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Help for Bullies and the Bullied

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Most kids have been teased by a sibling or a friend at some point, and it's not always harmful, especially when done in a playful, friendly and mutual way, and both kids find it funny. But when teasing becomes hurtful, unkind and constant, it crosses the line and needs to stop. Every day thousands of kids wake up afraid to go to school because of bullying. Yet because parents, teachers and other adults don't always see it, they may not understand how extreme bullying can get.

One of the most painful aspects of bullying is that it is relentless. Bullying is intentional tormenting in physical, verbal or psychological ways. It can range from hitting, shoving, name-calling, threats and mocking to stealing the victim's money and possessions. Some kids bully by shunning others and spreading rumors about them, while others use e-mail, instant messages and social networking websites.

Kids who engage in bullying behaviors seem to have a need to feel powerful and in control. Research indicates that children and youth who bully are not socially isolated. They report having an easier time making friends than children and youth who do not bully. Children and youth who bully usually have a group of friends who support or encourage their bullying. In some cases, bullies come from homes in which physical punishment is used, where physically striking out is often a way to handle problems, and where parental involvement, support and warmth are frequently lacking. Students who regularly display bullying behaviors are generally defiant or oppositional toward adults. Bullies appear to have little anxiety about what they are doing and possess average or above-average self-esteem. Research shows that bullying can be a sign of other serious behaviors. Chronic bullies seem to continue their behaviors into adulthood, negatively influencing their ability to develop and maintain positive relationships, and can experience legal or criminal troubles as adults.

Unless your child tells you about bullying, or has visible bruises or injuries, it can be difficult to know it's happening. However, there are some warning signs. Parents might notice their kids acting differently, seeming anxious, or not eating, sleeping well or doing the things they usually enjoy. Kids may seem moodier or more easily upset than usual, and may begin avoiding certain situations, such as taking the bus to school or once enjoyed peer activities. It's important for parents and guardians to take bullying seriously and not something that kids have to "tough out." The effects can be serious. Studies show that youth who are abused by their peers are at risk for mental health problems, such as low self-esteem, stress, depression or anxiety. They may also think about suicide.

If you suspect your child may be the cause or the victim of bullying, ask him/her to tell you what's going on. It's important to respond in a concerned, change-focused manner and not with demeaning or physical punishment. If your child is the victim, let him know it's not his fault and that he did the right thing by telling you. Parents also should know the school policies that protect students from harassment, bullying and physical violence. Seek help from your child's teacher, the school guidance counselor, and school administrators and hold them accountable for following school policy. Notify the police if your child is assaulted.

Combating bullying requires cooperation between everyone involved. Parents, the school and the community must work together to stop bullying.

If you would like to talk with someone about your child, call COMCARE's Children's Program at 316-660-7540. COMCARE will speak with you confidentially and assist you with your next step. COMCARE is the licensed Community Mental Health Center for all residents of Sedgwick County.