

**Tips for Parents** by Susie Kohl

## *Social Skills to Prevent Bullying*

“Bullying is a conscious, willful, deliberate, hostile, and repeated behavior by one or more people that is intended to harm others”  
~ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

“**S**HE’S A BABY,” a four-year-old girl tells her mom, pointing to one of her classmates who is obviously the same age. Her wise mother knows the other child’s Russian background, and tells her daughter with focused attention, “She’s not a baby. She speaks another language. If you tried to speak Russian, you would sound younger too.” Mom has sensitivity to the fact that putting someone down who seems a little different can become a habit, even at a young age. Her willingness to stop and talk with her daughter about an incidental remark demonstrates the awareness necessary to promote positive social relationships with any age group.

Most of us have emotional associations with the word bullying from our own childhood. Did you sometimes feel the pain of exclusion? Was there someone on the playground you tried to avoid? We don’t want our children to have to deal with physical aggression or feelings of being left out—ever. Yet learning to handle conflict is an important part of social development. That’s why it’s helpful for us to review the crucial role we can play in coaching our children to become kind and confident members of their social groups.

In simple terms, bullying involves intentionally intimidating others or excluding them in an ongoing way. With boys, picking on someone tends to involve more physical aggression. Girls are more likely to say mean things or purposely exclude. Both the intimidator and the victim need to learn new social skills through systematic support from adults.

Children who act out toward others have often observed intimidation between adults or been treated harshly themselves, so they need to learn new patterns. Teachers and parents of those who feel helpless in conflict situations because they are young or have sensitive temperaments need to have them practice ways of standing up for themselves. Here are some ideas for effective social coaching:

**Listen to your child with empathy.** Remember how you felt as a child, and listen to your child’s feelings about a sibling, friend, or classmate without judgment. We want them to feel free to talk with us.

**Empower your child as a problem solver.** “How do you think we could stop your younger brother from taking your toys?” “How could you get help at school when your friend always wants her own way?”

**Do not tolerate unkindness.** Inviting all the girls to a birthday party but one or two shows a lack of compassion. Writing a mean message about another child in a note or online has to be unacceptable. Talk about your family’s stance on treating other people with insensitivity.

**Stop physical aggression and domination.** Don’t let your child hit you or hurt you, even in play. Make sure one sibling doesn’t repeatedly coerce another into doing what he wants.

**Present positive role models of working out conflicts.** It isn’t easy to maintain our composure. However, we don’t want to present an example of making others do things out of anger. It’s too easy for children to adopt that pattern with others.

Social awareness is growing in our society, and our efforts will help our children to fit into a world that will require more sensitivity and ability to work and communicate with anyone.

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