

Is Your Child Being Bullied?

Back to school" can be a time of fun and excitement as kids meet their new teachers, connect with friends and get involved in great extracurricular activities. It can also be a time of fear, especially as an age-old social problem rears its ugly head: the bully.

Bullies can take the fun out of school and turn something simple like a ride on the bus, stop at a locker, or walk to the bathroom into a scary event that's anticipated with worry all day, every day. In this column, I'd like to share some basic information about bullying and how parents can recognize if their child is a target of bullying.

Bullying has two key components: repeated harmful acts and an imbalance of power. It involves recurring physical, verbal or psychological attacks or intimidation directed against a target who cannot properly defend him/herself because of size or strength, or because the target is outnumbered or less psychologically resilient.

Bullying includes assault, tripping, rumor-spreading, isolation, demand for money, destruction of property, theft of valued possessions, destruction of another's work, and name-calling. Other bullying includes sexual harassment (repeated



ON THE DEFENSIVE

BY RICK ALFORD

exhibitionism, voyeurism, sexual propositioning, and sexual abuse involving unwanted physical contact), ostracism based on perceived sexual orientation, and hazing. Parents should note that not all taunting, teasing and fighting among schoolchildren constitutes bullying. Two persons of approximately the same size or strength (physical or psychological) fighting or quarreling is not bullying. Rather, bullying entails continual acts by someone perceived as physically or psychologically more powerful.

Bullying is known to have long-lasting harmful effects, for both the target and the bully. Without intervention, bullies are much more likely to develop a criminal record than their peers. The targets of bullying suffer psychological harm long after the bully stops.

In fact, two thirds of attackers in school shootings had previously been bullied. This experience appears to have been a major role in motivating the attacker. International research suggests that bullying is common at all grade levels, but

most frequently during elementary school. It occurs slightly less often in middle school, and less so but still frequently in high school. High school freshmen are particularly vulnerable.

Kids who are being bullied often tell no one about their misery out of shame, fear of retaliation or being considered a snitch, and feelings of hopelessness. How can parents know if their child is the target of bullying? Some signs to watch for include:

- Subtle changes in behavior (withdrawn, sensitive, anxious, pre-occupied)
- Demonstrates a loss of interest in school and in favorite activities
- Comes home from school with bruises and scratches, torn or dirtied clothing, or with missing or damaged books and property
- Loss of appetite
- Excessive trips to the school nurse
- Inability to sleep, bad dreams, crying in sleep
- Repeatedly loses clothing, money or other valuables
- Appears afraid or reluctant to go to school
- Has repeated headaches or stomachaches, particularly in the morning
- Chooses a roundabout or strange route to and from school
- Feels lonely

- Reluctant to take the school bus
- There are a number of techniques that can help your child deal with a bully. At my martial arts school, students learn many physical self-defense skills to give them confidence to be able to defend themselves in dangerous situations. Just as important, kids need to understand that "mental self-defense" and non-violent alternatives are the best ways to approach handling conflicts with a bully – before they become physical. In subsequent columns, I'll address how to help your child prevent, prepare and protect against bullying.

About the author: Rick Alford is the Founder and Head Instructor of Defensive Edge Martial Arts Academy located in Wakefield, Mass. Mr. Alford has been training in the Martial Arts for over 24 years. He holds black belts in 3 disciplines including a 3rd Degree black belt in Small Circle Jujitsu. He is also a purple belt in Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, is training in Kali/Escrima/Arnis and is a certified instructor in Fierce Israeli Guerilla Hand-to-Hand Tactics. Rick teaches regular Bully Buster classes. For more information, email rick@modernjujitsu.com or call 781-245-0250.