

Handling your own emotions when your child is bullied.¹

By Elizabeth K. Englander, PhD, Bridgewater State University, Massachusetts²

Were you bullied at school as a child? If so, learning that your own child has been bullied may generate a groundswell of feeling that you have a hard time controlling. Even if you were never a target yourself, you may feel angry, vulnerable, frustrated, helpless and overwhelmed. It can be hard to control these feelings.

Does it matter if you control your own feelings about this matter? It does. “Taking over the room” emotionally – dominating the room with your own feelings – puts you in the center and takes focus away from your child. Thinking and controlling your emotional reactions, on the other hand, can help your child resolve hers, too.

So *how* can you help yourself resolve your own feelings? What will make you feel better?

The first rule is to make sure, before becoming upset, that you’re dealing with a genuine bullying episode. Many episodes of meanness between children involve brief, transient, and less serious behaviors. Sometimes your child may be suffering from inadvertent meanness – such as when they’re not invited to a friend’s birthday party. It can be helpful not to over interpret these kinds of events. However popular your child is, I can promise you that there will be birthday parties that he or she won’t be invited to. Try not to take it personally when this happens. Most children simply cannot invite the entire third grade to their party, or even every one of their friends!

Another important thing to remember is that children tend to call everything “bullying.” They’ve picked up on the fact that adults sit up and panic when that word is uttered, and they know that this is a great way to get your attention. Is the incident a repeated, targeted, intentional attack from a more powerful child? If so, it could be bullying – but if it’s one-time, accidental, or not from a more powerful child, then generally it isn’t bullying. It’s still a problem, but a different kind of problem.

It’s also useful to remember that however much the incident is impacting YOU emotionally, it may not be impacting your child the same way. In our research, we’ve found that more than 20% of incidents are classified by victims as not upsetting at all, or as only very mildly upsetting. The key is to make sure that you have every single fact straight, and to ask how your child feels about what happened.

All right, so you’ve spoken with length with your child and you feel sure that this is truly a bullying situation. Now comes a hard part: being sympathetic and sensitive with your child, while not escalating the emotional temperature of the incident. Ranting and raving about the unfairness of it all will only make your child sorry that they told you. But taking them on your lap or in your arms for a cuddle and a long talk will help both of you handle it better emotionally.

¹ This column has been published by Gatehouse Publications Inc.

² Dr. Elizabeth K. Englander is a Professor of Psychology and the Director of the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center at Bridgewater State University.