

# Can you really teach a kid to become bullyproof?

By Beth J. Harpaz, Associated Press May 31st, 2012

NEW YORK (AP) - Teaching kids to become "bullyproof" is all the rage. Books, videos and websites promise to show parents how to protect their kids from being bullied; school districts are buying curricula with names like "Bully-Proofing Your School," a well-regarded program used in thousands of classrooms. Even martial arts programs are getting into the act: "Bullyproofing the world, one child at a time," is the motto for a jujitsu program called Gracie Bullyproof.

But can you really make a child invulnerable to getting picked on? And even if you could, should the burden really be on potential victims to learn these skills, rather than on punishing or reforming the bullies?

Parents and educators say when bullyproofing programs are done right, kids can be taught the social and emotional skills they need to avoid becoming victims. But bullyproofing is not just about getting bullies to move on to a different target. It's also about creating a culture of kindness, beginning in preschool, and encouraging kids to develop strong friendships that can prevent the social isolation sometimes caused by extreme bullying.

## WHO'S GOT YOUR BACK?

Bullies "sniff out kids who lack connections or who are isolated because of depression, mental health issues, disabilities or differences in size and shape," said Malcolm Smith, a family education and policy specialist at the University of New Hampshire who has been researching peer victimization for more than 30 years. "So if you're worried about your child being a victim, the best thing a parent can do from a very young age, starting in preschool, is ask, 'Who's got your back? When you're on the bus, when you're in the hall, who's got your back?' If they can't name someone, you should help them establish connections to their peers."

Smith, who is working on a program called "Courage to Care" that's being tested in three rural New Hampshire schools, cited an example of a new boy who was being pushed and shoved by other boys in the hallway. "We didn't know how to empower him," Smith said, until the staff noticed that he'd become friends with a girl. "This girl is sweet but really assertive. What are seventh grade boys more afraid of than anything? Girls! So having her walk down the hall with this boy was the immediate solution to ending the bullying."

Psychologist Joel Haber, a consultant on the recent documentary "Bully," says kids should also have "backup friends" outside school through sports, hobbies, summer camp or religious groups. "That's hugely important, especially as kids move from elementary to middle school."

## EMOTIONAL SKILLS

Haber says "most kids can learn skills to make themselves less likely to have the big reactions" that feed bullies.

"Let's say you're one of those kids who, when I make fun of your clothes, you get really angry and dramatic. If I taught you in a role-play situation as a parent or a therapist to react differently,

even if you felt upset inside, you would get a totally different reaction from the bully. And if you saw that kids wouldn't tease you, your confidence would go up," said Haber

One way parents can help is to normalize conversations about school social life so that kids are comfortable talking about it. Don't just ask "How was school today?" Ask, "Who'd you have lunch with, who'd you sit with, who'd you play with, what happens on the bus, do you ever notice kids getting teased or picked on or excluded?" advises Haber, who offers other bullyproofing tips and resources at [RespectU.com](http://RespectU.com) and is co-authored of a new book called "The Resilience Formula."

## BODY LANGUAGE

Bullies "feed on the body language of fear. It's a physical reaction – how the victim responds, how they hold their head and shoulders, the tone of voice," said Jim Bisenius, a therapist who has taught his "Bully-Proofing Youth" program in more than 400 schools in Ohio and elsewhere.

Teaching a kid to appear confident physically can sometimes be easier to teach than verbal skills, Bisenius said. "If a kid who's never been mean in his life tries to fake it, or tries to outdo a bully with a verbal comeback, the bully sees right through that."

Lisa Suhay, a mom in Norfolk, Va., said her 8-year-old son Quin was helped by Gracie Bullyproof, a martial arts program taught in 55 locations that combines verbal strategies with defensive jujitsu moves. Quin had been bullied so much on the playground that Suhay stopped taking him there. But she decided to give the park one last try after he completed the Gracie training.

No sooner did Quin begin playing on a pirate ship than a bigger boy knocked him down and ordered him to leave. But this time, as his mom watched in amazement, Quin grabbed the other kid around the waist "and landed on him like a big mattress, all while saying, 'That was an incredibly bad idea you just had. But I'm not afraid of you.'" The other boy swung again, and Quin took him down again, then asked, "Now do you want to play nice?" They played pirates for the rest of the afternoon.

"It's about respect and self-confidence," said Suhay. "You're not teaching them to beat up the bully. But they're not cowering. They make eye contact. They talk to the bully. So much of the time they avert the situation because the bully doesn't expect them to say, 'I'm not scared of you.'"

## HOW NOT TO RAISE A BULLY

The classic bully profile is a child who was neglected, abused, or raised in an authoritarian home where punishment was the norm. But lack of discipline is just as bad: Children who have no boundaries, who feel entitled to whatever they want, can also become bullies.

Smith worries that misguided efforts to boost kids' self-esteem have produced a "sense of entitlement that we've never seen before." He worries that we're raising "the meanest generation" and says schools and parents must create a culture where meanness is not tolerated. "Kindness, empathy, caring and giving – you can teach those things."

Haber says parents and schools can start in preschool years by discouraging hitting, pushing and teasing: "Ask, how would you feel if someone did that to you?"

Children can even be taught that being kind is fun. "Addict your child to kindness," said Smith. "There are releases in the brain that feed endorphins that are very positive when you act with kindness. Encourage your kids to go over to a kid who's alone and bring them in."

Some kids who bully need help learning to read social cues. "If I tease you and you cry, most kids will realize they crossed a line and will apologize, but if I'm a bully, I want more power, more status, and I see there's an opportunity to go after you," said Haber. "If you see your child bullying a child, the child not only has to apologize but do something nice, practice atonement. Being a bully is less exciting when you have other skills."

And beware the example you set when you treat a waitress or clerk rudely. "If you're the kind of person who is constantly criticizing, you're unconsciously role-modeling behaviors that kids will test out," Haber said.

## PROSPECTS FOR SUCCESS

Given what Smith calls "a history of failure" in reducing bullying, it's easy to be cynical about whether bullyproofing can work. At one time, bullies were seen as having low self-esteem; now they're seen as narcissists who think they're superior. Conflict resolution was big in the '90s, but that didn't work because bullies don't want to give up the power they have over their victims – even when they pretend to be conciliatory.

"They say what we want to hear. But they'll go back and do it again when nobody's watching," said Bisenius.

But experts are hopeful about this new generation of bullyproofing programs, which teach social and emotional skills while promoting a caring school culture. Susan Swearer Napolitano, a Nebraska-based psychologist and co-director of the Bullying Research Network, who recommends a half-dozen bullyproofing programs on her website [TargetBully.com](http://TargetBully.com), says "if these programs are implemented with fidelity and the messages are consistently communicated across a school community, then bullying prevention and intervention programs can help change the culture of bullying behaviors. However, ultimately it's about people treating each other with kindness and respect that will stop bullying."

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