

Being bullied not only has physical effects,
it can also take a toll on a child's emotional health.

Beating Down Self-Esteem

By Tamekia Reece

Everyday when fifth period gym rolls around, Aaron's heart rate speeds up, his breathing gets heavy, and he starts to sweat. And that's before he puts on his gym uniform. See, Aaron knows he'll be taunted, called names, and purposely tripped during physical activities. He's gotten "sick" and spent the class period in the nurse's office so many times that the excuse doesn't work anymore. He doesn't know what to do, but knows he'll do almost anything to get away from those two guys who just won't leave him alone.

In 2005, about 28 percent of 12- to 18-year-old students reported they were bullied at school in the previous six months, according to the U.S. Department of Justice. And while any physical scars from the bullying will likely heal very quickly, emotional scars may linger.

Beyond Physical

The physical effects of bullying are well known: black eyes, bruises, headaches, sleep problems, and stomachaches are among those we all associate with the abuses of bullies. But others are often overlooked. "What's coming out in the literature now is teens subjected to bullying as a victim become subject to a host of long-term effects as they reach adulthood," says Joseph Wright, M.D., M.P.H., FAAP, chair of the American Academy of Pediatrics Violence Prevention Subcommittee. "The most concerning of those have to do with the contribution to overt mental health problems like depression and suicidal ideation."

Bullying damages a child's ability to see herself in a positive light. A teen whose self-esteem is shot may start to believe what the bully says is

true, and begin to self-bully with thoughts of being weak, ugly, or worthless. This may lead to self-loathing or feeling hopeless. Social withdrawal and social anxiety may also become a problem, harming the adolescent's self-esteem even more.

One particularly problematic result of bullying is anger, which can bring about thoughts (or actions) of retaliation. Almost three-quarters of the attackers in school shootings felt bullied, reports the U.S. Secret Service.

"Stand Up for Yourself?"

So, how do you know if your teenager is being bullied? Most kids don't tell their parents about bullying right away because of embarrassment, fear of the "snitch" label, or the hope that it will go away on its own, says Robert Sege, M.D., Ph.D., FAAP, director of ambulatory pediatrics at Boston Medical Center. When parents do learn of the bullying, it's probably been going on for a while, he says.

That's why it's so important to be in tune with your teen. "Parents need to be aware of any changes of behavior that impacts the child's sleeping patterns, eating, desire to go to school or performance in school," Dr. Wright says. Because the adolescent years are chaotic anyway, it may be bullying or it may be something else. Your job is to find out.

If it is bullying, avoid giving "stand up for yourself" or "fight back" advice. "We, as adults, grew up in a culture where if you did take it in your own hands, the most that might happen would be a fistfight," Dr. Wright says. Now, with the use of lethal weapons too often a factor in retaliation, telling teens to fight back can be detrimental, he says. It could



also be dangerous or even deadly.

Instead, what parents should do is intervene immediately. First step: Talk with your teen and reassure him there's nothing wrong with him. Explain that most bullies don't like themselves and try to make others feel bad so that they can feel better.

Then, get the school involved. A meeting will likely be set up between your child, the bully, his parents, the principal, and yourself to discuss the issue and find a resolution.

Time to Rebuild

Hopefully, the adult intervention will stop the bullying. To help your teenager repair her self-esteem, help her realize she's capable and worthy by praising her often. Helping her find another social environment, like an art class, music group, athletic or academic activity is also helpful. The idea is to get her involved with new people and activities where she's likely to be successful and have a boost of self-confidence.

Depending on the severity of the bullying and the emotional effects your child suffers, sometimes allowing the teen to change schools is needed. While this may seem like a drastic measure, if going to the school continues to cause emotional distress, nothing good can come of it.

If there's any concern your teen isn't getting better, is harboring revengeful thoughts, or feeling suicidal, don't hesitate to contact a pediatrician who can connect you with a mental health specialist.

Although there are many issues teens face during adolescence, a battered self-esteem from bullying doesn't have to be one of them. ●

Quick Tips: What's Bullying, Really?

It can be hard to determine if what your child is experiencing is actual bullying or just "kids being kids." Being called a name once or being ignored by a friend for a few days isn't bullying. Bullying is repeated, intentional, aggressive behavior toward someone more vulnerable than the bully.

The types of bullying are:

- **Physical:** hitting, kicking, stealing belongings
- **Verbal:** name-calling, taunting, insults
- **Psychological:** intentional exclusion, spreading rumors
- **Cyber:** sending cruel text, email or instant messages, posting insults on the Internet