

# Four types of bullying every parent should know about

What are the different types of bullying and how can you spot them if your tween or teen is being targeted? Signs to look for and what to do next.

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Worries about childhood bullying are common among parents, but those concerns often take on a new sense of urgency during the tween and teen years. These worries might be well founded if you start noticing baffling behaviour, like your tween trying to avoid school—also known as truancy.

During these years, the social landscape is more complex and the stakes are often high. Smartphone-wielding kids in middle school and high school may feel emboldened to say things online that they wouldn't dare utter in person, and hurtful words cut even deeper when they're shared over and over again on group chats or social media. But unlike younger kids, who usually run to their parents if a friend hurts their feelings, a tween or teen may be reluctant to tell their mom or dad if they're being bullied. What are the different forms of bullying, and how can you spot the signs among the tween and teen set? Here's everything you need to know.

## What are the different types of bullying?

It's important to understand exactly what bullying is, especially considering how often the term is thrown around these days. "Bullying is persistently targeting another child who is vulnerable with the intent to harm or hurt them in a repeatable pattern," says Jennifer Kolari, a child and family therapist and author of *Connected Parenting: How to Raise a Great Kid*. "If someone is in a bad mood and they're nasty once, that's not bullying—it has to be repeated."

Types of bullying can be broken down into four main categories: physical, cyber, verbal and social.

### Physical bullying

"Physical bullying is either the threat of being physical or actually being physical," says Kolari. There's a wide range of physical bullying, from pinching, pushing and tripping to hitting, kicking and damaging property.

### Cyberbullying

According to Kolari, online bullying is on the rise. "I would say it's intensified," she says. Cyberbullying involves putting down, harming, hurting, threatening, starting rumours or passing messages along about another person online. What makes cyberbullying especially pernicious is that messages keep getting passed around within a social network, extending the lifespan and reach of a bullying episode.

## Verbal bullying

The intent behind a person's words is what differentiates verbal bullying from teasing. Verbal bullying is done with the intent to "rip someone apart, devastate them and hurt them," says Kolari. This differs from mutual "dissing," which tends to be especially common among boys to establish status, she notes.

## Social bullying

This type of bullying happens primarily through exclusion and social contagion. "It's saying things like 'We're going for a private talk, so you're not allowed to come' or 'We're all getting together and leaving you out,'" explains Kolari. She adds that this type of bullying tends to be more common among girls. The contagion part is when other kids—who typically wouldn't bully—participate due to peer pressure or to avoid being targeted themselves. "That would be more like 'If you talk to that person, you can't sit with us,' whether that's explicit or understood," she says.

## What are some common signs of bullying?

Behavioural changes can be an indicator that a tween or teen is being bullied. Vanessa Lapointe, a registered psychologist and author of *Parenting Right from the Start: Laying a Healthy Foundation in the Baby and Toddler Years*, says that this can include changes in sleeping and eating patterns and resistance to going to school.

## Truancy

Truancy refers to a persistent pattern of avoiding or missing school. It differs from not being at school because a child feels sick or has another good reason for missing class. "It's when you're not there without an explanation," says Kolari. For a child who is experiencing physical, social or emotional abuse or being cyber-bullied, avoiding school is a "natural response to walking into a hostile, emotionally unsafe environment," says Kolari. While hard data on truancy isn't available, Kolari says she believes there's been an increasing trend toward missing school among middle schoolers and high schoolers. An offshoot of truancy is school phobia, which often stems from the fact that a child has been bullied to the point where they can't even leave the house or get out of the car to go to school. This leads to missed classes and severe anxiety over school performance and homework.

## Mood changes

Bullying can take a toll on a teen's self-esteem and is often linked to mental health issues. Keep an eye out for subtle or quick and drastic mood changes, increased anxiety and signs of low mood or depression. A child who is frequently irritable or shuts himself in his room may also display signs of bullying. Another sign can be a lack of interest in activities that a child once enjoyed.

## Physical and emotional symptoms

A child who is being bullied may experience both physical and psychological signs, which can include frequent complaints of headaches and stomach aches. Panic attacks, nightmares and loss of sleep may also develop as a result of the emotional trauma of bullying.

## Substance abuse and self-harm

Other concerning signs of bullying include talking about wanting to die, self-harming behaviours, such as cutting, and using drugs or alcohol. "Any kind of habitual substance abuse is an effort to self-medicate," says Lapointe.

## **What can parents do?**

If you suspect that your child is being targeted, speak with them to try to find out what's going on, even though they may be reluctant to share. Address the issue with the school and talk to a guidance counsellor or social worker to learn helpful strategies to deal with bullying or even how your kid can defend other children from bullies. Contact your paediatrician or family doctor to find local organizations that offer support. Kolari notes that it's also important to monitor the online interactions of your teen or tween, especially as smartphones and social media become increasingly intertwined in kids' social lives. That way, you can be aware of any troubling content or messages that may indicate that your child is at risk and demand intervention.

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