

Think back and you probably remember some of the cruel nicknames from your own childhood: "four-eyed Freddie," "stuttering Sammy," "metal-mouth Melanie."

Or maybe you were one of them -- one of the kids always picked last for dodge ball, one of the kids who just never quite fit in and who usually wound up sitting next to the teacher at lunch to escape taunting and tormenting from classmates.

I can still remember the shame and humiliation I felt when some of the kids in grade school routinely called me "football head." It would happen whenever my mom fixed my hair a certain way -- pulled up at the crown and fastened in double ball, glass barrettes. I would hear those two words and in one instant become a shrinking violet, wishing I could somehow just melt into my desk and disappear.

While many generations have viewed this phenomenon of social cruelty as a childhood rite of passage, [research](#) has shown the early isolation some children experience can follow them throughout their academic careers, sometimes leading to depression, low self-esteem and even violence.

As early as four or five years of age, children learn to use name-calling or teasing as a form of social power. Although any child can fall prey to this form of aggression, it is especially common for kids who seem "different" than others: the girl with glasses, the boy who speaks with a lisp, the boy in a wheelchair, the student from another country.

With a new school year unfolding, have you discussed the importance of embracing rather than ostracizing peers who seem "different"? Have you and your child talked about ways to handle ridicule or ostracism?

If back-to-school time at your house is anything like mine, chances are you've been way too caught up in the whirlwind of school supply shopping, open houses, soccer schedules and "summer's over" bedtime battles to give social cruelty much thought.

But experts say such a discussion should fall high on every parent's to-do list.

"Early on, parents have to work at creating open communication with their kids about what's going on in school everyday," said Wendy Craig, a psychology professor and researcher on bullying at Queens University in Kingston, Ontario.

"Creating an atmosphere of open communication is important because many times kids are reluctant or embarrassed to talk about being teased or bullied."

Craig says there are a number of ways parents and caregivers can help take the sting out of social cruelty -- for those on the giving and the receiving ends. Here are a few suggestions:

If you suspect your child is being teased or bullied:

- **Look for the signs:** Keep an eye out for reluctance to go to school; silence about what's happening at school; frequently lost objects or possessions; a frequent "everybody's picking on me" attitude; low self-esteem.
- **Ask open-ended questions:** Show interest by asking questions less likely to be answered with a brief yes or no. Don't just ask, "How was your day?" Try asking, "What kinds of things did you do at recess today?" or "What happened at lunchtime today?"
- **Share your experiences:** Tell your child about your own childhood experiences with being teased or bullied. Talk about how it made you feel and how you handled it.

- **Respect where the child is:** Parents often want to act immediately by calling the teacher or a school administrator. This can sometimes make the situation more difficult for the child who is being teased or bullied. If your child asks you not to do anything about it, try to respect this wish and work instead on making her feel empowered enough to try handling the situation on her own.
- **Try role-playing:** Reenact the bullying or teasing and help your child practice non-aggressive ways to handle it. Brainstorm about witty or humorous comebacks. Teach your child preventative tactics such as reporting aggressive, abusive behavior and staying near friends or adult supervisors.

If you suspect your child is the aggressor:

- **Be a good role model:** Be aware of your own aggressive behavior and be a positive role model. Watch the fights over parking spaces at the grocery store and keep a handle on your aggression at sporting events.
- **Reevaluate discipline techniques:** Children who are bullies require discipline that is non-violent and logically handed out. As with any child, never discipline out of anger.
- **Identify the triggers:** Know what pushes your child's buttons and when he is most likely to become aggressive. Role play and suggest ways your child can respond to these situations assertively, not aggressively. Validate and reward assertive versus aggressive behavior.
- **Suggest ways to join in with others:** Provide opportunities for your child to be of service to others -- reading to a younger child, helping out at a soup kitchen, making cards for nursing home residents. These activities can help your child feel better about herself, making her less likely to bully.

Above all, parents should know that the old "sticks and stones" adage doesn't tell the whole truth. Words may not break bones, but they can break a child's spirit and self-esteem.

Granted, I don't think I harbor any long-term emotional trauma about the taunting I experienced as a child (well, besides a complex about the shape of my head). But, I was fortunate enough to have a family that reinforced positive self-esteem and made it easy for me to discuss what occurred at school each day. The only thing I *didn't* have was a mom who listened when I begged her to fix my hair a different way!

>> Try this activity with the child in your life

[A New Friend](#) is personalized storybook and coloring book featuring your child as the main character. A new student arrives in class one day. Will your child welcome her? Use this story to explore with children how we make friends, even with those who may seem in many ways unlike us. (Ages 4-7)

>> Give this activity to your child's school

In [A Contract on Bullying](#), a Minnesota teacher challenges her students to face up to verbal and physical harassment.

*Dana Williams is a staff writer with Tolerance.org.
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