

## What does the Bible teach us about bullying?

For many students, bullying is an everyday issue that they have to deal with at school. Up until the past few decades, bullying was overlooked by most people, being viewed as “kids just being kids” or “a normal part of growing up.” But incidents such as school shootings or the recent Netflix series “13 Reasons Why” have made bullying and harassment a more regularly discussed topic.

Bullying happens more frequently than you might think. According to the American Medical Association, by the time students finish school, nearly half of students have been bullied at one point or another. It’s a serious issue that needs to be addressed.

### What is bullying?

People usually know what bullying is when they see it, but it’s sometimes hard to put it into words. Researchers who study bullying cite three common characteristics of what makes an act bullying:

Bullying is intentional and tries to cause harm or distress to the victim.

Bullying occurs between two students who have different degrees of power.

Bullying happens repeatedly over some time.

There are three types of bullying that occur:

Physical: Hitting, kicking, spitting, tripping, pushing, breaking someone’s things, rude gestures

Verbal: Teasing, name-calling, threats, inappropriate sexual comments, taunting

Social: Leaving someone out of a group on purpose, telling others not to be friends with them, publicly embarrassing them, spreading gossip or rumors about someone, etc.

With the increased use of computers and cell phones, especially among teens, there is also a special type of bullying called cyberbullying, in which the harassment is done with electronic means like texting, email, social media, etc.

### What does the Bible say about bullying?

The Bible doesn't talk directly about bullying, but that doesn't mean that we can't use biblical principles to address the issue. The Bible commands us to love our neighbor as ourselves (Mark 12:31) and to treat others the way we would like to be treated (Luke 6:31). There is no room in the Christian faith for belittling or abusing someone. Every person, regardless of what he or she looks or acts like, is created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27; James 3:9-10) and is worthy of the dignity that God gives to every person.

Bullying, therefore, is never okay. Thirty percent of students admit to bullying other students.[4] We should make sure we aren't counted among them (1 John 4:20). As Christians, we are called to honor God with our words (Eph. 4:29) and our actions (James 1:22). We should constantly examine our actions and motives to make sure they line up with these standards, asking God whether there is anything displeasing to him (Psa. 139:23-24).

How should Christians respond to bullying?

How does God call us to respond if we are being bullied or we see someone else being bullied?

1. If you see something, say something.

Reporting bullying to the proper authorities is one of the most important strategies we can use to prevent further bullying. Twenty-eight percent of students in grades 6-12 say that have been bullied at school. Yet only 20-30 percent of those who are bullied report when they are bullied. [5] As Christians, we are called to seek justice and defend the oppressed (Psa. 82:3-4, Isa. 1:17). God, in His infinite wisdom, has established human authorities like the government (Rom. 13:1-4)—or, maybe in your case, the police, school administration, or parents—to help make the situation right. You aren't alone. Don't be afraid to tell others what's going on, whether you are the one being bullied or are merely the observer.

Something extremely important to remember is that it isn't tattling to report bullying. Tattletales only tell on someone when they want to get them in trouble. Reporting bullying is motivated by the desire to protect people. Reporting bullying protects you, the person being bullied, and everyone else around you. Doing nothing helps bullies because it allows them to continue bullying without consequences. We need to have courage and stand up for those who can't or won't defend themselves. Of course, use wisdom in all situations. If there's a situation that looks dangerous, get an adult to help or call the police.

2. Understand who you are in Christ.

Meditate on passages like Psalm 139:13-18, which tells us that you are fearfully and wonderfully made and that God's thoughts toward you are too numerous to count. You need to know that you are special to God and created in his image with immeasurable worth and value. Do not let the lies that bullies tell you to influence what you think about yourself, because what God says about you is the truth. He loves you and cherishes you because you are made in his image.

3. Even if you are wronged, respond in a Christ-like manner.

When we are in the midst of a painful situation, it can be very easy to forget who we are in Christ and how he has called us to act. Thus, if you ever find yourself being bullied, there are a couple of principles that you need to keep in mind.

First, we should never try and get back at a bully or seek revenge (Rom. 12:17). As Christians, we know that this world is not perfect, but we are not the judge of the earth. God is the one who can judge the world in righteousness and repay everyone for the evil that they've done (Rom. 12:19). Instead, respond to your bully with kindness and love. I know this is easier said than done. It's easy to feel angry, upset, or defeated about your situation, bringing with those feelings a temptation to want to get back at them. But what Scripture calls us to do is to love our enemies and pray for them (Matt. 5:44). Do not try and overcome the evil being done to you by doing evil in return. Rather, overwhelm your opponents with the goodness and love of God (Rom. 12:21). You never know how your kindness may change their heart.

Second, it's okay to stick up for yourself if you are bullied. Christians can often be confused by passages such as Matthew 5:39 and Luke 6:29 which tell us to "turn the other cheek." Most

commentators agree that these passages are probably not referring to severe physical or emotional abuse, but rather a slap that is meant as an insult. When we look at the context, Jesus is teaching his disciples about the suffering they are going to endure for being a Christian (Luke 6:22). His primary concern is speaking against the “eye for an eye” mentality of revenge (Matt. 5:38) that was prevalent in the culture. He is not speaking against all forms of self-defense. Jesus himself, when he was slapped unjustly, did not turn the other cheek but questioned his accusers (John 18:22-23). From other passages of Scripture (Ex. 22:2-3; Neh. 4:16-18), we can see that even using physical force to defend yourself is permissible in some circumstances. However, do this only in situations where you are being physically assaulted and have no other choice. Use the amount of force necessary to escape, never to take revenge.

Sticking up for yourself may be difficult to do, but if you can stay calm and respond lovingly, then you have every right as an image-bearer of God to defend yourself and speak the truth. You are worth being defended.

#### 4. Reach out to those being bullied

Lastly, we need to reach out to those being bullied. One of the best ways we can do this is to befriend them and invite them to hang out with us. Not only will this make them feel loved, accepted, and less alone, it also acts as a deterrent to bullying. Bullies are much less likely to pick on someone if they are in a group of friends than if they are alone. Another helpful thing we can do is comfort and encourage them. Remind them of their intrinsic worth and value, combatting the lies that bullies speak. Even little things like spending time with them or hugging them make a bigger difference than we realize.

Bullying is wrong, period. As Christians, we are called to act in love and kindness toward everyone, including those who wrong us. And we are called to stand up for the vulnerable and weak. We should do good in the face of being mistreated, and when we see others being mistreated. Above all, we shouldn't try to handle these situations alone. Authorities should be involved when needed. And our family, friends, and church love and care about us and are there to support us.