

I am not the parent of a bullied student, but I worry about my ninth grader. What can I do to make sure his school days are safe or to make sure that he does not make life difficult for others?

Lately, it feels like bully behaviors are being regularly reported in the news. Most recently, in two unrelated incidents, a 15 year old Massachusetts girl and a 13 year old Texas teen hung themselves due to the daily tortures and taunts inflicted by their peers. Earlier this school year, the St. Louis area received its own turn in the national spotlight for the bully bus incident that occurred in Belleville.

While these sensationalized incidents receive a lot of press, many students suffer in daily silence due to constant intimidation. In fact, a recent American Justice Department study indicated that 77 percent of all students have been bullied, and 15 percent of those kids reported that they were treated severely and suffered long lasting effects. And more startling is that one out five students admit to engaging in some type of harassment activity.

Parents should be concerned, and they should also assist in the prevention of these troublesome behaviors. First, review the student handbook sections that pertain to violence, fighting, and bullies. Contact an administrator if you feel the rules are vague or lack pertinent details. Meet with the school technology coordinator and learn how he monitors cyber harassment and what you can do at home to protect your household. Become involved with the Parent-Teacher Association and start a committee that works to integrate an anti-bully program into the school curriculum.

If you feel your child is the victim of continual harassment, take appropriate action. Document all incidents in a factual, objective manner by emailing the homeroom teacher, counselor, grade level principal, principal and appropriate superintendent. Find a therapist that has school experience who can document present level mental status and provide on-going support. And involve your child in a new activity away from school which will introduce him to other kids.

It is also important to make sure your child is not the aggressor by knowing the signs of bully behavior. Yes, frequent phone calls from the school about aggressive acts are a clear indicator, but these intelligent kids may operate more covertly. In fact, teen terrors typically know how to verbally manipulate others and can talk their way out of troublesome situations. They defy authority, desire to dominate others and/or engage in frequent rule breaking behaviors.

Parents should confront their teen if they suspect bully behaviors. Make it clear to your angry adolescent that they are not allowed to hurt others. Impose consequences, but also make sure to acknowledge positive behaviors.

At some point during adolescence, most students will either be bullied or engage in bully type behavior. If the situation occurs frequently, more serious action needs to be taken. To ensure that your son stays safe--stay involved in his life.