



# Catholic Parenting 101

## Tips for Building Strong Catholic Families

By **TIM HOGAN, PsyD, LP, CIRT**

### Confronting the Challenges of Bullying

While some conflict between children is normal, *bullying* is an increasingly common and destructive problem that requires wise and skillful intervention from adults.

The American Medical Association defines bullying as “repeated negative acts committed by one or more children against another” with a deliberate intent to harm or disturb a victim, despite the victim’s apparent distress. While bullying can happen “in-person,” it can also occur online through social networks, websites and text messages. This is called cyber-bullying.

Adults can help reduce or eradicate bullying by teaching and encouraging their communities on how to graciously confront injustice, defend those who are injured, and empower those who are oppressed.

Here are three basic steps on how to confront bullying:

**Step 1: LEARN:** Find out if bullying is a problem for the children you know.

This may not be as easy as it sounds. Children who are bullied often do not tell trusted adults or their parents unless asked. When children show signs of inner distress (i.e. stomachaches, headaches, problems sleeping, loss of appetite, general distress or sadness), you should consider the possibility of bullying being the cause.

Sometimes children will simply report hating or refusing to go to school. Bullies, on the other hand, are often confident kids with little empathy for others and often have oppositional attitudes towards adults. Children who bully others often display rude, sarcastic, or disrespectful behavior in other situations.

**Step 2: ACT:** Take action to help a child who is bullied by following these simple strategies:

#### 1. Prayerfully confront the problem.

Gently allow the child who is bullied to feel sad and grieve; being bullied often involves a loss of safety and self-confidence. Teach them to pray for themselves and the bully. Pray for the strength to speak-up in the face of injustice. If necessary, prayerfully consider sitting down with the child who is bullying and his or her parents to further confront the issue.

#### 2. Role-play strategies to stop the bullying.

Affirm what the bullied child is already doing well and build on that. Brainstorm possible responses, such as humor (“Sweet!” or “I love you too!”), wit (“Your point is...?”; “So being mean to me is, what, cool?”), a compliment (“I don’t think you mean that because deep down you are better than that.”), or calm assertion (“Okay, that’s enough. Keep going and I’ll get someone else involved.”)

#### 3. Intervene, when necessary.

Help the bullied child to privately and quietly report the bullying to the appropriate school or church leader. Be clear about exactly what was said, what started it and who else was present. Do not expect the child to solve this or control another’s behavior. Deal personally with the child who is bullying. If you see the behavior, take that child aside and tell them specifically what you saw them do or say. Clarify for them that you would never allow anyone else to treat them the same way because it is not okay to treat people like that.

#### 4. Strengthen the social network and self-confidence of children.

Create healthy and holy opportunities for children to interact with one another. Encourage children to take a class that will develop physical strength and confidence, such as dance, gymnastics, or a martial art.

**Step 3: PREVENT:** Initiate community prevention measures

Even when there is no apparent sign of bullying in your community, children should know what bullying is and why it is not acceptable. Children should also know that most bullying can be stopped by the creative intervention of a bystander, or by simply encouraging the reporting of bullying to trusted adults and/or parents. If bystanders do report bullying, this should be done privately. If a child’s peers learn of such reporting, the peers will likely tell the child who is bullying, which often makes the situation worse.

When children live in a community where people use power to dominate others, bullying will always be a problem. As adults, we are called to set an example for our children. Every unjust use of power, by teachers, administrators, coaches, pastors, parents and children, should be confronted and eradicated. Bullying will only stop when we empower our children to choose to live the Gospel in our communities. Remember that Christ calls each of us to love one another as he loves us.

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