

Ask BYFS

Adult Witness to Kids' Bullying

Parent Question: What should an adult do as witness to an incident of bullying, aggressive, or assaultive behavior between middle school kids?

As our children grow older, they let us know in various ways they need us less and less. They want us to drop them off away from peers watchful eyes; they think they can do most anything on their own without us; they want to stay out later and later. Being sensitive to their blossoming sense of independence can be a challenge while monitoring their physical and emotional safety.

When our kids were 2 years old and had trouble sharing toys with friends they were playing with or fighting about one thing or another, it was easy for us to be reminded of their young age and the need for us to 'civilize' their behavior. Teachable moments happened regularly, and we capitalized on them. In middle school, the teachable moments may occur further from our line of sight or outside of our homes but they still happen and we must be ready.

We will more likely see middle school youth in groups, maybe in our neighborhood or at the library or Town Common, in a local restaurant or store, walking along the Great Road or at Bedford Day. On occasion we may see inappropriate behavior and be uncertain how to respond, especially if we do not know any of the kids or have relationships with their parents. We may feel it is not our responsibility to intervene or be afraid that a parent might retaliate verbally or legally. But as adults we have a duty to ensure the physical and emotional safety of all our youth so we have to do something. Liability concerns should not govern our actions as long as we are acting in the interest of youth safety.

What we tell our kids to do in situations where they are witness to bullying, aggressive, or assaultive behavior can apply to us as adults as well. Better than doing nothing is at least getting help. That could mean engaging another nearby adult for assistance or even calling the school or police. Sometimes having adults just notice the behavior with a raised eyebrow or folded arms is enough to end it.

Of course an adult verbal intervention in a situation like this increases the likelihood of learning on the part of the youth and models bystander intervention that youth can then use in future situations where they might be uncomfortable or not know what to do. Depending on the type of behavior and our own respective comfort levels, our responses can distract and escalate in intensity:

- I lost my keys - could you help me find them?
- Hey, that doesn't look like fun for everyone. Maybe you can re-think that game?
- I want to play, too - I'll be on his/her (victim) side.
- That language/behavior is inappropriate - you need to stop or I will call the school or the police.

One good place to start is to ask our kids what kind of adult intervention might be helpful if a situation arose where a friend or class mate was being bullied. What would they do? What would they have us do, especially if we do not know any of the kids? Certainly ensuring safety is our primary goal, and our middle school kids still need our help, even if they don't think they do...

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