



# Family Matters

## *Making Family Life Easier*

### **Peer Aggression**

Very often when we ask young people if they have been bullied, they will often talk about times when somebody pushed them, said something mean to them or maybe excluded them from an activity. What they are talking about here is very often not bullying but peer aggression, something which most young people will experience growing up.

Aggression can be defined as acts intended or perceived as intended to cause harm to a person and can happen in different ways; physical, verbal and social. Examples include hitting, kicking, pushing, tripping, shoving, stealing, destroying or messing with another person's property, name calling, mean-spirited remarks, taunting, insults, put downs based on race, gender or sexual orientation, intimidation or threats, whispering, eye-rolling, sighing, turning away when someone is talking to you, excluding people, group rejection, gossip, rumours, ignoring someone to punish, creating or joining cliques, threatening to end a friendship, public humiliation (pranks/nasty jokes) and the list goes on and on.

While it is not bullying, all forms of aggression are hurtful and harmful, impacting the social and emotional well-being of a child; low self-esteem, affects one's ability to form friendships and one's sense of belonging as well as having a significant impact on their academic life as children can find it difficult to concentrate and focus on their learning.

Peer aggression and bullying lie on a continuum and therefore aggression needs to be tackled before it escalates into bullying behaviour. Empowering young people from playschool to secondary school to deal with aggression and develop positive peer relationships is key. To do this we need to teach them assertiveness skills and build their self-esteem. When children feel good about themselves, they are less likely to be aggressive to other children and a child who is targeted is able to take better care of themselves and brush it off. Teaching assertiveness skills helps young people to stand up for themselves and get what they need, while at the same time respecting the rights of others.

Building self-esteem and teaching assertiveness skills is something we can do in our daily interactions with children by modelling the behaviours we want to teach. It is also about using teachable moments, for example, if your child comes home from school and is upset because her friends ignored her in the yard, you can listen and empathise with her feelings as well as helping her to figure out what she can do or say to the girls and then practice that with her, as the following example shows:



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P: something happened at school that upset you?

C: yeah, today at lunch Amy and Mia ignored me and wouldn't let me walk around with them.

P: That must have hurt your feelings

C: it did

P: sounds like you don't want to go to school tomorrow because you're worried they might do the same thing

C: yeah, every time I went up to them, they just turned their backs and walked away

P: oh, I'd feel terrible too if my friends did that.

C: I'm afraid they won't speak to me again and I won't know what to do.

P: so you're worried about what to do if they ignore you again?

C: yeah

P: How about we come up with some ideas now about what you could do?

C: okay

P: have you got any ideas of what you might do?

C: I could maybe talk to Amy and Mia and ask them why they aren't talking to me

P: You could do that and what do you think you might say?

C: I'm not sure..

P: Do you want us to practice together now what you might say?

C: okay

And so the parent could practice what her daughter might say as well as continue the conversation and come up with some other ideas in case talking to her friends didn't work.

These years are crucial for teaching young people skills for fostering cooperation, respect and effective conflict resolution strategies so they can create socially and emotionally safe environments for themselves.