

Help Your Child Recognize the Signs of Bullying

Children may not always realize that they are being bullied. They might think it is bullying only if they are being physically hurt; they might believe the other child is joking; or they may not understand the subtle social norms and cues. Children can benefit from a definition of the differences between friendly behavior and bullying behavior. **The basic rule: Let children know if the behavior hurts or harms them, either emotionally or physically, it is bullying.**

Parents can prepare themselves to talk with their children by considering how they are going to respond to their child's questions and emotions. They can also decide what information they would like to give their child about bullying.

Parents should be ready to:

- **Listen.** It is the child's story; let him or her tell it. They may be in emotional pain about the way they are being treated.
- **Believe.** The knowledge that a child is being bullied can raise many emotions. To be an effective advocate, parents need to react in a way that encourages the child to trust.
- **Be supportive.** Tell the child it is not his fault and that he does not deserve to be bullied. Empower the child by telling her how terrific she is. Avoid judgmental comments about the child or the child who bullies. The child may already be feeling isolated. Hearing negative statements from parents may only further isolate him or her.
- **Be patient.** Children may not be ready to open up right away. Talking about the bullying can be difficult because children may fear retaliation from the bully or think that, even if they tell an adult, nothing will change. The child might be feeling insecure, withdrawn, frightened, or ashamed.
- **Provide information.** Parents should educate their child about bullying by providing information at a level that the child can understand.
- **Explore options for intervention strategies.**

Parents can discuss options with their child to deal with bullying behavior.

Questions to Ask Your Child about Bullying

Open-ended questions will help the child talk about his or her situation. Begin with questions that address the child's environment. For example, "How was your bus ride today?" or "Have you ever seen anyone being mean to someone else on the bus?" Then move on to questions that directly affect the child such as, "Are you ever scared to get on the bus?" or "Has anyone ever been mean to you on the bus?"

If the child is talking about the situation, parents can help their child recognize bullying behavior by asking more questions such as:

- Did the child hurt you on purpose?
- Was it done more than once?
- Did it make you feel bad or angry? How do you feel about the behavior?
- Did the child know you were being hurt?
- Is the other child more powerful (i.e. bigger, scarier) than you in some way?

For the child who is reluctant to talk about the situation, questions may include:

- How was gym class today?
- Who did you sit by at lunch?
- You seem to be feeling sick a lot and want to stay home. Please tell me about that.
- Are kids making fun of you?
- Are there a lot of cliques at school? What do you think about them?
- Has anyone ever touched you in a way that did not feel right?

Reactions to Avoid

When children choose to tell their parents about bullying, parents might have one of three responses.

1. Tell their child to stand up to the bully
2. Tell their child to ignore and avoid the bully
3. Take matters into their own hands

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While these reactions express **genuine caring, concern, and good intentions** – and often reflect what parents were told by their own parents or other adults – they are likely to be ineffective. Parents may feel better for having taken action, but these reactions can have harmful consequences. Here’s why these responses will likely be unsuccessful:

1. Tell your child to stand up to the bully – This can imply that it is your child’s responsibility to handle the situation. While there is a ring of truth to this statement (being assertive is often a good response) sending your child back into the situation without further information will probably cause more harm. A more effective response is to brainstorm options with your child about what you can do as a team to respond to the situation.
2. Tell your child to ignore the bully – This is easier said than done. Your child has probably tried ignoring the situation, which is a typical response for children. If that method had been effective, however, there wouldn’t be a need for the child to seek your help. It is difficult to ignore someone who is sitting behind you on the bus or next to you in class.
3. In addition, if the student who is bullying realizes that their target is purposefully “ignoring” them, it can actually ignite further bullying, since that response provides the sense of power and control the student seeks.
4. Take matters into your own hands – A normal gut response from parents is to try to fix the situation and remove their child from harm. For example, a parent might call the parents of the student who is bullying, or directly confront the bully. Remember, when children tell a parent about bullying, they are looking for the parent to guide them to a solution that makes them feel empowered. Involve them in the process of determining next steps. Typically, calling the other parent or directly confronting the bullying student is ineffective. It is best to work through the school and implement steps to respond.

It is important to Help Your Child Know That They Are Not Alone

- **You are not alone.** Many children feel that they are the only ones who are bullied and that no one cares. Let them know that there are people who do care.
- **It is not up to you to stop the bullying.** It is never the responsibility of the child to change what is happening to them.
- **Bullying happens to a lot of kids but that NEVER makes it right.** Let your child know that bullying happens in small schools, large schools, rural schools, and city schools. It can happen in preschool, high school, and every school in between. It happens in Australia, Argentina, and all around the globe. Certain people will say that some kids deserve to be bullied because of the way the child looks or acts, but this is simply not true.

- **No one deserves to be bullied.** Everyone deserves respect. All students have the right to be treated with dignity and respect, no matter what.
- **We all need to work together.** Everyone is responsible for addressing bullying. The community, schools, parents, and students all play a role.

PACER Resources

Student Action Plan

pacer.org/bullying/pdf/StudentActionPlan.pdf

Are you an educator working with a student being bullied, a parent looking for ways to help your child change their behavior, or a student who wants to take action against bullying but you aren’t sure what to do? As a student, bullying is something that impacts you, your peers, and your school – whether you’re the target of bullying, a witness, or the person who bullies. Bullying can end, but that won’t happen unless students, parents, and educators work together and take action.

The first step is to create a plan that works for you and your situation. This student action plan is an opportunity for you – either on your own or with parents and teachers – to develop a strategy to change what’s happening to you or someone else. It’s your chance to make a difference.

Advice Gone Wrong

pacerteensagainstabullying.org/#/listen/advice-gone-wrong

An interactive teen perspective (written by teens for adults) on unhelpful advice from parents and educators.

Inside Story

pacerteensagainstabullying.org/#/listen/inside-story

An interactive look, from a teen perspective, at some of the reasons students don’t talk about bullying. Meet Pete. He is a dude with a lot going on inside, and he has zeroed in on some of the reasons that students don’t tell an adult about bullying.

We Need To Talk – Video

pacerteensagainstabullying.org/#/listen/we-need-to-talk-video.html

Teens have their turn talking about what is helpful and what they want parents to know.

What if Your Child *IS* the Bully?

The word “bullying” often conjures up an image of a schoolyard scene, with a big, intimidating student towering over a small, cowering child. That’s just one face of bullying—and of children who bully.

Another face of a bully might be...that of your child. Surprised? Many parents are. Often they have no idea that their child is harassing other children. Yet knowing the facts—and acting to change the situation—is vitally important in making the future safer for your child and all children.

Here’s why. Children who bully suffer as much as those they target. They are significantly more likely than others to lead lives marked by school failure, depression, violence, crime, and other problems, according to experts. The message is clear: Bullying is too important to ignore.

Could your child be bullying others? Would you know? Once you found out, would you know what to do? Here is some information that can help.

What is bullying?

Bullying is different from the routine conflicts of childhood. It is intentional behavior that is meant to hurt and dominate another person. Characterized by an imbalance of power between the child who bullies and the target, bullying can be physical, verbal, emotional (social), or sexual. It includes harassment via e-mail and instant messaging.

Who does it?

Children who bully come in a variety of packages—the waif-like second grader, the big sixth-grade boy, the child with a disability, the popular girl, the loner. They can come from any background, race, income level, family situation, gender, or religion. Research has shown that despite their differences children who bully typically have one or more of the following traits. They may:

- be quick to blame others and unwilling to accept responsibility for their actions
- lack empathy, compassion, and understanding for others’ feelings
- be bullied themselves
- have immature social and interpersonal skills
- want to be in control
- be frustrated and anxious
- come from families where parents or siblings bully
- find themselves trying to fit in with a peer group that encourages bullying
- have parents who are unable to set limits, are inconsistent with discipline, do not provide supervision, or do not take an interest in their child’s life.

If you see these traits in your child or hear from others that your child is bullying, you may want to look into the issue. If your child is bullying, take heart. There’s a lot you can do to help correct the problem. Remember, bullying is a learned behavior—and it can be “unlearned.” By talking with your child and seeking help, you can teach your child more appropriate ways of handling feelings, peer pressure, and conflicts. Here are some ideas.

Help your child to stop bullying

1. **Talk with your child.** Find out why he or she is bullying others. You might explore how your child is feeling about himself or herself, ask if he or she is being bullied by someone else, and invite discussion about bullying. Find out if your child’s friends are also bullying. Ask how you can help.
2. **Confirm that your child’s behavior is bullying and not the result of a disability.** Sometimes, children with disabilities bully other children. Other times, children with certain behavioral disorders or limited social skills may act in ways that are mistaken for bullying. Whether the behavior is intentional

bullying or is due to a disability, it still needs to be addressed. If your child with a disability is bullying, you may want to include bullying prevention goals in his or her Individualized Education Program (IEP).

- 3. Teach empathy, respect, and compassion.** Children who bully often lack awareness of how others feel. Try to understand your child's feelings, and help your child appreciate how others feel when they are bullied. Let your child know that everyone has feelings and that feelings matter.
- 4. Make your expectations clear.** Let your child know that bullying is not okay under any circumstances and that you will not tolerate it. Take immediate action if you learn that he or she is involved in a bullying incident.
- 5. Provide clear, consistent consequences for bullying.** Be specific about what will happen if the bullying continues. Try to find meaningful consequences, such as loss of privileges or a face-to-face meeting with the child being bullied.
- 6. Teach by example.** Model nonviolent behavior and encourage cooperative, noncompetitive play. Help your child learn different ways to resolve conflict and deal with feelings such as anger, insecurity, or frustration.

Teach and reward appropriate behavior.

- 7. Role play.** Help your child practice different ways of handling situations. You can take turns playing the part of the child who does the bullying and the one who is bullied. Doing so will help your child understand what it's like to be in the other person's shoes.
- 8. Provide positive feedback.** When your child handles conflict well, shows compassion for others, or finds a positive way to deal with feelings, provide praise and recognition. Positive reinforcement goes a long way toward improving behavior. It is more effective than punishment.
- 9. Be realistic.** It takes time to change behavior. Be patient as your child learns new ways of handling feelings and conflict. Keep your love and support visible.
- 10. Seek help.** Your child's doctor, teacher, school principal, school social worker, or a psychologist can help you and your child learn how to understand and deal with bullying behavior. Ask if your school offers a bullying prevention program. Bullying hurts everyone. Parents can play a significant role in stopping the behavior, and the rewards will be immeasurable for all.

Is Your Child Being Bullied In Cyberspace?

By Marcia Kelly

If the word “bullying” makes you think of one child picking on another in the schoolyard, it may be time to update your image of this important problem. While such face-to-face harassment certainly still exists, new ways of bullying have emerged. With the proliferation of cell phones, instant messaging, social networking Web sites such as MySpace, and other technologies, bullying has muscled its way into cyberspace.

Cyberbullying, as this new technological danger is called, may already have happened to your child. According to a study done by wiredsafety.org, 90 percent of middle-school students say they have been the victims of this new form of bullying. Perhaps more sobering, only 15 percent of parents even know what cyberbullying is, according to another study by the group.

Cyberbullying: What it is and how it works

Cyberbullying is the use of technology to harass, hurt, embarrass, humiliate, or intimidate another person. It can be done anonymously, which makes it easy for one child to hurt another and not be held accountable or see the impact of his or her actions. Because this technology reaches a wider audience than just the person who is targeted, its effects can be devastating.

This form of bullying can take place in many ways. For example, some young people have discovered sites where they can create a free Web page—including one intended to bully another child. Embarrassing pictures, private instant messaging (IM) exchanges, and hateful or threatening messages can be posted on these sites. Some young people also post mean comments at legitimate Web sites’ guest books. Others post blogs (short for “Web logs”), information that is instantly published to a Web site. Bullies have found blogging to be a powerful tool when encouraging peers to gang up on another child.

Cyberbullies, like schoolyard bullies, look for targets who are vulnerable, socially isolated, and may not understand social norms. Many children with disabilities have these characteristics, and so they may be especially vulnerable to cyberbullying.

Your 3-step plan to protect your children from cyberbullying

Today’s children are the first generation to experience cyberbullying. Today’s parents are the first to figure out how to respond to the problem.

As you venture into this new territory, here are some tips that you may find helpful, says Julie Hertzog, PACER’s bullying prevention project coordinator.

1. Raise the topic of cyberbullying with your children.

Many children are afraid to initiate such a conversation because they fear that their access to the Web and cell phones will be eliminated; others are scared to admit that they are being bullied. Open the subject for discussion and let your children know that you want them to have some cyber freedom—but that it needs to be safe.

2. Set cyber safety rules.

You set safety rules for your children in the physical world. Do the same in cyberspace. Remind your children that they never really know who is on the other end of cyber communication. It could be the person they think it is, or it could be a predator or a bully. With that in mind, two good guidelines are, “Don’t do or say anything online that you wouldn’t do or say in person. Don’t reveal anything that you wouldn’t tell a stranger.”

Specific advice for your children might include:

- Never give out your e-mail password, a photo, or any personal data, such as a physical description, phone number, or address. A bully could use that information to harass you in many ways.
- Never share too many personal details. For example, if you keep an online diary, someone could use that information to bully or ridicule you.
- Never share your IM account password with anyone, even your best friend. That friend may share it with other people, or the friendship may end—and your private messages could suddenly become very public. Also, a cyberbully with your password can sign on, pretend to be you, and behave inappropriately with others to embarrass and humiliate you.

3. Know what your children are doing online.

Privacy is important, but safety is more important. As a parent, you have a responsibility to know what your children are doing online. Keep your children's computer in an open spot, such as the family room, where you can supervise Web activity. If your children have an account on a social networking site such as MySpace or Facebook, for example, know how to access it so you can monitor the communications. If you do discover that your children are subjected to cyberbullying, document it by printing the e-mails or Web pages, saving electronic copies, and contacting your children's school or the police.

Technology offers your children many advantages and benefits—and, occasionally, some risks. The solution is not to remove their access to technology but rather to manage the risks. You can do that by being aware of your children's cyber activities, learning about new technologies, and adding "cyber parenting" to your list of talents.

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Cyberlife by the numbers—a new world for many parents

Cyberbullying

- 22% of students know someone who has been bullied online.*
- 19% of students admit to saying something hurtful to others online.*
- 12% of students have personally become upset by strangers online.*

* Based on a 2005–06 survey of 13,000 students in grades 5–12.

Kids Online

- 58% of students admit to using the Internet unsafely, inappropriately, or illegally.
- 55% of students report having given out personal information (e.g. name, age, gender, home address) to someone they have only met online.***
- 31% of students have a personal Web page.***

** Based on a 2005–06 survey of 11,900 students in grades 5–12.

*** Based on a 2005–06 survey of 12,000 students in grades 5–12.

Digital Divide

- 93% of parents say they have established rules for their child's Internet activity.*
- 37% of students report being given no rules from their parents on using the Internet.**
- 95% of parents say they know "some" or "a lot" about where their children go or what their children do on the Internet.*
- 41% of students do not share where they go or what they do on the Internet with their parents.**
- 26% of students believe their parents would be concerned if they knew what they did on the Internet.**

* Based on a 2004–05 pre-assessment survey of 1,350 parents.

** Based on a 2005–06 pre-assessment survey of 12,650 students in grades 5–12.

Statistics from the Internet safety organization i-safe and its sister group, Teenangels. Learn more at www.isafe.org and www.teenangels.org.

Drama: Is It Happening to You?

Advice for Teens Who Are Experiencing Bullying

Drama. Bullying. Teasing. Harassment. No matter what you call it, it hurts. If you're pushed, hit, or your things are ripped off or trashed, it can hurt physically. If you're ignored by friends or cruel things are posted about you online, it can hurt emotionally. If it happens to you, you've probably asked yourself, "Why me?" You know how painful it is to be treated this way.

So seriously, what can you do? A lot!

You can take back control, but you don't have to do it on your own. Remember, bullying is never your fault and you have the right to make it stop.

Begin taking back control by talking to your parent or an adult you can trust. Then check out these three steps for handling the situation at school.

1. Know That You Are Not Alone

"When I walk into the classroom, all the girls start whispering with each other and laughing." -Jenny, 7th grade

Ever feel like this only happens to you? It doesn't. Unfortunately, bullying happens to a lot of kids. It happens in small schools, large schools, rural schools, and city schools. It can happen in preschool, high school, and every school in between. It happens in Australia, Argentina, and all around the globe.

Sometimes people say that bullying is just part of growing up or that you should just "deal with it" and it will go away. This is NOT true. Even though bullying happens to a lot of kids, that doesn't ever make it right. No one deserves to be bullied, everyone deserves respect, and everyone has a right to feel safe at school.

2. Be a Self-advocate

"Self-Advocate? Seriously, what does that even mean?" -Nick, 6th grade

Being a "self-advocate" means speaking up for yourself, telling people what you need, and taking action. Bullying can be stopped, but you need a plan. First, think about what you can do to change your situation, and then make an action plan. You can download a copy of PACER's Student Action Plan from PACER.org/Bullying. In the plan:

- Write down what is happening to you, when and where it takes place, and who is involved.
- Include what you would like to change, how things could be changed, and what would help you gain control over the situation.
- List your role in this action plan, who else should be involved, and what they could do.

Share this information with your parents and an adult you trust at school.

3. Assert Your Rights

"We are told over and over again to tell an adult. I tried that at my school and was told that's just how kids in middle school act." -Jack, 8th grade student with Aspergers

Every student has the right to feel safe at school. If one adult isn't able to help you, don't give up! It is your right to talk with another adult, such as a parent. When you do speak to a teacher, an administrator, or a person you trust at school:

- Share all of the information in your action plan.
- Ask: "What can be done so I feel safe and other kids do, too?"
- Tell adults that there are laws outlining the school's responsibility in handling bullying situations. You may have additional protections under federal law when the bullying is about:
 - Race, color, or national origin
 - Sex
 - Religion
 - Disability

State and local laws may provide additional protections on other bases, including sexual orientation.

Some adults may not know this, so clue them in and keep talking until someone understands. Visit www.Olweus.org for an interactive map leading to each state law.

No matter what you call it, bullying is painful. But you don't have to go through it alone! There are people who will help you, and it is your right to be safe.

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Common Views and Myths about Bullying

In spite of the significant impact that bullying can have on a target, our society often views it as acceptable behavior. There are many misconceptions that characterize bullying, all of which can lead to minimizing the behavior. Here are a few of these common misconceptions, followed by the facts.

- **“Bullying is a natural part of childhood.”**

Fact: There is nothing natural about being bullied. Bullying is often considered a normal part of childhood because it is such a common experience. Physical or emotional aggression toward others should not be tolerated as a normal part of childhood.

- **“Words will never hurt you.”**

Fact: Even though words don't leave bruises or broken bones, studies have shown they may leave deep emotional scars that can have lifelong implications. Children learn at a very early age that words can hurt other children.

- **“Some people deserve to be bullied.”**

Fact: No child's behavior justifies being hurt or harmed in any manner. All children deserve to be treated with respect and consideration.

- **“Bullying will make kids tougher.”**

Fact: Bullying does not make someone tougher. Research has shown it often has the opposite effect and lowers a child's sense of self-esteem and self-worth. Bullying often creates fear and increases anxiety for a child.

- **“Telling a teacher about bullying is tattling.”**

Fact: Children need to know the difference between tattling and telling. Tattling is done to get someone in trouble, telling is done to protect someone. The secrecy of bullying only serves to protect the bully and perpetuate the behavior.

- **“It's only teasing.”**

Fact: Most children are occasionally teased. When teasing does not hurt a child, it isn't considered bullying. Teasing becomes bullying when a child does not understand that he or she is being teased and the intent of the action is to hurt or harm.

- **“Boys will be boys.”**

Fact: The implication here is that bullying is acceptable, and that it is normal for boys to be physically or verbally aggressive. However, research indicates aggression is a learned behavior, not a natural response.

- **“Girls don't bully.”**

Fact: Research shows that girls can and do bully. While they do not physically bully targets as often as boys, they will often use verbal and emotional bullying. Bullying for girls escalates during the middle school years.

- **“Children and youth who are bullied will almost always tell an adult.”**

Fact: Adults are often unaware of bullying, in part because many children and youth don't report it. Most studies find that only 25 to 50 percent of bullied children talk to an adult about the situation. Boys and older children are less likely than girls and younger children to tell adults about bullying. Children may be reluctant to report bullying because they fear retaliation by the children doing the bullying. They also may fear that adults won't take their concerns seriously or will deal inappropriately with the situation.

- **“Bullying is easy to recognize.”**

Fact: Physical bullying, such as hitting, kicking, and fighting, is easy to recognize since this type of behavior is overt. It is the covert bullying—such as shunning, alienating, and leaving children out on purpose—that is much harder to detect.

- **“Ignoring bullying will make it go away.”**

Fact: This solution sounds easy, but ignoring the problem will not make bullying go away. In fact, it often makes the situation worse, because it sends a message that the target is unable to do anything about the behavior and gives the person bullying emotional satisfaction.

- **“Children and youth who bully are mostly loners with few social skills.”**

Fact: Children who bully usually do not lack friends. In fact, some research finds that these children have larger friendship networks

than other children. Importantly, they usually have at least a small group of friends who support and encourage their bullying behavior. Children who bully also generally have more leadership skills than targets of bullying or children not involved in bullying.

- **“Bullied kids need to learn how to deal with bullying on their own.”**

Fact: Some children have the confidence and skills to stop bullying when it happens, but many do not. Moreover, children shouldn't be expected to deal with bullying on their own. Bullying is a form of victimization and peer abuse. Just as society does not expect victims of other types of abuse (e.g., child maltreatment or domestic abuse) to “deal with the situation on their own,” we should not expect this from targets of bullying. Adults have critical roles to play in helping to stop bullying, as do other children who witness or observe bullying.

- **“Most children and youth who observe bullying don't want to get involved.”**

Fact: The good news is that most children and youth think that bullying is “not cool” and feel that they should do something if they see it happen. In a recent study of tweens (children ages 9 to 12), 56 percent said that they usually either say or do something to try to stop bullying or tell someone who can help (Brown, Birch, & Kancherla, 2005). These children and youth play a critical role in helping to stop bullying.

Telling Classmates About Your Child's Disability May Foster Acceptance

Parents often become experts on their child's disability. Through their own learning process, many see the value of teaching their child's classmates about the affect of the disability at school. Parents and professionals find that if classmates understand a child's disability, they may become allies in helping the child. The children may also be less likely to view accommodations or individual support as unfair advantages.

One of the best ways to teach children about a disability is to talk to them at school. For many families, presenting at school is an annual event. Sometimes, an IEP team writes it into a child's Individualized Education Program (IEP) document. The event is an opportunity to

- discuss why a child may look or behave differently from other children in the class
- point out the many ways in which the child is like classmates
- offer classmates tips for interacting with the child

"I found that children rose to the occasion when they understood the reasons for my son's challenges," said one mother. "When there's an obvious difference and no one is talking about it, children become confused and think there must be something 'bad' about it. When the children understood that the disability was not bad, but just different, many were eager to help him."

Several PACER advocates suggest how to talk to students about a child's disability or health needs.

The parent will probably need to begin the project

Because parents know their child better than anyone else does, they are the ones to broach the subject. Schools and teachers are very concerned about sharing private information

about students. They know that parents have varying attitudes about publicly discussing a child's disability. For example, the family of a child with an obvious physical disability may feel comfortable talking about the disability because curious people have probably asked about it before. The family of a child with a less apparent disability, however, may not wish to draw attention to it. If a family wishes to explain the disability to their child's classmates, a telephone call to the school or teacher can begin the process. Parents find most teachers and schools open to the idea.

Some parents may not feel comfortable speaking in the classroom. In that case, someone else from the IEP team, such as the special education teacher, school nurse, or a therapist, may be able to speak to the children. In addition, the classroom teacher may wish to lead the discussion. If the students are in middle school or older, bringing in a disability expert or other professional may be the way to go. An older student with disabilities may do the presentation him or herself after practicing with parents or staff.

Work with the teacher or school

Involving the teacher early is important. It is the courteous thing to do, and the teacher may need to change lesson plans to provide for the session. Some teachers use the session as a springboard for other classroom discussions and may already have planned similar sessions with other families. Helping to plan the presentation may also encourage a teacher to learn more about the child's challenges.

Most parents (or others) talk to their child's classmates early in the school year. A parent whose child is physically vulnerable may need to confirm that an IEP or Section 504 (of the Rehabilitation Act) supports are in place, and then address students the first week of school about the child's safety issues. Another parent may prefer to wait a couple weeks into the

school year so that others are more familiar with the child.

If someone other than the parent talks to the class, the speaker and family should confer ahead of time to convey what the family intends.

Ways to present

The age of the class determines the content, amount of presentation time, and who should give the information. If presenting to young children, parents can keep the session short and simple. Sometimes discussions occur during “circle time.” Most parents advise, “Leave time for questions.” One mother said the session was more about the children’s need to have their questions answered than it was for her to inform them about the specifics of her son’s disability.

Including a child in the presentation and class discussion is an individual choice. Participating may become more awkward as a student grows older. Many parents who spoke at their child’s preschool or elementary school ask someone else to present in middle school and high school. As youngsters grow up, they may be less comfortable having Mom or Dad at school.

Props may be used, particularly with young children. One mother found a picture book about disabilities to launch discussion. She then donated the book to the school. Another parent illustrated “brittle bone disease” by using a piece of uncooked spaghetti and a licorice stick to compare the child’s bones with those of classmates. Someone else brought along their younger child because she wanted the class to see that “I was just a mom and that my son had a little sister, just like another family might have.”

Children are usually fascinated by technology. If the child with a disability uses assistive technology, showing how it works will often hold the class’s attention. Speakers can also explain that such an item is not a toy and must be handled with care.

Written pieces can augment class discussions. One parent wrote a brief article about her child’s disability for the school newspaper after speaking to the class. Another made a small card with the child’s photo and a brief “All About Me” description to hand out at the session (and in other situations where people were meeting her child for the first time). While a “live” presentation offers an immediate opportunity for students to ask questions, other methods can deliver information. As students enter middle school and high school with multiple classrooms and teachers, parents may find it more practical to use written materials to inform staff and classmates about a student’s disability. Others may wish to do a short video or overhead presentation, if they have the resources.

Results

Most families who talk to children at school about their child’s disability find improvement in the way their child is perceived and treated. In addition to informing current classmates, doing such presentations helps prepare for the future.

As one mother put it, “It was a wonderful way to show my child self-advocacy—to give him the words and ways to speak for himself.”