



What does social science research* tell us about . . .

WHAT FAMILIES CAN DO WHEN THEIR CHILD IS BEING BULLIED?

What Are Possible Signs a Child is Being Bullied?

Different youth will show different signs that they are experiencing bullying. Unfortunately, because bullying is so common, and it is not often discussed openly, young people will often show signs that bullying is taking a mental and physical toll on them before it is talked about openly.

- Mental health symptoms: Psychological distress, including symptoms of depression and anxiety have been associated with being bullied because of they are LGBTQ.^{1 2 3 4} including being persistently cyberbullied.⁵ Such symptoms include: *Persistent sadness, withdrawing socially, poor or excessive appetite, irritability, difficulty sleeping, excessive worry, suicidal thoughts, and self-injury*
- Academic problems: In a county--wide study of 7th--12th graders⁶, LGB youth of all racial groups who were bullied experienced poorer school performance, and a national study found similar, harmful associations.⁴ Such academic problems and signs of potential bullying include: *Feeling as though s/he does not belong in school, believing it is less important to graduate, skipping school, and lower academic performance/poorer grades.*
- Behavioral problems: Bullying youth because of they are LGBTQ has also been associated with behavioral problems, such as: *Physical and verbal aggression, defiance, rule--breaking behavior,¹ and substance use⁷.*
- You might also notice direct evidence of bullying. For example, if your child is missing items that might have been taken, has broken items, or unexplained injuries.

How Do I Respond To My Child Who Is Being Bullied?

Try not to assume: Even if a child is being bullied because their peers perceive them to be LGB or T, they might not be LGB or T. If you child has not “come out” as LGB or T, don’t assume they are because of the bullying. Whether or not your child has “come out” about their sexual orientation or gender identity, foster a safe space for them talk about themselves by showing acceptance and openness to diversity in sexual orientation and gender.

Ask the hard questions about bullying: Young people sometimes feel helpless or humiliated about being bullied and so may be reluctant to talk about it. It is often up to the family to “break the ice” and ask if a young person is being treated unfairly or is being bullied. It is recommended that family members ask directly if their child is being bullied or mistreated. It is helpful to take a caring, non--judgmental tone.

Respond effectively: It is important that families clearly explain that being bullied is never the fault of that youth: no one deserves to be bullied. Also be sure you are ready to deal with your own difficult reactions to what might be happening to your child. Hearing about bullying or harassment can be very difficult for families and becoming overwhelmed with anger, disappointment, or sadness may not be helpful to your child.

Be supportive: Providing support may be one of the most important things parents and family members can do for a young person, including when their child is being bullied. LGBTQ youth who have supportive families tend to show less depression and suicidal behaviors.⁸ In general, being supportive includes showing interest in your child, expressing care and affection, and attending to and encouraging your child’s interests.

Affirm your child for who s/he is: Emerging research suggests that general parent support of LGBTQ youth may not help to decrease the negative consequences of anti--LGBT bullying.⁶ Instead, family members can help to curtail the negative consequences of anti--LGBT bullying by specifically supporting their child’s sexual orientation or gender identity or expression. Supportive behaviors include expressing acceptance for who your child is and showing affection when your child talks about being LGBT or questioning. For a family guide to supporting your LGBT youth, go to <http://familyproject.sfsu.edu/publications>

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- *All research cited is representative of a larger body of social science research. Please note, not all LGBT people or their families/allies are affected in the same way.*

Advocate for your child within the school: Talking with school officials to ensure they are aware of potential bullying and how they might best respond to your youth can be helpful. Be sure to try your best to respect your child's desire for privacy and potential fears of embarrassment in an age-appropriate way. Research shows that when youth participate in supportive spaces for LGBTQ youth in schools, like Gay-Straight Alliances (GSA), youth perceive the schools to be safer⁴ and show better well-being in young adulthood.⁹ Family members can help their children by offering to support their child start, re-start, or join a GSA. See GLSEN's *Jump-Start Guide for Gay-Straight Alliances* at: <http://www.glsen.org/cgi-bin/iowa/all/library/record/2226.html>

Advocate for your child outside of school: Family members can also take their young people to other community places that support LGBTQ youth, including LGBTQ affirming religious organizations, community centers, and events. Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) can be a good place for family members to learn more about how to access and create LGBTQ affirming communities. You can find the nearest PFLAG chapter to you by visiting <http://community.pflag.org/page.aspx?pid=803> and start learning about LGBT-affirming religious and spiritual organizations by visiting <http://community.pflag.org/page.aspx?pid=655>

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