

# The Parent Action Toolkit

Adapted from The Bully Action Guide: How to Help Your Child and Get Your School to Listen, by Dr. Edward F. Dragan, [www.thebullyactionguide.com](http://www.thebullyactionguide.com), [www.edmgt.com](http://www.edmgt.com)

*Dr. Dragan provides consultation and expert witness services to attorneys, parents and schools across the country and internationally on matters dealing with school bullying, school accidents, student supervision, sexual harassment and various other school liability issues. For more information regarding his practice please visit Education Management Consulting, LLC at [www.edmgt.com](http://www.edmgt.com).*

School should be a place where children feel safe and secure—a place where they can count on being treated with respect. The unfortunate reality is that many students are the targets of bullying, resulting in long-term academic, physical, and emotional consequences. Kids don't often go to adults when they are being bullied because they feel that most adults won't help. And when parents do realize that their child is the victim of bullying they don't know how to respond to it. They don't know how to effectively communicate with their child about bullying and they don't know how to effectively communicate with the school to end bullying. Parents often need tools to help.

It is my hope that the information shared here will help parents recognize bullying, effectively communicate with children about bullying and effectively communicate with the school to hold it accountable to end bullying. Thousands of parents have already applied the steps offered here and have made a positive impact in the way their school treats bullying.

**o How to Talk to Your Child**

**o How to Approach the School**

**o Next Steps**

The  
**BULLY**  
Project

# How to Talk to Your Child

As parents, it can be difficult to get your kids to talk about their fears and hurts – especially when they are being bullied. Younger children need your help articulating what's going on with them. Older children often keep their hardships to themselves out of a desire for independence or because they fear retaliation. By setting the right climate – listening, not lecturing – you can find out the facts and help put an end to the bullying.

The first hurdle in helping to put an end to bullying is to find out what's happening with your child. You need to ascertain the chain of events. Kids are often unwilling to tell their parents that they're being harassed, so as parents, we must be vigilant and sensitive to our children's moods.

Don't just dismiss what your child tells you about being called names on the playground as "kids being kids" or simply hope that it will blow over. It may be a symptom of a bigger problem. Changes in behavior or mood can be warning signs of a bullying problem. To unravel that, parents need to ask questions to get information but, at the same time, must create an atmosphere of trust by listening more than talking.

## How to Start the Talk

First, be matter-of-fact and de-emotionalize your encounters. To do otherwise will actually trigger the same feelings that the bully evoked in your child: fear, unhappiness, and sense of being overwhelmed by negativity.

When you communicate effectively with your child, it develops a foundation of trust because she will sense three things:

- 1. You are actively listening, which shows that her concerns are being heard.*
- 2. Her thoughts, ideas, and feelings matter.*
- 3. The message you are giving is clear and not punctuated with mixed signals.*

If you think your child is being bullied, try to talk with him about it. Some basic ideas to keep in mind:

- Stay simple.*
- Be brief.*
- Be positive.*
- Replay the message you heard from your child.*
- Make sure your child understands that he does not deserve to be bullied – nobody does.*
- Never encourage him to bully back.*

## Communicating with Young Children

A six-year-old child has a vocabulary of about five thousand words, while an adult's vocabulary is thirty thousand to sixty thousand words. At this age, a child doesn't have the skills to articulate her problem well. Nonverbal communication, then, becomes an important way of getting your child to tell you what's going on in her world.

Start out by putting your child at ease. Sit at your child's level and maintain eye contact. Ask simple questions that he can understand, using a gentle matter-of-fact tone of voice. Listen to what your child says and affirm that you hear him by nodding your head. And try to take note of how he feels when responding to your questions.

You want to know who did what and who was around to see what happened. Get times, dates, and places. Be as precise as you can. Here are some questions to ask:

- What kids were there?
- Was there a teacher who saw what happened?
- Who was the kid who called you names or hurt you?
- Whose class is he in?
- Where did this happen?
- When did it happen?
- What, exactly, did the kid say to you?
- What, exactly, did the kid do to you?
- Is this the only time this happened?
- What other times did it happen?
- Did this person do anything else to you?

You might find that it's hard for your child to talk and that he doesn't respond well to direct questioning. In that case, instead of asking him outright if he is being bullied, ask questions about his day, whom he likes best and least, and how he feels about certain classmates.

Listen to answers – don't judge or respond to any of them. Give your child the space to express herself and get it all out.

After hugs and encouragement, talk with your child about why some people are bullies. Decide what information you will share with your child about bullying, and share it at a level that she can understand. You can talk, for instance, about why some kids bully others: they may be angry about something else, they may not know how to get attention in a positive way, they may want to show off, or they may push your child's buttons to try to get a reaction.

Talk with your child about the ways to end the bullying. Talk about whom she can go to in the school to report bullying and who else in the school can help her.

## Communicating With Tweens

With tweens, don't assume that you're getting the whole story simply because your child begins to talk about bullying. Sometimes the worst is simply too much for her to acknowledge. It may take time and special effort – perhaps an afternoon spent together doing some favorite activity instead of a face-to-face talk over a table – to pry loose the whole truth.

Middle schoolers are willing to share their feelings with their parents. They want to be heard. By now, they have developed shared values with their friends and a sense of social justice. They understand right from wrong but they haven't yet learned to sort out the shades of gray. They are still malleable and are open to a parents' guidance.

Again, the trick is to ask questions, listen, and be nonjudgmental. Here are some questions to ask your middle school-age child about bullying:

- Who did you sit next to at lunch today?
- How was the bus ride home?
- I notice that you don't like going to school on Thursdays. What happens on that day that you don't like?
- Are there a lot of cliques at school? What do you think about the kids in these cliques?
- What do your teachers tell you about bullying in school?
- Are kids allowed to bully in school?
- Is there someone in school who makes you feel bad?
- Is there someone in your class who is physically hurting you?
- Who did you play (or "hang out") with today?
- What did you play (or "do") at recess?
- Did you like playing?
- Would you have liked to play with someone else or play different games?
- Is there anyone you don't like at school?
- Tell me why you don't like that person.
- Are you looking forward to going to school tomorrow?

Sometimes it will take more than one conversation in a nonthreatening environment to pry loose the truth from your child.

## Communicating With Teenagers

One of the reasons teenagers don't report bullying is humiliation. Older children report bullying less often than younger children because they are often embarrassed and fear retaliation.

As a parent and an adult, your response to stimuli tends to be more intellectual. But a teen's response is often more from the gut.

Research demonstrates what every parent can confirm: the teenage brain is not easily reckoned when it comes to communicating about bullying.

Things can often become worse when we, as adults, apply adult solutions to a teen's world. His world isn't the same, and we adults don't usually understand that. Encouraging your kid to buck up – “Stand up to that kid,” “You are bigger,” “Don't let him call you names” – is a product of an adult perspective. It's too simplistic, and it doesn't work for your child or any other child. Then, when it doesn't work – and it won't – he will feel even more defeated and blame himself for not being able to handle the situation. He doesn't have to handle it himself. Never communicate to your child that he is to blame for being a victim. In calm situations, teenagers can rationalize almost as well as adults. But stress seriously affects decision making.

Be careful in communicating with your teen. You want to develop a partnership with her. The way you talk with her can demonstrate to her that you have an ability to communicate effectively with the school to stop the bullying. If you can't effectively communicate with your child, she will reason that you can't possibly effectively communicate with her school.

Here are some questions that will shut down communication with your teen:

- “How was your day?” Teens don't welcome questions like “How was school?” or “How was the dance last night?” Don't expect to hear anything more than “Fine” in response. These are surefire questions to end a conversation before it begins!
- “Why don't you just tell that bully to leave you alone?” The teen brain doesn't know how to do this effectively. Your kid needs help with this. Teens need to be taught safe strategies to fend off bullies so that they're not the target of more bullying.
- “Why don't you just forget about it and let it go?” This isn't practical. A child bullied is a child hurt emotionally. His hurt is strong, and he feels it deeply. Remember, a teen isn't likely to come to you about being bullied because she is embarrassed and ashamed about it.

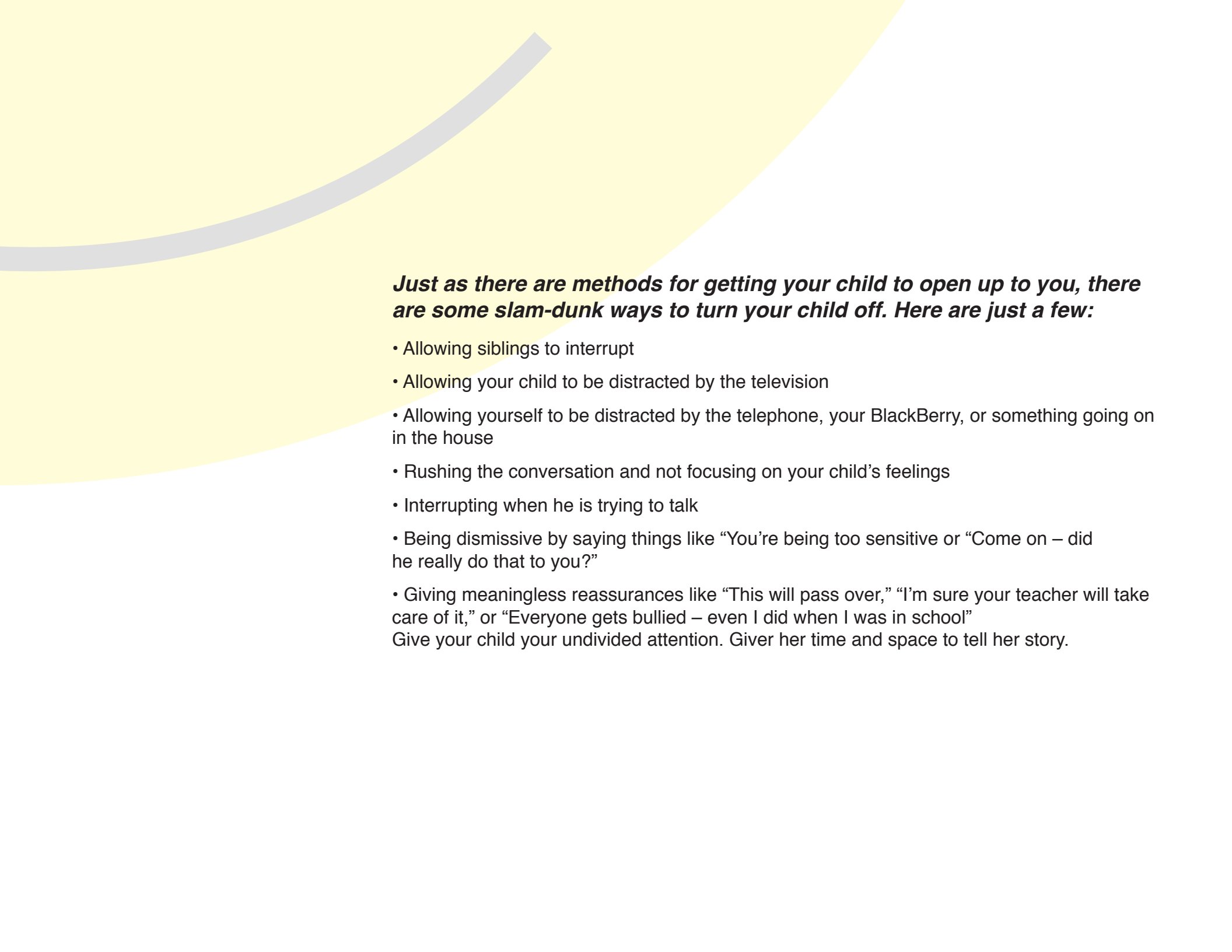
Instead, develop a partnership with your teenager through careful communication.

## Preparing Yourself

Stopping the outrage of bullying starts with effective communication with your child, whatever her age. That's how you can elicit the full story, make her feel that she is not to blame, and develop strategies that work so that the responsibility of ending the harassment is placed on the school.

Doing so requires some thought, effort, and discipline on your part. Before talking with your child, prepare yourself. Consider how you are going to handle her questions and emotions – as well as your own. Some of the following ideas are age appropriate, and some are universal:

- Above all, detach emotionally. Staying calm will help you gather the information you need.
- Be as nonjudgmental as possible. There won't be a reason to hold back if your child senses that you won't accuse her of starting the bullying, won't punish her for fighting back, or won't ask her, "What did you do to get her angry at you?"
- Use open-ended questions. If you use a question that begins with why, you are setting up a confrontational climate that will cause your child to be defensive.
- Don't use yes-or-no questions – they won't get you much of a response. Use questions that will stimulate conversation between you and your child. "What did you notice about Sophia today at the party?" works better than "Do you like Sophia?"
- Reflect back on what you're hearing: "Oh, you don't like the way Sophia played with you." Then you can add, "How did she play?" "What feelings do you have about her?" This will give you even more information.
- Don't try too hard to get your child to talk. The harder you try, the more he'll resist you. When you relax the pressure a bit, he'll sense it and be more ready to talk to you.
- Remember that it may take more than one conversation to get the full story. Your child may feel like telling you only so much the first time through. A second conversation when both of you are refreshed gives you a chance to think of follow-up questions that will elicit more information.
- Try using the car as your "office." You're in a small space with no distractions, and it's already a place where your child has spent many hours with you before.
- Get involved in a physical activity that your child enjoys. Playing a game of catch, riding a bike, or shooting baskets loosens the endorphins and could be the key to setting a relaxing tone for your child to get talking.
- Talk with her while she is coloring, working on a puzzle, or playing with a dollhouse or a favorite toy. When you use these times to allow your child to express herself, she is more likely to express herself to you as well. When you get down on the floor with your child, join her in the activity, and let her talk, there's a lot you can find out.
- Slow down and be available. As parents, it's not unusual for us to miss what's going on in our children's lives because of the hectic pace of our own. If you're not available, your child will turn to alternative means to deal with the frustration and hurt of being bullied. Many of these alternatives – self-medication, to name one – may compound the problem. You need to be there when your child needs you the most.
- Listen. Some kids can be long-winded, and their stories can lack continuity, but let them tell it. After all, it's their story – so let them go on. Listen, engage, and learn.



***Just as there are methods for getting your child to open up to you, there are some slam-dunk ways to turn your child off. Here are just a few:***

- Allowing siblings to interrupt
  - Allowing your child to be distracted by the television
  - Allowing yourself to be distracted by the telephone, your BlackBerry, or something going on in the house
  - Rushing the conversation and not focusing on your child's feelings
  - Interrupting when he is trying to talk
  - Being dismissive by saying things like "You're being too sensitive or "Come on – did he really do that to you?"
  - Giving meaningless reassurances like "This will pass over," "I'm sure your teacher will take care of it," or "Everyone gets bullied – even I did when I was in school"
- Give your child your undivided attention. Give her time and space to tell her story.

## **When You Have the Information**

Carefully document the information you get from your child. Write everything down. Develop a story of what happened and what's still happening with a time line. Then, review it with your child to be sure that you have all of the relevant details.

Here's a list of what to do next:

- Ask your child for a copy of her “agenda” or school calendar, which often includes the district’s antiharassment or antibullying policy and disciplinary code of conduct.
- Check to see if you have a copy of a parent handbook sent by the school. Some schools provide these for parents at the beginning of the school year. Many of them are available online. Check what the school is telling you about its anti-harassment or anti-bullying policy and see how it compares with model policy.
- Have your child keep a log or diary of what is happening to her at school. If she is too young to do this herself, talk with her each day and write down the important events.
- Use the log and information you obtained from talks with your child to put together a narrative of what has been happening with him. This should be simple and to the point, detailing names, dates, incidents, who saw what, and what sort of response – if any – there was from school personnel.
- Practice telling the story back to your child and check to be sure it’s accurate.
- Practice telling the story to a trusted friend to get feedback on how you are explaining details.

Next, you will make contact with your child's school to discuss the issue. You need to know how to communicate effectively with your child and then with the school to end bullying. The right to protection in school is more powerful than the bullies. Getting the school’s cooperation starts with getting your child’s full story.



## How to Approach the School

To most parents, schools can be intimidating. Making the first call to the principal about your child being bullied can be scary – after all, when you were a student, you wanted to steer clear of the principal's office at all costs. Crazy though it may sound, parents often avoid involving the principal in their child's bullying. But with a record of facts, a script to follow, and careful planning, you will have the confidence to communicate effectively to put an end to the bullying.

## How to Get Information about Your Child's School District

The first place to look for information about your child's school district is on the Internet. Enter the name of your school district and location, and search for its website. On that site, you will find the names of teachers, administrators, members of the board of education, and programs. It will also list contact information for the superintendent's office and the offices of principals and other administrators. It will not include phone numbers of members of the board of education; members cannot individually act as representatives of the board.

Teachers' email addresses and/or phone numbers are usually listed on the individual school's website. The school's site should also have a section that covers its protocol for addressing a complaint, how to get listed on the board of education's agenda to present a complaint, and how to address when putting specific issues in writing.

## District-Level Anti-Bully Policies

Many schools do have anti-bullying policies, modeled on state laws governing the prevention of student harassment in schools. To see an example of a model anti-bullying policy, **[click here](#)**.

All state-level anti-bullying laws outline the broad components that every school district in the state must include in an anti-bullying policy. For example, New Jersey's law defines bullying, requires each school district to adopt a policy that compels school employees to report incidents of bullying, outlines a procedure for investigating reports of such behavior, and defines consequences for engaging in bullying.

You can get a copy of your state's anti-bullying law by visiting [www.bullypolice.com](http://www.bullypolice.com). Most state laws are fairly comprehensive. When you look up the law, compare it with the policy you got from your child's school.

## Talking with Teachers, Principals and Administrators

There may be times when the quickest route to action is to place the responsibility squarely where it belongs – on the school administration. As the leader of the school, the principal has the responsibility to ensure that the school policies are being implemented to create a positive climate for learning. She is responsible for making sure the teachers are protecting your child from harm and has a duty to train teachers in anti-bullying techniques. Talking with your child's teacher is always a good place to start. But remember – if your child is still bullied after you contact the teacher, you will need to take it up a notch and go to the principal, and at times, the Superintendent and Board of Education.

## **Suggestions for Talking with Your Child's Teacher**

Talking with the teacher notifies him that you are aware of what is happening and that he needs to pay attention and respond. If you want to talk with the teacher before you approach the principal, here are a few suggestions:

- Ask if she ever suspected that your child was being bullied. If she answers yes, then ask when she noticed it, what she noticed, and where it was happening.
- Then ask, "Can you let me know if this happens again?"
- Follow this with the question, "What did you do to stop the bullying?"
- Tell the teacher what your child described. This is where you use the script you developed from your conversations with your child.
- Ask the teacher if she noticed what your child described to you. If she says yes, ask what she did to stop it.
- Ask the teacher to tell you what will happen next. Get an action plan. What will the teacher do if Ray calls Sam a "fag" and pushes him on the ground at recess? Write it all down.
- Set up a time to call the teacher back to review this again and to discuss what she did to end the bullying. Don't let any more than five school days go by!
- Send the teacher a thank you note. In the note, list all of the things you discussed and review the action plan that you and she developed.

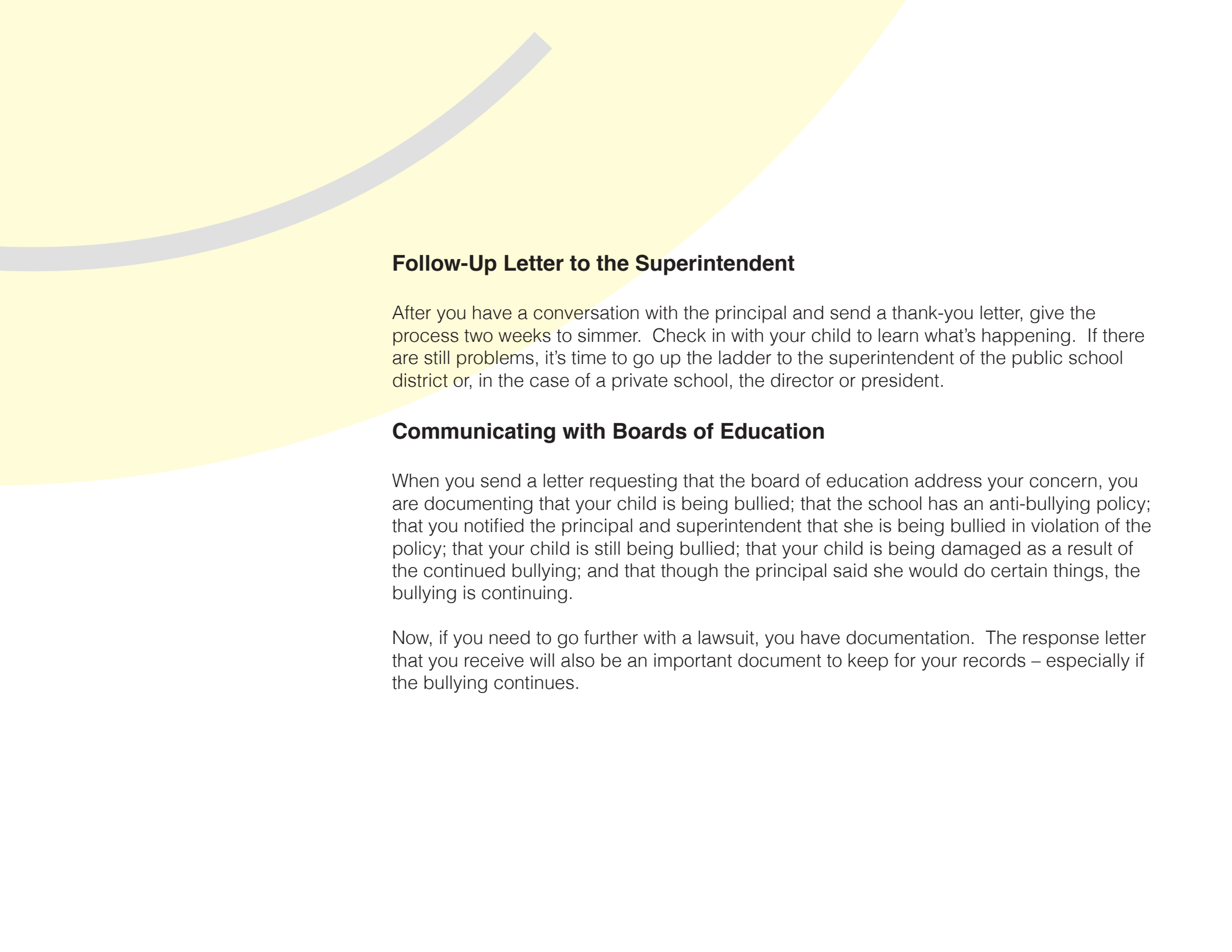
If nothing gets better after the calls with your child's teacher, a call to the principal is the next step.

## **Suggestions for Talking with Your Child's Principal**

By building a relationship with the principal on the basis of mutual respect and concern for your child's well-being, you can help to make the school more responsive to your child's problems. Here are a few tips to prepare yourself for a phone call or in-person meeting with your child's principal. Remember, the goal is to end bullying – not to pick a fight:

- A checklist for the phone call or meeting starts with calling on time. Punctuality shows that you respect the principal's time and that you appreciate his willingness to share some of it with you.
- Use a respectful tone throughout the conversation – avoid using phrases like I want, I have a complaint, right now, or he/she better.
- Have the script that you developed from talking with your child to help yourself stay focused.
- Introduce yourself and tell the principal that you were reading the school's anti-bullying policy and have some questions. This is your opportunity to tell the story of what happened to your child.
- Be factual, not emotional.
- Ask the principal how you can work together with him to make things better for your child and other kids who may be experiencing the same abuse.
- End the conversation by repeating what you and the principal will do together.
- It is important that you write everything down! Send a thank you note to the principal after the call or meeting, summarizing the conversation and action items for follow-up, notifies the principal that you are watching the situation and that you expect steps to be taken to end bullying.

Make sure to copy the school district superintendent or the private school director on correspondence. Reiterate the main points from your discussion and his commitment to resolve the issue.



## **Follow-Up Letter to the Superintendent**

After you have a conversation with the principal and send a thank-you letter, give the process two weeks to simmer. Check in with your child to learn what's happening. If there are still problems, it's time to go up the ladder to the superintendent of the public school district or, in the case of a private school, the director or president.

## **Communicating with Boards of Education**

When you send a letter requesting that the board of education address your concern, you are documenting that your child is being bullied; that the school has an anti-bullying policy; that you notified the principal and superintendent that she is being bullied in violation of the policy; that your child is still being bullied; that your child is being damaged as a result of the continued bullying; and that though the principal said she would do certain things, the bullying is continuing.

Now, if you need to go further with a lawsuit, you have documentation. The response letter that you receive will also be an important document to keep for your records – especially if the bullying continues.

## Dealing with Private Schools

Putting a child in a private school in the hopes that this will stave off harassment is usually misguided. We may think that in exchange for paying a hefty tab, we get more control over our child's environment; that private institutions are a refuge from the harsher world of public education; or, at the very least, that the headmaster will take our complaints seriously. Precisely the opposite is often true. Parents usually have less control at a private institution.

After spending tens of thousands of dollars on a private education, many parents are often shocked to discover how coldly they are treated when they report bullying, sexual abuse, or other serious problems. And because private schools don't get federal or state money – which is what gives the government the right to enforce regulations in public schools – parents have no right to much of anything from a private school's administration.

What strategies can you use to be effective with a private school's governing board? Methods for dealing with private schools differ considerably from those used to get cooperation from public and charter schools, which are publicly funded.

- Review the contract you have with the private school to see what it promised about protecting your child from bullying.
- Review the marketing material from the school. Does it promise that children will learn in a safe environment?
- Use all of the other strategies from this section when communicating with your child's teacher and principal or headmaster.
- Send a letter directly to the head of the school's board of directors if you are not satisfied with the results.

## Next Steps

If you followed the school's procedures for bringing your concerns to the board of education, but have yet to receive a satisfactory resolution, is there more you can do? Yes.

The U.S. Office for Civil Rights (OCR) enforces federal civil rights laws that prohibit discrimination on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, disability, and age in programs or activities that receive funding from the Department of Education. Anyone who believes that an education institution that receives federal financial assistance has discriminated against someone on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex disability, or age may file a complaint with OCR. The person who files the complaint does not need to be a victim of the discrimination and may file a complaint on behalf of another person or group.

Additionally, some states have criminal laws against harassment and stalking. Prosecutors can rely on both when filing criminal charges against school bullies. As a parent, you can't bring criminal charges against individuals for harassment, stalking, or other persecution against your child. Only a prosecutor can do this if the law provides for it. You can, however, invoke civil laws when you believe your child has been physically or emotionally harmed because the school ignored the bullying and allowed it to fester.

### Federal Office for Civil Rights

If by now you are thinking, "The teacher, principal, and superintendent didn't address my child's situation – why would the board of education be any different?" then consider this: federal funding may be at stake, especially if your child's civic rights are being violated. That's why public school systems have an interest in listening to you.

The U.S. Office for Civil Rights (OCR) enforces federal civil rights laws that prohibit discrimination on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, disability, and age in programs or activities that receive funding from the Department of Education. These civil rights laws extend to all state education agencies, elementary and secondary school systems, colleges and universities, vocational schools, proprietary schools, vocational rehabilitation agencies, libraries, and museums that receive federal financial assistance from the Department of Education. Keep in mind that if your child is in a private school, you do not have the option to rely upon these laws because private schools do not receive federal financial assistance.

Anyone who believes that an education institution that receives federal financial assistance has discriminated against someone on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex disability, or age may file a complaint with OCR. The person who files the complaint does not need to be a victim of the discrimination and may file a complaint on behalf of another person or group.

## How to File a Complaint

If you file a complaint with the OCR, you must file within 60 days after the last act of the school district's grievance process. In other words, you have 60 days after you have (a) sent a letter to the board of education complaining about your child's disability or ethnic harassment and (b) received an unsatisfactory solution from the board to file a complaint with the OCR. The website for the Office of Civil Rights is located at <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/index.html>.

At this site, you can read an informative section entitled "Know Your Rights." The "How to File A Complaint" section escorts you through the process of filing a complaint and submitting it over the Internet. Be sure to include enough detail so that the OCR understands what occurred and when, as well as the basis for your complaint (e.g., was the alleged discrimination based on race, color, national origin, sex, or disability?).

The U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights will determine whether it has jurisdiction over the issue stated in your complaint. You will receive a response indicating whether it will investigate and, if so, when you should receive a report. One thing to remember is that the complaints are filed in anonymity. The school is not informed of who files a complaint. Realistically, however, the issue behind the complaint most frequently identifies the complainant. You should know that you and your child are protected from retaliation for filing a complaint, though you might need to keep an eye on how your child is treated once a complaint is filed.

## Talking to a Lawyer

When is it time to talk to a lawyer about a lawsuit? When you have done all that you can with the school to prevent your child from harm and yet harm is done, you should talk with a lawyer who has expertise in education law. This may not always be easy to find; most lawyers do not have training in education law and have little experience in the realm of schools and education matters.

The first place to search for an education-law attorney is your state's bar association. The American Bar Association website has a function to help you find state and local bar associations; to find one, visit [http://www.americanbar.org/groups/bar\\_services/resources/state\\_local\\_bar\\_associations.html](http://www.americanbar.org/groups/bar_services/resources/state_local_bar_associations.html). Each state bar association's website should have a section listing lawyer specialties. Many state bar associations have education-law sections with a list of member attorneys who specialize in education law.

When you locate several choices in your state, carefully read each lawyer's profile and experience; many lawyers who list themselves as "education lawyers" specialize in personal injury and may have had one or two education-related personal injury cases. Make a list.

Before you call anyone, put your story together in very clear, concise terms. When you do call, ask to speak with a person who can tell you about the attorney's experience litigating school cases.