

Recognizing Violent or Potentially Violent Kids

Recognizing kids who hurt kids is similar to recognizing adults who hurt kids in that it is not what they look like that matters its their behavior that matters. Not all kids who fit any of these profiles will walk into a classroom and start shooting people, but statistically they will commit acts of violence in their life.

Hopefully with the following information you will be able to recognize and teach your children to recognize potentially violent kids. This knowledge will not only help you help these kids, but most importantly, it will enable you to protect your children

THE BULLY

A big, tough kid stops a smaller kid on his way to school and threatens to hurt him unless he hands over his homework. The popular girls at school won't let anyone sit at their lunch table except their friends. These two bullying scenarios and others happen more often than most adults realize. Seventy-four percent of 8 to 11-year-olds say teasing and bullying happen at their school. But what exactly is bullying?

Bullying is:

- Fighting, threatening, name calling, teasing, or excluding someone repeatedly and over time
- An imbalance of power, such as size or popularity
- Physical, social, AND emotional harm
- When someone is willing to hurt another person to get what he or she wants

Some parents don't think bullying is a big deal. They think it's a rite of passage to adulthood, that it's just kids being kids. But for kids, bullying is one of the biggest problems they face. In fact, every day 160,000 kids miss school because they're scared of bullying, according to the National Education Association. Bullying doesn't only negatively affect its victims but also the bullies themselves.

The National School Safety Center calls bullying "the most enduring and underrated problem in American schools." Bullying is no laughing matter as it is estimated to leave its mark on one in four children.

Characteristics of Bullies:

- Both guys and girls can be bullies
- May be outgoing and aggressive
- Can appear reserved on the surface
- May try to manipulate people in subtle, deceptive ways, like anonymously starting a damaging rumor just to see what happens.
- They like to dominate others and are generally focused on themselves.
- They often have poor social skills and poor social judgment.
- Sometimes they have no feelings of empathy or caring toward other people.

- Some think they're hot stuff and have the right to push people around, others are actually insecure.
- They put other people down to make themselves feel more interesting or powerful
- Some bullies act the way they do because they've been hurt by bullies in the past — maybe even a bullying figure in their own family, like a parent or other adult.
- Some bullies actually have personality disorders that don't allow them to understand normal social emotions like guilt, empathy, compassion, or remorse. These people need help from a mental health professional like a psychiatrist or psychologist.

A lot of the time kids don't tell their parents that they're being bullied. They may be embarrassed, or they may think that telling will make the bullying worse. To help their children, parents may need to do some detective work to spot the clues that bullying is happening. Here are some signs that a child is being bullied:

Warning Signs of those being Bullied:

- Withdrawal
- Drop in grades
- Torn clothing
- Loss of friends
- Avoidance of school and other activities
- Bruises
- Need for extra money or supplies

When Your Child Is Bullied:

- If your child comes to you and asks for help with a bully, take it seriously.
- Many times if kids aren't taken seriously the first time they ask for help, they don't ask again.
- Even if your child doesn't turn to you for help, you can watch for the warning signs that he or she is being bullied.
- If you think your child is being bullied or if your child has told you that he or she is being bullied, you can help. Parents are often the best resource to build a child's self confidence and to teach him or her how to best solve problems. Here are a few ways you can help:
 - ⇒ Talk to your child's teacher about it instead of confronting the bully's parents. If the teacher doesn't act to stop the bullying, talk to the principal.
 - ⇒ Teach your child nonviolent ways to deal with bullies, like walking away, playing with friends, or talking it out.
 - ⇒ Help your child act with self confidence. With him or her, practice walking upright, looking people in the eye, and speaking clearly.
 - ⇒ Don't encourage your child to fight. This could lead to him or her getting hurt, getting in trouble, and beginning more serious problems with the bully. If your child is cornered with no way out, teach him to fight only to defend until he can get a way and tell an adult.
 - ⇒ Involve your child in activities outside of school. This way he or she can make friends in a different social circle.

- ⇒ Some children seem to be bullied all the time, while others may rarely get picked on. Why do some kids seem to attract all of the bullies? Kids who are bullied often:
- ⊖ Are different from other kids, whether by size, race, sexually, or have different interests
 - ⊖ Seem weak, either physically or emotionally
 - ⊖ Are insecure
 - ⊖ Want approval
 - ⊖ Won't tell on their bullies

When Your Child Is a Bully

It's hard for any parent to believe that their child is a bully, but sometimes it happens. But just because your child bullies doesn't mean that he or she will bully forever. Parents are one of the best resources to help their child stop bullying and start interacting positively with their classmates.

Your child may bully if, he or she

- lacks empathy and doesn't sympathize with others
- values aggression
- likes to be in charge
- is an arrogant winner and a sore loser
- often fights with brothers and sisters
- is impulsive

What you can do to stop your child from bullying

- Take it seriously. Don't treat bullying as a passing phase. Even if you're not worried about long lasting effects on your child, another child is being hurt.
- Talk to your child to find out why he or she is bullying. Often, children bully when they feel sad, angry, lonely, or insecure and many times major changes at home or school may bring on these feelings.
- Help build empathy for others and talk to your child about how it feels to be bullied.
- Ask a teacher or a school counselor if your child is facing any problems at school, such as if your child is struggling with a particular subject or has difficulty making friends. Ask them for advice on how you and your child can work through the problem.
- Ask yourself if someone at home is bullying your child. Often, kids who bully are bullied themselves by a parent, family member, or another adult.

Results and Consequences of Bullying:

Kids who are bullied are more likely to

- do poorly in school
- have low self-esteem
- be depressed
- turn to violent behavior to protect themselves or get revenge on their bullies

- Kids who bully are more likely to:
- do poorly in school
- smoke and drink alcohol
- commit crimes in the future

Parents can play a central role to preventing bullying and stopping it when it happens.

Here are a few things you can do.

- Teach kids to solve problems without using violence and praise them when they do.
- Give children positive feedback when they behave well to help their build self-esteem. Help give them the self confidence to stand up for what they believe in.
- Ask your children about their day and listen to them talk about school, social events, their classmates, and any problems they have.
- Take bullying seriously. Many kids are embarrassed to be bullied. You may only have one chance to step in and help.
- If you see any bullying stop it right away, even if your child is the one bullying.
- Encourage your child to help others who need it.
- Don't bully your children or bully others in front of them. Many times kids who are bullied at home react by bullying other kids. If your children see you hit, ridicule, or gossip about someone else they are also more likely to do so themselves.
- Support bully prevention programs in your child's school. If your school doesn't have one, consider starting one up with other parents, teachers, and concerned adults.

CLASSROOM AVENGERS

While bullies may be obvious due to their outward behavior, the “classroom avenger” is more difficult to recognize because he generally does not exhibit his violent tendencies. His behavior may be normal, but include spending countless hours on the internet or playing video games (usually an expert).

Characteristics:

- Usually a good student
- Adults like him
- Dress is usually in keeping with what other teens are wearing
- Little or no previous history of delinquent behavior
- Usually not known to have a psychiatric problem
- Most kids may think he is a bit if a nerd
- Over-all he’s an ok kid
- May be the target of teasing or bullying

Factors that May Contribute to the Development of His Violent Acts:

- Parents divorced, separated, or constantly involved in episodes of intense friction between them or children
- Abused
- Neglected

- Witness to violent acts in real life or through media
- Problems differentiating between fantasy and reality

Your child knows who these kids are...

- Ask your child who the trouble makers are
- Ask your child if they know the kids who are always getting picked on
- Teach them what to look for
- Teach them to trust their feelings about other kids

KIDS WHO MAY KILL OR COMMIT SUICIDE

Remember recognizing warning signs in a potentially dangerous kid is not a call to arms, but it is a reason to confer with other adults and professionals. Do not label these kids based off one or two signs. A child who exhibits several of the warning signs at once or continuously is reason for some action to be taken. Do not take this task on alone, and do not confront the parent with advice, remember a lot of the leading issues may be coming from the family environment.

Imminent Warning Signs of Kids Who May Kill or Commit Suicide:

- Recent Stressful Event – break up with girlfriend, rejection from group, persecution from peer group, conflict with parent, school or other authority
- Loneliness – excessive feeling of isolation or being left alone; if associated with behavior that is aggressive, take note
- Grades drop – dramatic drop in grades or attendance at school
- Considered “Weird” – peer group considers him weird or dangerous. Threats of violence made verbally or in writing
- Preoccupied with weapons – guns, explosives knives, fire
- Severe “Rage” – out of control episodes for seemingly minor reasons
- Self Injurious – overt behavior causing self injury, threats or attempts of suicide
- Cruelty to animals or smaller children
- Fascination with fire and fire setting

Characteristics Common to Emotionally Healthy Children:

- Personality – generally friendly and can be outgoing or shy, but not usually withdrawn
- Relationships – are generally good with peers, siblings, parents, adults and authority
- Peer Acceptance – is usually good; may not be popular, but generally accepted
- Outlook – is enthusiastic about the present and future; often have specific career aspirations
- Active in constructive group activities – student government, clubs, sports, band, etc.

Not all kids that do not exhibit emotionally healthy characteristics are bad. Most kids going through growth changes will become emotionally unstable at times. Some kids may even periodically exhibit some violent or aggressive behavior. This may or may not be a need for concern. However, it should be incentive for us to look at reasons and solutions.

Other Characteristics Common to Violent Kids:

- Loners / Social Outcasts
- Physically Healthy. Not likely to be physically handicapped or disabled
- Attend public schools, but not associated with any pro-social groups or “normal” pastimes; socially immature
- Member of alienated groups or gangs
- Relation conflicts with peers and adults
- Poor parent and sibling relationships; child abuse
- Family history of mental illness, personality disorders, substance abuse (only about 10% of violent kids have severe mental illness)
- Depression, suicidal tendencies
- As a small child may have been colicky, temperamental, a bed wetter, delayed milestones. Problems with attachment and bonding
- Displays chronic anger; anger and power struggle issues at home
- Distrustful of adults in authority
- Negative self image and/or unstable self-esteem
- Inappropriate access to, possession of, and fascination with firearms
- Violent fantasies, strong attraction to real or fictional violence in media, movies, video games and music
- Premeditation/planning/surveillance of targets
- Victims of bullying since preschool
- Multiple psychological stresses imagined or real, including rejection, discipline, humiliation
- Inability to accept responsibility and blame
- Cruelty to animals, small children
- Fascination with fire and fire setting

URBAN VIOLENT KIDS:

Characteristics of Classroom Avenger (CA) versus Urban Violent Kids (UVK):

CA – Caucasian Race

UVK – Minority Race

CA – Middle income family, resides in rural or small community in south or northwest

UVK – Lower income family, resides in large city

CA – Fair to excellent academic performance; average to above average IQ

UVK – Consistently poor academic performance; average or below average IQ

CA – Appearance of normality to adults; no history of misbehavior at school

UVK – Severe and evident conduct disorder

CA – Superficially “normal” dysfunctional family (hidden anger and hostility)

UVK – Obvious family history of problems

CA – Illegal alcohol and drug use uncommon, or some experimentation. Prescribed psychiatric medication by pediatrician or other doctor not skilled to administer psychiatric care

UVK – Illegal drug and alcohol use common

CA – Strong school interest; school is center of social arena

UVK – Low interest in school; social arena is outside school environment

CA – Superficially respectful to teachers and authority figures

UVK – Extremely belligerent and disrespectful to teachers and authority figures

CA – “Geeks” or “Nerds” who are rejected by mainstream students. Rarely instigate physical confrontations

UVK – “Cool Kids” who have patterns of impulsive and chronic hitting, intimidating and bullying behavior

CA – “Covert” vandalism and dishonesty

UVK – Well documented history of extensive criminal and delinquent behavior

CA – Target females, highly functioning students, and authority figures

UVK – Target could be anyone

CA – Motive is vengeance and achievement of power and/or status

UVK – Motive is to harm, but usually have secondary motive of dispute, robbery or rape

WHAT CAN BE DONE

Don't give up on raising your kids too soon. Some parents see the ages of between 10 and 12 as a time to relax. The child is old enough and knows the basics of safety and is not yet a teen. However, today's kids meet the teen dangers a lot sooner than we previously did. Because of media influence, sizes of schools, etc. the teen turmoil is starting at a younger age. Be alert to behavior shifts, sleep patterns, friends and performance in school. Any noticeable changes should be investigated.

As your child grows, especially as he/she reaches teen years, he/she is beginning to form their identity. Know your child's role models and friends, who he/she wants to be like.

Growing kids require more privacy, but spending a vast majority of their time behind closed doors is not healthy and should be investigated and limited.

Know where your children are, physically and mentally

Teach your child from a young age not to bully others. Listen to him when he talks about being bullied, or bullying others. If he repeatedly brags about being a bully, seek professional help.

Children with explosive tempers should be taught at an early age not to respond with aggressive or derogatory behavior. This may lead others to respond in a similar manner. Boys may need some outlet for aggression. School or city league sports may help here (look for good role models in male coaches – do background checks).

Teach your child that actions have consequences, good and bad. Violence has a price. Help your child understand the difference between TV violence and the real world.

Apply discipline consistently and without anger. This will help your child learn that misbehavior has negative consequences. If anger is a key element in your family dynamics, seek professional help.

Encourage your child to share his/her thoughts with you. From a young age children gain a sense of worth based on parent's responses to them. Focus your attention on them when they come to you with issues or problems, or successes.

Teens, especially need to know there is a strong sense of family support and belonging. Don't be fooled by the media's presentation of most teens abandon their family ties.

Get to know your child's friends and family of your child's friends. Before you let your child visit a friend's house check to see if that family keeps guns in the house and if so are they secured.

Several studies share research that media violence has a direct coalition to aggressive behavior. Know what your kids are watching, video games they are playing, music they are listening to, etc.

One way to decrease violence in our country is to not accept it or tolerate it in our homes, our friends, or our associates. It must begin with you, the parent.