

## Bullying: What Parents and Teachers of Children with ADHD Need to Know

A chat with Marlene Snyder, PhD



**MARLENE SNYDER, PHD, IS A RESEARCH ASSISTANT PROFESSOR** at the Institute of Family and Neighborhood Life at Clemson University in South Carolina. She is the National Director of Development for the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program and the founding president of the International Bullying Prevention Association. Snyder has served as a national and international conference speaker, trainer, and technical assistance consultant for educational, mental health, child welfare, and juvenile justice agencies, and parent education organizations. She consults regularly with a wide variety of professional and community organizations on a range of topics related to bullying prevention and intervention. She has also written extensively on the topic of ADHD and is the author of *ADHD & Driving: A Guide for Parents of Teens with ADHD* (Whitefish Consultants, 2001).

### How do you get a thirteen-year-old boy with ADHD to tell someone he is being bullied when he thinks that is snitching?

We know that it is more difficult for boys than girls to report victimization. When they get older, it is also more likely that they will hesitate to tell anyone that they are being bullied. This is a very common problem.

It is important for parents to listen to the child and to let them know that “snitching” is not the same as “reporting.” They need

to know the difference between tattling or snitching as “telling-on” someone for doing something to get that person in trouble. Telling or reporting is to help resolve an issue they can’t take care of by themselves. If a child is concerned about his own safety—or the safety of another child—it is NOT snitching. Schools are beginning to teach this to children in their bullying prevention programming.

The WORST things a parent can do when a child comes to you to tell you about being

bullied are to ignore him, to tell him to stop tattling, to ask *What did you do to bring it on?* or to make a comment that because of the way he acts you are not surprised that other kids are picking on them.

No child should be abused by his or her peers. Please continue to encourage your child to talk to you about this problem. You can work it out together.

**My son is being bullied at school and in our neighborhood. He is being called names, such as fat and stupid, and told that no one likes him. He has been diagnosed with ADHD and is much larger than the kids in his age group. What is the best way to tell him to stick up for himself that will bring him confidence and also stop the other child from bullying him? He came home crying the other day and it is so hard to see him not stick up for himself.**

First of all, it is important for him to understand that what the other kids are doing to him and saying about him isn’t right. He has a right to be around other children at school and in his neighborhood without this kind of intimidation and humiliation.

We often find that children who are afraid to stand up for themselves can get a lot of good information from attending Taekwondo lessons or working with someone who can help with self-esteem. Many times, these children don’t stand up tall and don’t use eye contact—signaling that if they are bullied they might not stand up for themselves.

Parents are important to coach their children and to offer encouragement. They can be encouraged to find things that they are good at, be involved with other children, and so forth.

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## What is bullying?

"It is important for people to have a definition of 'bullying' behavior," says Marlene Snyder, PhD. "Bullying is when someone repeatedly and intentionally says or does mean or hurtful things to another person who has a hard time defending himself or herself. It is important to understand that bullying is *not* just a conflict or a misunderstanding between two children."

Bullying, Snyder says, is characterized by three key components:

- › Bullying is a form of intentional aggression—the child who is bullied is picked out for some reason—it is not accidental mistreatment.
- › Bullying behavior is often repeated. Adults are not always aware of patterns until a serious event occurs. But **DO NOT WAIT** for a pattern to develop before responding. Address all negative behavior immediately!
- › Unlike other forms of aggression, there is an imbalance of power or strength between the child who is bullying and the child who is being bullied. The imbalance can be physical (someone is bigger or stronger), but often is emotional or verbal and can be quite subtle.

A child who is being bullied is likely to have a difficult time defending himself or herself physically, verbally, emotionally. We must be clear—bullying is a form of victimization (or peer abuse) and shares some characteristics (intentional, repetitive, power imbalance) with other forms of victimization: domestic violence and child maltreatment.

**But how do we know when a child is being bullied? I'm already hypersensitive due to all the issues that a parent with ADHD already has with the school.**

**What are the signs?**

The signs are different for different aged kids. Be aware of any changes in characteristic behaviors. Is your child appearing "quiet"? Are there unexplained scratches or bruises? Are they missing items they have taken to school, or are their possessions being damaged at school? There may not be any children coming to your home or making calls to talk with your child. Does your child cry easily or become irritated when you ask about "friends" at school?

Bullying is not just a conflict—the power imbalance part of bullying is important here. Power imbalances can be physical, but they can also be emotional imbalances. Some kids react with crying or yelling, handing the child who bullied more power. Some kids are more verbal and can be using that verbal power to harm others (gossip, name calling, taunting). Some kids have more things or more economic resources, giving them more power with their peers. There is also power in numbers; more popular children can manipulate several other children to bully another child.

I must remind you here that if your child feels bullied, you need to listen carefully. Ask questions. Too many times parents dismiss the child before they know what is really going on.

**How do you decide which is the best way to defend against the bully? Ignore it if possible? Use a smart comeback? What advice would you give a ten-year-old boy?**

This is a difficult question. It is never good advice just to "ignore" it. Remember that bullying is victimization. Telling a child to ignore constant bullying is as effective as telling the victim of a domestic violence situation, "Just ignore it." We are well meaning when we give that advice, but it really isn't helpful to the child who is being harmed.

If your child has some friends or supporters, advise him to always stay with that group. Children who bully often look for loners—people who don't have many friends who will step in to defend.

Telling a child who is bullying to "stop it" may or may not work. Sometimes we see children who say that wind up being harmed worse.

If your child is able to make a comeback, sometimes that works, but most children are so devastated by what has just happened that they can't think of what to do in the moment.

Most importantly, he should remove himself from the situation, and not let the other kids see him get overemotional. For children with ADHD, this is very difficult. They will often try to fight back, and most times they are ineffective and it makes matters worse.

The most important thing is that they should tell a trusted adult at school what is happening. If the person they talked to isn't helping, then they need to keep telling other adults until they find someone who will help.

**What is the best way to approach your child's principal or teacher if you believe your child is being bullied?**

It is very difficult for parents to see what is happening to their child when they are being bullied. Often parents become very emotional when recounting what has been happening and the impact bullying has had on their child.

First of all, call the principal and ask for a meeting. It is really good if you have something in writing that helps you to remember all the things you want to say. This can be a very emotional meeting, so try to have your feelings under control. You can help yourself a lot by making this a meeting of stating the facts.

Thank the principal for meeting with you and then start down your list. Who has been harming your child? Who was standing around watching the events? What happened? What day did it happen? Has it happened before? Was it the same child who was harming your child, or is it a group of children who are causing the distress in your child?

Most states have anti-bullying laws. Look yours up and determine what your school should be doing to protect your child. Ask that the bullying be brought to an end and that you be informed of any problems that are brought to their attention. Your child has a right to attend school without being abused by their peers.

**When a situation presents itself where there is a clear target and known bully(ies) in a school setting, what should the supervisory system then look like? How can schools effectively keep a student safe in a situation when greater supervision is needed without making the victim's school experience completely different?**

Schools can use a student survey to find out the hot spots for bullying behavior in that school. Supervision can be reassigned to the places and the times that bullying is most likely to happen. Many schools also have a good deal of data from working with discipline issues. They know where in the school there are likely to be problems, what hours (usually it is during passing time in the halls), or in recess, gym class, or at lunch). There are many ways to increase supervision without costing additional money for additional staff.

**My thirteen-year-old son curls up when he's intimidated, which just seems to invite bullying. Any practical advice on helping him physically position himself in a manner that helps him appear confident instead of looking like a victim or target?**

This reaction is not uncommon; it is a protective position. He will need some coaching such as helping him to stand up straight and tall and trying to make himself look bigger. Standing with feet apart so he won't be easily tipped over can help too. The PE teacher at school would be a good place to get some one-on-one coaching and tips. Getting them into a martial arts class, where they can learn to be more confident with their own body and how to defend from physical or verbal threats really helps kids who are constantly targeted.

There are good martial arts schools and some that teach more aggression than may be necessary. Be sure to pick a school that teaches the use of physical force against others ONLY when necessary. Be comfortable that they are teaching good values in the class.

**What if someone who was previously a friend to your child begins to bully him or her? What is the best approach for a parent to take? Talk with the parents of the other kid? Talk to the other kid directly? Or try to give my child strategies for dealing with the bullying 'friend'?**

Dealing with this is especially hard for both the child and the parent. As kids get older, friendships shift, and sometimes our children are left behind. It is important to talk about how friendships change and talk about what might have happened in your own friendship experiences.

It is possible to have more than one good friend, and it can help to explain this to your child. Look for opportunities for your child to establish other friends.

It seems intuitive that parents want to talk to other parents about their child's friendships, but rarely does this work out the way parents want it to. Often the conversations become either defensive or emotional and can wind up making things worse for the child.

Your child should be encouraged to report what is happening to a teacher at school so that they are aware. It is heartbreaking to watch a child in this situation. Keep the communication lines open.

The best advice I can give is to help your child find other friends. Perhaps finding different groups of kids to play with will help.

**My nine-year-old son who has been diagnosed with ADHD consistently is the target of bullying. He is very outgoing and has friends, but I think when he is nervous or excited he acts silly, which draws negative attention. Coaching him on this has not seemed to help. On top of this we are new to our neighborhood. Do you have any advice for helping him in social situations?**

I have to catch my breath on this one. We lived through the same kind of situations, and our son is now thirty-five. First of all, know that they can survive and thrive, but it is going to be up to you to help keep hope alive.

Immaturity is a trait that children who bully will target. Groups want to look older rather than younger! Dr. Russell Barkley has presented information at conferences indicating that in chil-



### **Exclusion is a particularly painful form of bullying for a child.**

dren with ADHD, the ability to control impulsive behaviors lags by approximately one-third the chronological age. For example, your nine-year-old may act more like a six-year-old, a fifteen-year-old more like a ten-year-old and so on.

Honestly, your son may not be able to develop close friendships with kids in the neighborhood, but he can find friends in other places. Remember, it doesn't matter how many friends he has, but he needs to have at least one.

Helping him to get into things he likes to do

is important. Find something he is good at. For our son, it was bowling. He wasn't complained about like when he messed up a team sport, for example. When he played baseball it was a nightmare when he was left fielder—but he excelled when they let him catch. Parents just have to keep finding opportunities for them to find what they are good at. Many times friends are younger children. As long as they feel that they have someone to talk with and someone who will do things with them, they will be okay.

**A lot of your suggestions on how to deal with bullies seem to be targeted to an elementary or middle school child. Are there different tactics that high school students should take?**

You know, until a year ago, researchers believed that bullying slacked off in high school. We have surveyed over half a million US kids who tell us that for girls, bullying is highest in around the eighth grade then gradually gets better through the twelfth grade. However, what we learned for boys is that bullying is quite high at the ninth grade and continues to be about the same in grades ten through eleven. Then, the twelfth-grade boys have the highest incidence of bullying others.



## Resources for Parents and Teachers

- › Find additional resources on bullying prevention in both English and Spanish at [olweus.org](http://olweus.org), including an interactive map with information on state laws against bullying. Look in the portal for parents at the top of the homepage. There are lots of good tip sheets and fact sheets there that parents may choose to share with teachers. There is also a teacher portal and one for school administrators.
- › Contact Marlene Snyder directly at [nobully@clemsun.edu](mailto:nobully@clemsun.edu).
- › There is also a great website for kids about bullying at [pacer.org/bullying](http://pacer.org/bullying), the website of the PACER Center.
- › Read Barbara Coloroso, *The Bully, the Bullied, and the Bystander* (William Morrow Paperbacks, 2009).
- › See previous *Attention* articles on this subject.

We are training high schools. They have to be particularly careful NOT to confuse bullying with sexual harassment, disability harassment, and with civil rights violations (bullying because of race, gender, religion, or sexual orientation).

We also make high school students aware that bullying doesn't stop in high school; they may face this behavior in the workplace as well.

Again, the best strategy for high schoolers who are being harmed is to let adults in the system know what is going on. That is easier said than done. Our research also tells us that high school students are the most likely to suffer bullying without telling ANYONE—not parents, siblings, or friends.

It is particularly important for parents to be “tuned in” to their child—being very aware of the signs of depression—which are eight times higher in kids who are being bullied than in those who are not. As always, an informed parent is in the best position to help their child with ADHD. I certainly hope this helps you.

There are legal protections for all kids who are being harmed. You need to know your state laws against bullying, cyberbullying, and hazing; see the map on the Olweus website, [olweus.org](http://olweus.org).

### **What constructive things can a parent of a shy fourteen-year-old boy do to help him make true friends in a big new public high school? He definitely doesn't want mom or dad “orchestrating” any interactions with other kids. Just wait and friends will come or what?**

This is really a big issue. Many times children are LOST in big schools. It will be important that he have some adult at the school that he can go to. Perhaps meet the counselor ahead of time.

Making and keeping friends for any child with ADHD has always seemed to be more difficult than for other kids. It will be important to have some acquaintances before he starts school.

Can you get him involved in some activities or interest groups before going? It will be important for you to listen to what he is dealing with and what he needs.

Please know that bullying problems are very difficult. Read all you can so that you can be prepared to help your child. It is rough, but schools can do a great deal to help you. Keep talking with them and don't forget it is your child's right to get an education without having to face bullying from their peers. We do know what to do to take care of bullying problems in schools. That is the good news!

### **How can a parent address when their child is being excluded from groups? The child might be “friends” with another kid, but when that other kid is in a group of peers, they all exclude the child from activities.**

Exclusion is a particularly painful form of bullying for a child. You are right, “friends” can experience a good deal of peer pressure and fall into the group's behavior. When this happens constantly at school, I'd encourage you to visit with the principal and explain what is happening. Talk calmly, stating facts of what has happened and the impact that it is having on your child.

When you know that there is a particular event—like a birthday party—that your child is not invited to, remind the child that there are others who aren't invited as well, and perhaps plan your own activity that will keep the child busy during the time of the event that he or she was not invited to.

Remember that these kinds of exclusions are painful for parents, too. Try to avoid talking badly of the other kids and their parents in front of your child. That isn't going to help anyone.

When our children are being harmed by others, it is extremely frustrating and painful for parents. In this situation, however, we have to keep our focus on helping our child. Know that there are others who are experiencing the same kinds of things. Your CHADD group is a wonderful place to connect with other parents who may have strategies that they can share that will help you and your child. **A**