, it may seem like there is no escape from this type of bullying. The child being bullied at school can take refuge at home. With cyber bullying, however, the person bullying has opportunities to harass your child no matter where they are, in their bedroom, while enjoying time with friends, while on holidays etc.
- Cyber bullying can occur at any time your teenager has access to their phone or the internet. Your teenager may also have access to the internet through other electronic devices e.g. iPod or gaming devices.
- Many teens use social networks and information can circulate quickly among large groups of people. Your teenager may feel overwhelmed by the enormity of this.

Cyber bullying is an extension of traditional bullying. Often, those who are cyber bullied also experience traditional forms of bullying.

## How can cyber bullying affect mental health?

There is an increasing amount of research on cyberbullying which draws on young people's experiences. A small proportion of young people have had very negative effects from cyber bullying.

Research has linked victims of cyber bullying with poor self-esteem, feelings of frustration, anger, sadness, hopelessness, loneliness and depression. Some victims are unable to concentrate at school and others feel that they are forced to stay offline. Victims also often feel suspicious of others, as they may be unaware of the identity of the bully. The risks are greater among young people who have experienced both cyber bullying and traditional bullying.

There has been much media attention on very sad cases of youth suicide. In some cases, cyber bullying has been found to be a contributing factor in incidents of youth suicide.

Self harming and suicidal behaviour, while rare, are an expression of the deep despair which young people can experience as a result of being bullied.

## What are the signs of cyber bullying?

Most young people who have been cyber bullied do not tell their parents. This makes it very difficult for parents to provide support. However, parents should be alert to the risk of cyber bullying and changes in young people's behaviour. Teenagers can spend a lot of time texting and messaging friends and on social websites so this in itself might not be an indication that something is wrong. Look for a few of these signs.

- Receiving a high volume of text messages or voice messages.
- Appearing nervous, tense, angry or distressed after receiving text messages or emails or using the computer.
- Being reluctant to use the computer or stopping altogether. Alternatively, regularly using the computer to check if more bullying has occurred.
- Refusing to talk about what they are doing on the computer.

- Clicking out or exiting from pages when someone comes into the room.
- Keeping their mobile phone hidden from you.

### **What are the signs that my child is bullying another teenager online?**

- Having numerous online accounts or accounts that are not theirs.
- Laughing excessively while using the computer, either alone or with a group of friends.
- Refusing to talk about online activity.
- Deleting history on the computer.
- Closing or hiding webpages when you walk past.
- Frequently using the computer in the evenings or late at night.
- Becoming annoyed if they are not able to access the computer.
- Regularly using their mobile phone and keeping it hidden from you.

### **What should I do about cyber bullying?**

- Talk to your teenager about responsible internet use such as never posting anything online that they wouldn't want the whole world to read.
- Advise that they come to you or another adult if inappropriate things are happening online.
- Describe what cyber bullying is. Incidents of cyber bullying are often reported in the media, you may be able to refer to these as examples.
- Ask about their online activity with friends – what do they talk about, what photos or material do they post online? This discussion may give you opportunities to advise your teen about what is appropriate.
- Advise them about being safe online and keeping personal details (phone number, address) off the internet.
- Instead of banning all use of the computer, make an agreement with your teenager about being safer online. Go to the 'Help' section of a website and discuss how your teen can edit privacy settings, report abuse etc.

- If the person bullying is from your child's school you will need to report it to teachers. Other types of bullying may also be occurring with the cyber bullying just a part of what is happening.
- In some cases of bullying or harassment through mobile phones, the network provider can provide a new, free telephone number.

If you are asking your child about bullying reassure them that whatever they say you won't take their phone away from them as their fear of this may prevent them from opening up to you.


### Suggest that your teenager does the following in cases of cyber bullying:

1. **Stop** – Leave the chat room, go offline.
2. **Block** the sender of messages. Don't respond.
3. **Talk** – Tell an adult about the bullying.
4. **Save** – Keep messages and forward these on to an adult. They may also be forwarded onto the network provider who may have policies that will restrict the activities of people who use their sites.

### What else can I do to prevent or stop cyber bullying at home?

Teenagers tend to be secretive about their online activities and can access the internet through many devices such as laptops, phones, iPods etc. Monitoring this can be a challenge for parents. Try some of the following:

- Keep your computer in a communal area within the home so you always know who is using it and for how long. If your teenager uses a laptop, encourage them to use it in communal areas and not always in the privacy of their bedroom.
- Have some family ground rules about the use of the computer – how often it is used, for how long etc.

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- Encourage 'phone free' periods during the day such as during family outings, at study time, meal times or while watching TV.
  - Agree to turn mobile phones off at bedtime so that there is a guaranteed period free of bullying.
  - Check 'history' files on your computer to see what websites are visited regularly.
  - You may be able to purchase anti-bullying mobile phone software. Check out [www.vmad.com](http://www.vmad.com) for information.
  - You may also choose to purchase 'parent control software'. You can find out more about this by searching for information online.

## What is self harming? Is this something I should be worried about?

Self harming is when people cause themselves physical pain in an effort to alter their mood state. Self harm is always a sign of emotional distress and indicates that something is seriously wrong. The reasons for doing this can be complex and personal. It may be a coping mechanism during a time of overwhelming emotions. It may be a way of controlling feelings of powerlessness or temporarily combat feelings of numbness to the world around. Behaviour includes scratching, burning, cutting, biting, bruising, picking skin, head banging, pulling hair, eyebrows, eyelashes or taking dangerous amounts of alcohol or medication.

Self harming may not necessarily mean that your teenager has suicidal thoughts along with the self harming. Your teenager may be self harming as a coping mechanism or to temporarily relieve distress. **However, some people who self harm are at a higher risk of suicide whether it is intentional or not.**

Self harming or thoughts about suicide are both serious issues and you will need to get help and advice as soon as possible. The website [www.3ts.ie/need-help/self-harm/](http://www.3ts.ie/need-help/self-harm/) can provide you with more information about self harming. Your GP may also be able to link you with specialised services.

# Your well-being

Coping with bullying can be stressful for you and your teenager. It is important that you look after your own mental health during this time. The following tips may be helpful:

- Look after your physical health – eat well, get exercise.
- Talk things over with your partner or a friend. You may find that other parents have experienced similar issues.
- Take time to relax and to do things that you enjoy at least once a day.
- Make a plan about what you are going to do and break this down into steps, for example talk with your teenager, make a note of the issues they are talking about and arrange a meeting with the school.
- Be realistic and remember that resolving this issue is a process in itself and things will take time.
- Get advice and help from professionals available to you e.g. school principal, counsellor.



# Finding Help

## Useful Contacts

### **Barnardos**

Barnardos supports children whose well-being is under threat, by working with them, their families and communities and by campaigning for the rights of children. Barnardos was established in Ireland in 1962 and is Ireland's leading independent children's charity.

Christchurch Square, Dublin 8

Tel: 01 453 0355

Email: [info@barnardos.ie](mailto:info@barnardos.ie)

[www.barnardos.ie](http://www.barnardos.ie)

### **Tusla - Child and Family Agency**

Tusla - Child and Family Agency is the State agency responsible for improving well-being and outcomes for children. It is responsible for child protection, early intervention and family support services in Ireland.

Brunel Building, Heuston South

Quarter, Dublin 8

Tel: 01 771 8500

Email: [info@tusla.ie](mailto:info@tusla.ie)

[www.tusla.ie](http://www.tusla.ie)

[www.tusla.ie/parenting-24-seven](http://www.tusla.ie/parenting-24-seven)

### **Family Mediation Service**

Family mediation is a service to help married and non-married couples who have decided to separate or divorce, or who have already separated.

For contact details of local centres see [http://www.legalaidboard.ie/lab/publishing.nsf/content/Family\\_Mediation\\_Service\\_](http://www.legalaidboard.ie/lab/publishing.nsf/content/Family_Mediation_Service_)

### **Family Resource Centre National Forum**

A support network working with the Family Resource Centres (FRCs) located in communities throughout Ireland. [www.familyresource.ie](http://www.familyresource.ie)

## Support for both parents and teenagers

Details of parenting programmes all over Ireland are available online.

Check out <http://www.barnardos.ie/resources-advice/parents/parenting-course-database.html>

Barnardos has support and information for teenagers on bullying on [www.barnardos.ie/teenhelp](http://www.barnardos.ie/teenhelp).

### **Anti-Bullying Centre**

(ABC)Room C2125/C2121

School of Education Studies,

Henry Grattan Building, Dublin City

University, Dublin 9

[www.dcu.ie/abc](http://www.dcu.ie/abc)

### **BeLong To**

[www.belongto.org](http://www.belongto.org)

(supports lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender young people in Ireland)



**Centre for the Prevention of Self-harm or Suicide**

Tel: 01 601 0000  
Email: mary@pieta.ie  
www.pieta.ie

**Childline**

Tel: 1800 666 666  
www.childline.ie

**Children's Rights Alliance**

Tel: 01 662 9400  
Email: info@childrensrights.ie  
www.childrensrights.ie

**Crosscare Teen Counselling**

A service that aims to provide professional counselling services for adolescents and their families who are struggling with behavioural and emotional problems.  
Tel: 01 557 4705  
Email: teencounselling@crosscare.ie  
www.teencounselling.ie

**GLEN (Gay and Lesbian Equality Network)**

Tel: 01 672 8650  
Email: info@glen.ie  
www.glen.ie

**Headstrong: The National Centre for Youth Mental Health**

Tel: 01 472 7010  
Email: info@headstrong.ie  
www.headstrong.ie

**Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (ISPCC)**

Tel: 01 676 7960  
www.ispcc.ie

**Jigsaw Galway** A community based system of care supporting young people to achieve better mental health. In conjunction with Headstrong.  
Tel: 091 549 252

**National Youth Council of Ireland Child Protection Unit**

Tel: 01 478 4122  
Email: info@nyci.ie  
www.youth.ie

**Office for Internet Safety**

Tel: 01 408 6122  
Email: internetsafety@justice.ie  
www.internetsafety.ie

**Parentline**

Confidential helpline for parents under stress or seeking parenting advice and support  
Lo-call: 1890 927 277  
Email: info@parentline.ie

**Samaritans**

Tel: 116 123  
www.samaritans.org

**The Office of the Ombudsman for Children**

Tel: 1890 654 654  
Email: oco@oco.ie  
www.oco.ie

## Useful reading

### For parents

#### **The Get With it! series by the Internet Advisory Board**

A guide to cyberbullying

A parents' guide to social-networking websites

A parents' guide to filtering technologies

A parents' guide to new media

technologies

**These booklets can be downloaded from [www.internetsafety.ie](http://www.internetsafety.ie)**

**The following books are available on [www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk)**

#### **Bullying: a Parent's Guide** by

Jennifer Thomson

Need2Know, 2013

#### **Cyber-bullying: Issues and Solutions for the School, the Classroom and the Home** by

S. Shariff, Routledge, 2008

#### **Coping with Depression in young people – a guide for parents** by

C Fitzpatrick and J Sharry, Wiley-Blackwell, 2004

#### **Parenting is Child's Play – the teenage years** by David Coleman, Penguin Books, 2010

#### **Understanding School Bullying: A Guide for Parents and Teachers** by Mona O' Moore, Veritas, 2010

#### **Understanding Cyberbullying: a Guide for Parents and Teachers** by

Mona O'Moore

Veritas, 2014

#### **Understanding girls' friendships, fights and feuds: a practical approach to girls' bullying** by Valerie E. Besag, Open University Press, 2006

#### **The Essential Guide to Bullying Prevention and Intervention: Protecting Children and Teens from Physical, Emotional, and Online Bullying** by

Cindy Miller & Cynthia Lowen

Alpha Books, 2012

#### **The Parents' Book about Bullying**

by W. Voors, Hazelden, 2000

#### **Rising above Bullying: From Despair to Recovery** by C. Herbert and R. Hayes, Jessica Kingsley, 2011

### For teenagers

#### **Inventing Elliot** by Graham Gardner (fiction) Orion, 2003

#### **Why do people bully?** by Adam Hibbert, Hatchett Children's Books, 2006

#### **Don't pick on me: How to handle bullying** by Rosemary Stones, Piccadilly Press, 2005

#### **Taking Action against Bullying** by Jane Bingham, Rosen Publishing, 2010

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Every care has been taken in preparing the content of this booklet, however Barnardos and Tusla - Child and Family Agency do not assume legal or other liability for inaccuracy, mistake or other errors. Information in this booklet is general information only and is not intended to be used as a substitute for advice and treatment from a qualified professional. Organisation contact details are shown for the convenience of the user and do not mean that Barnardos or Tusla - Child and Family Agency endorse these organisations.

(Photos by: MelodiT; Bina Sveda, Lavinia Marin, Lisa Kong, Patrick Bolger)

This booklet is one in a series on Parenting Positively. Parenting is a very rewarding job but one which can be difficult at times, especially when parents are faced with challenging situations. The aim of this series is to provide information and guidance to you, as a parent of a teenager, to help create a positive, loving and supportive relationship between you and your child.

The series covers teenage well-being as well as the complex life issues of death, separation, bullying, a parent's problem drug or alcohol use and domestic abuse. The booklets outline teenager's understanding of the particular issue and how you can support them through this difficult time. Each booklet also gives further resources that you can follow up for more information and help on the issue covered.

There is also information for teenagers on these issues on [www.barnardos.ie/teenhelp](http://www.barnardos.ie/teenhelp)

*Also in the series: Parenting Positively* for parents of children aged 6–12. Booklets in this range cover a range of topics including death, bullying, separation, a parent's problem drug or alcohol use and domestic abuse. For more information see [www.barnardos.ie](http://www.barnardos.ie)

Tusla - Child and Family Agency, Brunel Building, Heuston South Quarter, Dublin 8  
T: 01 771 8500 E: [info@tusla.ie](mailto:info@tusla.ie) [www.tusla.ie](http://www.tusla.ie)

Barnardos, Christchurch Square, Dublin 8  
T: 01 454 9699 E: [resources@barnardos.ie](mailto:resources@barnardos.ie) or [training@barnardos.ie](mailto:training@barnardos.ie) [www.barnardos.ie](http://www.barnardos.ie)