

Teach Carefully

How Understanding Child Development
Can Help Prevent Violence



This booklet focuses on child development from birth to age 8 years.

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Teach Carefully

How Understanding Child Development Can Help Prevent Violence

All families want the best for their children to help them grow in a way that improves their chances for a safe and productive future. Learning about child development helps parents, teachers, and other caregivers do a better job. It helps them to respond more appropriately to children's behaviors, to teach children age-appropriate ways to deal with conflicts and anger, and even to protect young children from getting involved in violence.

What is "child development?"

Child development describes the series of predictable changes and learning that typically occur while children are growing. These changes occur in different domains, including the:

Physical—changes in the appearance, proportions, and functioning of the child's body;

Cognitive—changes in how the child thinks, remembers, reasons, and understands;

Social—changes in how the child relates to other people; and

Emotional—changes in how the child feels and expresses the feelings.

Child development also describes the reasons for these changes and factors such as culture, socioeconomic status, and parenting style that influence the process, supporting or limiting development.

How can understanding child development help prevent violence?

During their early years, young children learn most of what they know about the world from adults who spend the most time with them—usually family members and others who take care of them. Adults' words and actions have great influence on children's behaviors. When interacting with a child, adults teach them directly, by telling and showing, and indirectly, by providing a model for how to behave. Therefore, to decide on a fitting response to the child's behavior in any given situation and to teach the right lesson, adults need to base their own behavior

on knowledge about what the child can understand, learn, and do at different ages and points in his or her development.

Remember...

Knowing what to expect at different ages and stages in a child's growth helps adults understand a child's behavior, but that doesn't mean that it's easy to respond appropriately. It takes time for children to learn emotional control, sharing, getting along with others, and self-discipline. Children learn those skills gradually—only when their physical, cognitive, social, and emotional capacities are mature enough, and only if caring adults teach them.

If adults know a child's characteristics and needs at different ages, they will:

- Better understand the reasons for the child's behavior
- Have more realistic expectations and be less likely to become frustrated, worried, or angry about the child's behavior
- Not ask the child to do something that he or she cannot do
- Respond to and influence the child's behavior in ways that are appropriate to the individual child's age and developmental level
- Avoid harmful physical and emotional actions that might occur when they, as adults, become angry or frustrated with a child's difficult behavior
- Help the child meet his or her basic needs and have a healthy life protected from involvement in negative situations.

Children need to:

- Develop a strong, stable relationship with their primary caregivers;
- Feel safe, loved, and accepted;
- Develop a sense of trust that their physical needs will be met;
- Have adults who are positive role models show them how to get along with others.

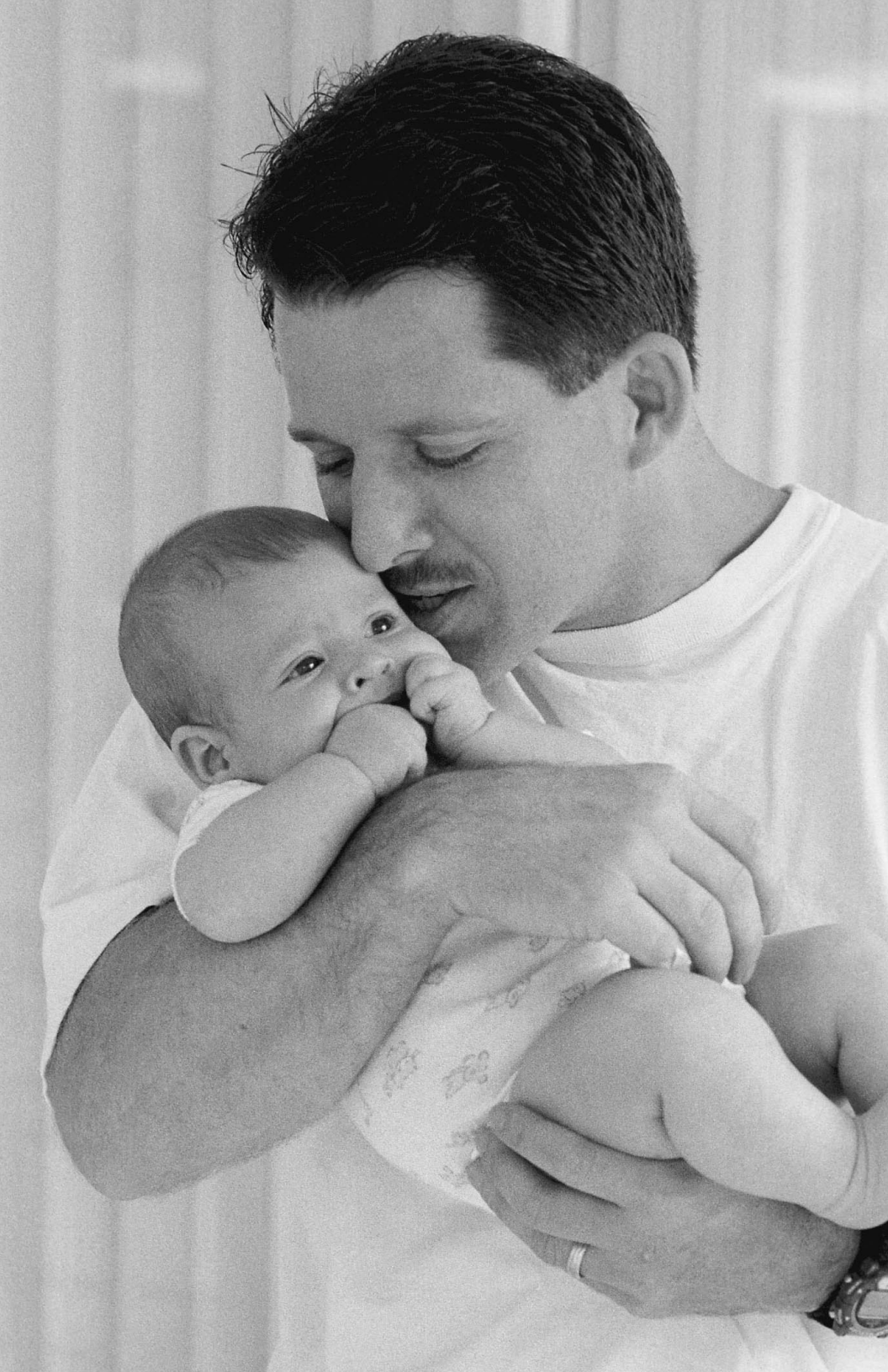
This booklet is designed to help adults understand their children's behavior and respond appropriately. To that end, it presents:

Scenarios illustrating problem behaviors that parents and caregivers might face with children of different ages;

Discussions of the underlying problems, taking into account the children's ages and developmental stages; and

Suggestions on how adults can appropriately respond to the problem behaviors.





Scenario #1: A CRYING BABY

Understanding Behaviors of 0- to 18-Month-Old Children

Small babies need constant care and often try our patience, as we see in the following scenario described by a new mother.

I CAN'T STAND THE CRYING!

I've had it! My 4-month-old baby just won't stop crying. I'm exhausted—I haven't had a full night's sleep for months, and here it goes again: Another night of horror—a screaming baby and no sleep! I can't stand the crying!

Why is this happening?

- The baby is crying to tell us that something is wrong and that he needs our help.
- **Babies do not cry to annoy us.** Infants have no other way to communicate distress when they are hungry or sick, have a dirty diaper or an upset stomach, or just can't calm down.
- A baby will continue to cry until someone takes away the discomfort or until he or she is just too exhausted to stay awake.
- Some babies cry a lot, while others hardly cry at all. This is usually a matter of the baby's temperament or personality.

What can children understand and do at this age?

In their earliest months, babies cannot control their actions, and they do not understand the cause and effect of their behavior.

- Babies live in a world of the here and now. The youngest babies are not very good at remembering past events, but they quickly learn to recognize the adults who comfort them, make them feel better, and make their surroundings interesting.
- Babies' ability to remember improves rapidly, however. By 6 to 8 months, they can remember people and objects that are not present. By the second year, they can remember events for a long time.
- Babies form strong bonds with the people who spend the most time caring for them. By about 6 to 9 months old, a baby feels safe when these people are around and may become sad or scared if he or she can't spot at least one familiar person nearby.
- Early in their lives, babies are able to imitate what they see—imitation is a primary learning tool for them. By playing and interacting with others, babies learn language, develop their exploration and thinking skills, and learn to enjoy other people.

- Babies can also sense and react to the emotional expressions of people close to them. When their parents and others who care for them are happy, babies relax and show they, too, are content; when the adults around them are angry or upset, babies become distressed.

How can adults respond to the situation described here?

If a child is distressed, our role is to find positive ways to soothe the child's distress and provide comfort. What can we do to calm a crying baby?

- **Check for the obvious causes** of an infant's crying and act to eliminate them.
- **Comfort the baby—this will not spoil the child.** When babies cry, they need warm and gentle responses to feel secure and safe. Try rocking, walking, bundling, snuggling, talking softly, singing, or massaging the little one. Sometimes a walk outside, with fresh air and a change of scenery, helps to calm the infant.
- **Don't punish a crying infant.** When we understand crying as a distress signal, it is easier to be patient and to realize that something is wrong, but the baby cannot tell us what it is. Harsh responses will startle and frighten the baby, making the problem worse.
- **Never shake a baby—**it can cause brain damage, even death—and hitting a baby can result in serious injury.
- **Watch for patterns.** Some infants will have a crying spell, for no apparent reason, at about the same time every evening. Try to figure out the source of the stress and do what you can ahead of time to alleviate some of it. Try some changes, such as walking outside with the baby or having some music in the room.
- **Know your baby's style.** Some babies need quiet, dark places to calm down and sleep; others can settle down and sleep in the midst of a crowd. You will gradually get to

Remember...

Every time we comfort a distressed baby, the baby gains trust in parents and caregivers. This trust forms the foundation for later relationships with people as the child moves into the larger world.

know your baby's individual style and keep it in mind when you put him or her to bed.

What if nothing works?

- **Call another adult.** If it is possible, call another adult to come over and provide some relief, especially if you have more than one child. This person could either help in trying to calm the baby or simply be there to listen and support you. In some cases, this approach can prevent a tired and upset caregiver from causing unintended harm to the child.
- **Leave the baby alone.** As a last resort, if you are completely exhausted and baffled, leave the baby safely in bed or secured in an infant safety seat, then dim the lights, close the door, and collapse. This course of action avoids exploding in anger and causing harm, and the baby will eventually become too exhausted to stay awake.



Scenario #2: A Toddler in a Grocery Store

Understanding Behaviors of 18- to 36-Month-Old Children

Anyone who has spent time caring for a toddler will recognize the following scenario described by a frustrated dad.

A PUBLIC DISASTER!

Why does it happen in public? My 2-year-old son picked a bad time to throw a fit. As we walked down an aisle in the drugstore, he grabbed a box of candy. I told him that he couldn't have candy now and that if he wants something in a store, he has to ask. Instead of obeying me when I told him to put it back, he started crying, screaming, and hitting me, then fell on the floor in a full-blown tantrum!! I was angry and embarrassed, and I didn't know what to do. I hate feeling that a 2-year-old has so much power!

Why is this happening?

- The child in our example is doing a very basic type of problem solving—he sees what he wants and goes for it! When the caregiver gets in his way, he is angry, and his intense feelings take over.
- Toddlers think they are the center of the world but can't yet control their emotions. When their needs are not met, sometimes toddlers get so frustrated that they can't think of anything else to do but lash out physically at whoever is closest to them at the time. They often resort to tantrums to express their feelings.
- Toddlers are beginning to develop a sense of their own power and regularly test the limits of this power. Sometimes children do this by saying “no” to just about everything that anyone says to them; sometimes they take action to get what they want—like the boy who grabbed the candy did.
- Toddlers are learning to use words to tell others what they want, but these new skills may not be well developed. Many people, including other toddlers, may not understand what a child is trying to say. When they are not understood, toddlers may become upset and angry.

What can children understand and do at this age?

- Toddlers think they are the center of the world and expect the world to turn around them. They also have strong notions of territory: “This is mine!” is their common theme.

- Toddlers understand that they are separate from other people and can act on their own; they develop a strong sense of self, which means they say “no” frequently.
- Toddlers are like sponges, learning by imitating behaviors they see and words they hear.
- Toddlers often have tantrums, simply because they don’t have much emotional control and are just beginning to use words to express feelings.
- Toddlers have a vague notion of time. They can remember past events and understand simple problems, but they don’t have a clear sense of time. Words like “today,” “tomorrow,” and “yesterday” do not have much meaning to them.
- Toddlers are learning to measure their behaviors against the expectations of others, and there is a growing acceptance of adults’ standards.

How can adults respond to the situation described here?

- Regardless of our feelings, we need to do several things when a child has a tantrum: (1) Stay calm; (2) remember that such behavior is common for children of this age; (3) without giving in to his demands, help the child settle down; (4) show the child that a tantrum won’t get what he or she wants; and (5) show him a better way to get what he wants.
- **Set an example.** If we want to teach our children how to solve problems in positive ways and keep their self-control, we must show them how it’s done.
- **Use a few gentle words.** In a tense situation, sometimes a few gentle words may be enough to calm or distract a child. But don’t try to talk to him in the middle of a tantrum. Don’t demand that a child stop crying when he is very upset. He will usually do the opposite. The best thing to do is to let the child work through the tantrum, giving him as little of your attention as is absolutely necessary or ignoring the tantrum.
- **Take the child to a quiet place.** If words don’t work, go to a quiet place and wait for the storm to pass. Once the crying stops, and he’s a bit calmer, talk in a calm voice with the toddler about what happened. Using simple words, explain what he did and how you expect him to behave.
- **Shift the toddler’s attention.** Distraction often works when tantrums occur at this age. Try shifting attention to something else, such as a simple game or an interesting object. Asking the child a question about something completely unrelated to the situation, perhaps referring to an animal or a cartoon character, may get his or her young mind to forget (even briefly) what is upsetting him or her.

- **Show you still love the child.** Whenever your child's behavior is unacceptable, be clear that you're upset about what he is doing, not who he is. There's a big difference between saying "You must stop grabbing things from other children," and "You are such a troublemaker!" Children need to know that we still love them, no matter what they do, and, because we love them, we want them to learn how to get along in the world.
- **Stand firm.** Children have good memory for times like this, and if we give in, our children will learn that all they have to do is scream loud and long enough to wear us out and get what they want. Never reward a tantrum.

How should adults respond to being hit by a child?

- **Stay calm** and firmly state that you will not tolerate the behavior. Say, "In our family we don't hit people."
- **Do not use physical punishment (hitting, pushing, shaking, pulling, etc.) when you are angry or frustrated with a child's behavior.** This response could hurt the child more than you intend and teach the wrong lesson: We don't want our children to learn that it's okay to hit when one is angry or frustrated. Physical punishment "teaches" that it is okay to hurt someone whom you love in order to control that person's behavior.

What can adults do to prevent this problem in the future?

- When you must go into situations where your child's behavior might be a problem, make the trip short and never go when the child is tired or hungry.
- Avoid bringing a toddler into tempting situations, such as the candy aisle of a drugstore, when you know he may want something you don't want him to have just then.
- Be sure to have toys and treats available when you go on outings. If your child becomes fussy, offering a toy or treat usually works for short periods of time.
- Whenever you can, help your child practice polite ways to ask for things he or she wants.
- Regularly let your child choose between objects or activities that are permissible (for example, between having a banana or apple for a snack or playing with toys inside or taking a walk outside before naptime). The child gets to make decisions, and you show that you respect his choice. Then, giving him such a choice when he wants something in a store can often prevent the kind of scene described in our drugstore tantrum example.
- As children get older, you can ask them to be your helper and get some things off the shelves at the store.



Scenario #3: A Sneak Attack

Understanding Behaviors of 3- to 5-Year-Old Children

Everything that adults have done to this point has laid the foundation for appropriate behaviors, but there's still more work ahead. The following example describes a situation you might encounter if you care for a preschooler.

A SNEAK ATTACK!

It's been one of those days. I hoped that a visit with my friend and her daughter would brighten things up, but... The girls were happy to see each other, and we managed to get them settled at play so that we could grab a few moments to talk. Everything seemed to go smoothly until my friend's daughter Emma started screaming. When I turned around, my 4-year-old daughter Sally was on top of her friend yanking her hair. Emma was screaming and pointing to a broken doll on the floor.

Why is this happening?

- Some preschoolers are still not good at controlling their emotions or at solving problems by using words, especially when they are angry or frustrated.
- Sharing toys is hard for many preschoolers.
- Children in this age group want to control the people and things in their lives. They often want to make most of the decisions and direct how things should go. "Give it to me!" or "I want this!" are common demands from preschoolers.

What can children do and understand at this age?

- Preschoolers understand the basics of acceptable and unacceptable ways of behaving, but they need consistent, positive support and role models delivering the message that hurting someone else is wrong.
- Preschoolers begin to read other people's emotions. They can tell when another child is upset and when an adult is angry.
- Preschoolers have a hard time understanding that other people have thoughts and ideas that differ from theirs. While they are not quite so self-centered as toddlers, the 3- to 5-year-olds still have a sense that they are the center of the world.

- Preschoolers learn how to get along with others through play with other children; peers become very important to them. They learn about sharing toys, taking turns, and solving conflicts. Controlling their emotions, however, is still a challenge for many preschoolers.
- By the end of this period, preschoolers start to be able to anticipate the consequences of their actions and to cooperate and play with others. They can understand the power of rejecting others and being rejected.
- Preschoolers' language and imagination develop during this period, but they still understand best when things are concrete and visible.

How can adults respond to the situation described here?

It is upsetting when our child hurts another child, but it is important to control our emotions, because children look to us for examples of how to behave in difficult or confusing situations.

- Adults need to step in to stop the fighting, help settle the problem, and provide lessons in how to treat others.
- If your child has hurt another, go first to the child who is injured. In a quiet voice, comfort the child and see if her injuries are serious. Let your child see that the one who is hurt gets the attention.
- Consider giving the aggressive child a "time out" to calm down by having her sit quietly in a safe spot. Time should be short—no more than a minute for each year of the child's age.
- When both children are calm, talk with them about what happened and how things could have been handled differently. Help the children express their feelings with words and come up with solutions like taking turns, playing with other toys, spending some time playing apart, or moving to another activity.
- Tell the children that it is NOT okay to hurt someone.
- Show love for the children even if you disapprove of their behavior. Be on the look out for problems—if children are having trouble sharing, help them find a solution, and praise them if they manage to play together peaceably.

What can adults do to avoid this situation in the future?

Children's play is important. Playtime offers chances for learning how to get along with others, but sometimes it is the setting for conflict between children.

- In advance, before your preschooler becomes involved with other children in a play situation, set up a few different activities and toys that the children will enjoy, so they can move from one kind of play to another.
- Keep in mind that commonly at this age period, especially with the younger ones, two or more children may be playing in a room, but each is engaged in his or her own activity, aware of but separate from the others.
- In simple language, discuss the concept of sharing with your child. If another child will be visiting your home, be sure that your child understands that when the visitor leaves, your child's toys will be left safe at home.
- If there are toys that your child absolutely does not want to share, those toys should be put away.
- Look for "teachable moments" in everyday situations— at home, in the neighborhood, while shopping—to teach and show children how to express feelings with words, to think about different ways to solve problems, and to resolve conflicts.



Scenario #4: Bullying at School

Understanding Behaviors of 6- to 8-Year-Old Children

During this period, children improve all of their skills, and they begin to take more responsibility for themselves. Showing more independence, they move out with their friends into the school and community. The going can be rough, however, as in this example.

WHEN SCHOOL IS NO FUN!

I don't know when it all started, but lately Melissa does not want to go to school anymore. She is 8, overweight, and shy. Recently she started to complain that kids at school have been tormenting her, making fun of her, and calling her names.

Why is this happening?

- Bullies are picking on Melissa. Bullying occurs when individuals use power to physically, verbally, or psychologically hurt someone who is weaker, smaller, or sensitive in a specific way that the bullies understand.
- Children who bully may feel important, and bullying allows them to get what they want, when they want. This sense of power may be especially important for a child who otherwise might feel neglected or unloved. Bullying can also make a child popular.
- Sometimes bullies are encouraged in their aggressive behavior by things they see and hear at home. Lessons learned at home about power and aggression often transfer to school and elsewhere.

What can children understand and do at this age?

Children ages 6 to 8 generally have these characteristics:

- They understand what is expected of them and also what they can "get away with" in certain circumstances.
- They start to really understand other people's feelings and viewpoints.
- They can think about several aspects of a situation at the same time and plan ahead to solve problems and get what they want.
- They can learn social rules, understand right and wrong, and apply the rules to their own activities.
- They become more and more responsible without constant adult supervision.

- With an ever-increasing vocabulary, they speak with more precision and understand the meaning and power of words.
- They place a high premium on friendships, belonging, and acceptance by peers; they no longer look only to adults for gratification.
- They have significant thinking and social skills along with increasing control over their emotions. They usually understand what bullying does to other people.
- They experience a changing relationship with their parents as they grow and become more responsible and independent. Parents gradually need to share their control over their children's lives with the children themselves.

How can adults respond to bullying?

Understand what bullying is...

- Bullying is the frequent, regular use of physical assaults, threats, teasing, belittling, or other verbal and psychological attacks to intentionally harm another person, physically or psychologically. It occurs when there is a power differential: Someone who is stronger, older, or more popular victimizes someone who is weaker, younger, helpless, or socially isolated.
- Bullying occurs usually on the playground, in school hallways, in neighborhood hangouts, or in other settings where there is little or no adult supervision.
- Boys are more likely to threaten or use physical force, and girls often use more subtle ways, such as verbal and psychological abuse, for example, spreading rumors or excluding others.
- Victims of bullying may experience loss of self-esteem, anxiety, distress, or shame or may view themselves as failures or unattractive; some develop symptoms like headaches or stomach pains. In adulthood, former victims tend to be depressed and have low self-esteem.
- Children who are more likely to bully others may be impulsive, hotheaded, and dominant. Frequently they have experienced little parental involvement and/or may have had overly permissive or harsh disciplinary parenting.
- Exposure to other bullies, lack of supervision at school, indifferent teachers, and aggressive peers also can influence a child to become a bully.

Help children and schools to change the situation.

Following are some ideas of what families can do.

If your child is the bully, take it seriously...

- If the school contacts you, talk to the teachers, counselors, or the principal to find out why and where bullying is happening and what the school is doing to stop the behavior. Participate in the solution.
- Your goals are twofold: (1) Stop the aggressive behavior and (2) help your child to experience power and leadership in positive, helpful, and caring ways.
- Talk to your child and try to understand why he or she needs to mistreat someone else to feel powerful. If the behavior is part of a complicated set of emotional problems, consider professional counseling for the child.
- Make it clear that hurting others, with actions or words, is unacceptable.
- Establish consequences for bullying without acting like a bully yourself. The child who bullies should know that he or she will lose certain privileges or face other consequences for teasing, threatening, and attacking others or for excluding specific people from social interactions.
- Understand that bullies are capable of change, especially at this young age. Through caring, consistent involvement and modeling good behavior, adults can turn a bully's life around and help the children redirect his or her leadership and energy to more constructive paths.
- If you witness and break up a bullying incident, take time to see that the victim is not hurt. Give more attention to the victim than to the child who bullied.

If your child is a victim of bullying, be supportive...

- Help your child to express her or his feelings about the situation through thoughtful, loving conversations. Try to understand what is going on and why.
- Teach your child to ask for help. A child should not be afraid to ask an adult for help when bullies threaten him or her.
- Encourage your child to not fight back.
- Teach your child ways to stay calm when bullies come around.
- Talk with your child's teacher, counselor, or principal about the incidents and ask for their help.

If your child witnesses bullying, help him or her take action...

- Tell your child to tell an adult when someone is being bullied. Let the child know that it takes courage and understanding to go for help.
- Tell your child to never encourage a bully and to try to speak up when bullying occurs. If no one says anything, a bully may view that silence as approval of his behavior.
- Encourage your child to be kind to victims of bullying.

How can adults prevent bullying?

- Set an example by modeling respectful, nonviolent behaviors at home.
- Encourage local schools to implement research-based, tested bullying prevention programs.
 - Get involved in the school's existing efforts on prevention of bullying.
 - Seek consultation from psychologists or other mental health professionals to address behavioral problems or to help develop programs that build a respectful, safe environment for children.

Remember...

Raising a child can be an exciting job that is easier when we understand our child's development. With such understanding, we can see more clearly what our children are doing, why they are doing it, and what they need to learn. We can respond better to their behavior. We can help them move along a pathway to a happy, safe, and healthy life.

This booklet was developed based on the draft by Debra J. Pepler, PhD, from the LaMarsh Center for Research on Violence and Conflict Resolution, York University, Toronto, Canada.

