



ALL ABOUT BULLIES

A GUIDE FOR PARENTS

By Kristen C. Quinn, CMHC, CCLS

As the parent of a young burn survivor, you're probably extra aware of your child's social adjustment and return to school. So when you drive up to pick up your child and see them off on their own, while all the other children are grouped in two's and three's, you can't help but be concerned.

IS YOUR CHILD BEING BULLIED?

Bullying has been a hot topic for teachers, parents, and burn survivors for several years. As the discussion has taken a prominent spot in these groups and on social media, the line between normal conflict, bullying, and assault has become blurred.

These three situations should be handled differently, so it's important to know what you're dealing with. It's also important to remember conflict is a normal part of life, and learning to resolve conflict is a lifelong skill.

NORMAL CONFLICT

- A disagreement or argument
- Equal balance of power
- Hurting someone's feelings is not the intention
- Both sides are willing to work toward resolution/understanding

BULLYING

- An individual or group intends to emotionally or socially hurt someone
- Unequal balance of power: the bully may be stronger, have social power, or hold something over the target.
- Negative behavior continues even when hurt or harm occurs

ASSAULT

- An attempt or threat to do bodily harm
- This may be in the context of bullying or a one-time event

WHAT IS BULLYING?

When an individual or group with more power repeatedly and intentionally causes hurt or harm to another person or group who feel helpless to respond. Bullying can continue over time, is often hidden from adults, and will probably continue if no action is taken.

There are many types of bullying, including:

- Verbal bullying may include repeated name calling done in a systematic way; in front of peers, but usually away from adults.
- Social/relational bullying happens when one person is removed from a friend group or intentionally excluded. Teens might call this ghosting, while school aged kids may refer to it as “being left out.”
- Cyber bullying has become one of the most persistent and difficult to address forms of bullying seen today. It may include removing a child/teen from group chats, spreading rumors/gossip via social media, or sending compromising photos via text or social media. (To be very clear, sending photos showing areas a bathing suit should cover is the distribution of child pornography. This is a felony no matter who sent the photo or their age.)
- Physical bullying tends to be harder for adults to see than a true assault. An example would be tripping someone every time they walk by. Physical bullying may lean towards assault, depending on the situation and the law in your area.

BULLYING IS NOT:

- One-time episodes of social rejection.
- One-time acts of aggression
- Random acts of nastiness.
- Disagreements
- Refusing to share a toy

When a child returns to school or their local community after a burn injury, their peers may avoid them simply because they don't know what to say.

This feels really bad, but is different than bullying. Physical assaults should be addressed immediately and in that very specific context.

BUILDING EMOTIONAL RESILIENCE

Brooks Gibbs, an award-winning educator, talks about building emotional resilience so kids are less likely to become victims of bullying. The list below will refer to the burn-injured child, but this could also affect siblings or children of adult burn survivors.

As adults, there are a few things we can do to help build a child's emotional resilience:

1. Work on rehearsing your responses.

Help your child/teen memorize three sentences (what happened, how you're doing and a closer) to use whenever someone outside the close family/friend circle asks about the burn injured person's scars or injury. A memorized response helps a burn survivor be confident, clear, and brief. Owning your response and your story helps build emotional resiliency. Ideally, this is mastered prior to leaving the hospital. Make a game of practicing this response, so it comes naturally to your child.

2. Practice confident body language

Confident body language is a deterrent to bullies. To help burn survivors remember how to show confidence, Phoenix Society created a tool called STEPS:

S: Self-talk

T: Tone of Voice

E: Eye Contact

P: Posture

S: Smile

3. Use a school reentry program to help prevent bullying

Talk to your child/teen about what they want classmates to know and make a plan with their school. Get hospital staff involved (maybe a child life specialist, a nurse, a social worker). Phoenix Society offers a school reentry program called Journey Back, and many burn centers also have solid programs.

4. Find allies in the burn community

A Phoenix SOAR Peer Supporter may be able to give firsthand accounts of what helped when they went back to school and the community. Ask if there is a Phoenix SOAR volunteer who might be a good fit. (If you'd like to connect with another parent of a burn injured child, peer support is an option for you too.)

5. Plan how to avoid the bully or the situation where bullying occurs

Take the time to understand when the bullying happens. Transitions are common times for this behavior, as there tends to be enough commotion to create a shield for the behavior to occur. Set up a plan for a friend to meet your child at the start of the transition. Some schools have peer ambassador programs; this is a great situation for a peer ambassador.

6. Identify an adult ally

Make sure your child/teen has clear guidelines about when and how they can contact their adult ally. Do they need to call to touch base? Do they need a safe place to eat lunch?

7. Role play

No new skill just comes naturally. Help kids gain confidence by practicing making eye contact, walking with confidence, or walking away from bad behavior.

8. Validate, validate, validate

Kids' feelings can grow bigger than their bodies, and they don't always have the vocabulary to describe them. As adults, we often feel like we need to have answers or protect our children at all cost. Letting a child/teen know their feelings are normal can be enough to give them the strength to move through the next day.

9. Check in

Ask "How are things going with...," "Did you try what we practiced last night," or "Did it work to...?" This lets your child/teen know you didn't forget about them and their safety is important to you, and you can adjust plans as needed.

10. Role model good behavior with your friends

Make sure your child/teen sees you being a good friend, avoiding gossip, being inclusive, and speaking to people with kindness. This sends a message about how they should be treated and how they should treat others.

11. Teach about bystander behavior

It's okay to reach out to the parents of your child's friends (maybe not your teen J) to say something like: "Hey, I'm sure you aren't aware of this, but John is being bullied by a group on the playground. Could you ask your son to go stand by him if he notices anything?" Kids are egocentric and aren't always aware when their friends are in a hard spot, but they tend to respond well to simple suggestions.

12. Teach techniques to respond to bullying

"Fogging" acknowledges that what the bully says may be true without getting defensive or upset.

Bully: "That scar on your back is nasty, don't get near me."

Target: "That might be true, I guess everyone gets an opinion."

Sarcasm is another technique:

Bully: "Dude, you must be pretty stupid to get burned by hot water."

Target: "Well, if it makes you feel better to tease me for a horrible accident, I guess go ahead." (Maybe with a little side smile.)

13. Get your child/teen involved in positive activities

School clubs, team sports, and scouting all tend to have adult supervision and may introduce your child/teen to a different group. You should also explore burn survivor and age-specific activities like burn camp, the Phoenix UBelong Program, and other activities that may be available at your burn center. These settings are opportunities for natural peer support, and they often teach skills for managing bullies. Knowing you're not alone is a huge part of building emotional resiliency. Help them find their community.

14. Let them know it's okay to ask for help

You may need to seek out help and guidance too; just be sure to tell your child/teen before you disclose their personal struggle with anyone.

15. Reach out for resources where the bullying is happening

Schools, religious organizations, and clubs all have adult leaders available to intervene. If you don't get the help you need, go up the ladder.

16. Nurture a growth mindset

Children/teens who believe that people can change (eg, bullies do not necessarily become lifetime bullies and targets will not always be targeted) tend to show resilience when things get tough. Remind them of all the hard things they did to recover from their burn and that they can do this too.

17. Build their problem-solving tool box

We can learn from our past behaviors. Ask them to think of a time when they were in a tough situation. What did they do to help themselves? What did they do in the hospital? What would (insert someone they admire) do in this situation?

18. Be aware of the language you use

What we say to ourselves matters. If we talk about our children/teens as victims (of bullying, of their burn, of their circumstance) they'll begin to absorb that language as truth.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

www.kidpower.org

<http://www.ncab.org.au>

www.kenrigby.net

www.brooksgibbs.com

www.phoenix-society.org

Kristen Quinn has worked in burn care at the University of Utah Health Burn Center for the past 26 years; her roles have included child life specialist, clinical mental health counselor, and psychosocial program coordinator. She helped to develop the Phoenix UBelong program and has since served as teen group leader, large group leader, and mental health team member. Through all of her work, her greatest passion has been burn camp programming that builds resilient burn survivors and connects a community.