

How to talk to families about bullying

8 tips for addressing bullying in a way that strengthens connections between educators, coaches, and families

Families want to partner with schools to address bullying. The following 8 tips apply whether you're talking with the family of a child who is exhibiting bullying behavior, a family whose child is being bullied, or the family of a child who has witnessed bullying. They were developed in partnership with members of the Choose Kindness Project's Educator Advisory Group and are intended to help educators and coaches address bullying with students' families in a way that communicates care, affirms common ground, and paves a clear path forward.

“Keep it behavior-centered. Remember, it’s bad choices, not bad students.”

Martha Alba-Gonzalez
Teacher & Dual Immersion Coach
Long Beach Unified School District, CA

1 Meet in person.

Much of our communication is non-verbal. With this in mind, try to talk face-to-face. Ensure the conversation occurs apart from other families and students. This communicates your respect for the family, their child, and their privacy.

“Could we find 15 minutes to meet one day this week after dismissal?”

“Might you have time to talk just before practice this evening?”

2 Establish common ground.

Your common ground with families is your shared interest in the growth and success of their child. Naming that common ground can be a powerful way to establish a tone and expectation of partnership.

“It’s important to me that _ feels safe, comfortable, seen, and valued. I’m glad you’re here because I know that’s important to you too.”

“I care very much about _’s growth and success, not just as a player but also as a young person. I know you do too.”

All families

If the child is being bullied

If the child is exhibiting bullying behavior

3 Recount what you observed or what was reported to you.

Be as specific as possible while abiding by school-based expectations around student privacy. Focus on actions – what happened or what was overheard. Avoid generalizations, inferences, or judgments (e.g., do not call a child a “bully”). Stick to the facts.

“An assistant coach shared with me that they saw/overheard...”

“This morning, I saw/overheard...”

4 Ask for help and partnership.

Families want schools’ partnership in addressing bullying (2022 Choose Kindness Project Survey conducted by IPSOS). Explicitly asking for a family’s help in identifying root causes and paving the path forward makes it clear that you’re on the same team and both want to see their child be successful.

“I’m hoping we can partner to ensure _ feels supported, the bullying behavior stops, and harm is repaired.”

“I’m hoping we can work together to get to the root cause and figure out what _ needs here – I’d really like your help.”

“Sometimes it can help to ask for partnership earlier in the conversation too, just prior to recounting what you observed, and then reiterate it here. So it might sound like, ‘I wanted to ask for your help and partnership. This morning, I saw/overheard _. I’m hoping you’ll come alongside us to help get to the root cause.’”

Aaron Huff
Principal
Bosse High School, IN

5 Hold space for dialogue.

Avoid the temptation to jump directly to action steps. Instead, provide time for families to process, ask questions, and share additional information with you. Listen with intentionality, and prioritize ensuring they feel heard. This will allow you to move toward problem-solving together, as a team.

“Have you heard anything about this in your conversations with _?”

“This is probably a lot to take in. How is this landing on you?”

“Have you noticed any changes in _’s behavior at home?”

All families

If the child is being bullied

If the child is exhibiting bullying behavior

6 Mind your body language and tone.

Throughout, notice your own emotions, and be cognizant of what messages you may be conveying non-verbally. Do your best to adopt body language that is approachable (e.g., lean slightly forward, keep arms uncrossed, make eye contact) and a tone that is calm and caring.

“We need to keep in mind that children’s behaviors indicate unmet or unexpressed needs, not their potential.”

Willie Edward Taylor Carver
2022 State Teacher of the Year, Kentucky
Board Member, Kentucky Youth Law Project
Author, University Press of Kentucky

7 Establish clear next steps.

Come prepared with solutions, work with the family to ensure you are both clear on next steps at home and at school, and ensure next steps align with federal, state, and local (e.g., district) policies related to bullying. Discuss how harm will be repaired (e.g., repair of damaged property, letter of apology), and leverage resources to aid in resolution (e.g., counseling, peer-to-peer mediation, ongoing partnership with educators and counselors). For families of students exhibiting bullying behavior, determine concrete steps the school and family can take to identify and address root causes. For families of students being bullied, determine concrete steps the school and family can take to address the impact bullying may have had on the child and to prevent it from recurring.

“Let’s talk about next steps – what the policies say; what we can do to ensure _ feels safe and supported; actions we can take at home or at school to prevent this from recurring; and how we’ll follow up and check in with each other in the coming weeks.”

“Let’s talk about next steps – what the policies say; how _ can repair harm; actions we can take at home and at school to interrupt this behavior; and how we’ll follow up and check in with each other in the coming weeks.”

8 Follow up and check in.

After engaging with the family, document the conversation and complete all next steps. Check in with the family in the agreed-upon way to share updates, to learn how next steps are going at home, and to continue to support their child.

All families

If the child is being bullied

If the child is exhibiting bullying behavior

This resource was created in collaboration with members of The Choose Kindness Project’s Educator and Coach Toolkit Advisory Group: Martha Alba-Gonzalez, Willie Edward Taylor Carver, Priscilla A. Grijalva, Aaron Huff, and Alma Lopez.