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## The bully gameplan

Story thanks to  
Jutta Dempsey

# bully's gameplan

Child Psychologist Jutta Dempsey explains why some children become bullies

There are many reasons why children become bullies. If your child has been accused of bullying the first thing to do is to find out what their intent is with this behaviour. Do they realise that they are actually hurting others? If they were only teasing and having fun, they will usually react with surprise and shame and immediately stop.

However, some children don't stop. True bullies attack because they need to have the power, control and status that being the bully brings. The question is - why do they have this need for power, control and status?

Some children believe that their bullying of others gives them belonging to, or leadership of, their peers. They are often popular children surrounded by friends and use their peers to support them. Often they have good leadership skills which are misdirected.

Some want to cause pain and suffering for their own gain and pleasure. These are often unhappy children who are quite angry although they present as positive and confident and work very hard to maintain this status. Many things can cause this child to be unhappy and angry, the most common being an unhappy home life or academic difficulty at school.

Some bullies have suffered bullying themselves when they were younger, or are bullied at home by an older sibling. They see bullying as an opportunity to get even and it's the way they've been shown to behave by others who they

consider successful. Some bullies are having difficulty dealing with their own feelings, so they focus on the feelings of others instead. The weak child reminds them of their own vulnerability and anxiety so they displace these uncomfortable feelings onto someone else who is weaker by being dominant and aggressive. Or it can be an attempt or substitute for intimacy.

Some bullies can be quite insensitive or attention seeking, both at the victim's expense. They can be socially unaware and don't know how to relate to others. They can be impulsive.

For parents, it's natural to feel responsible when your child is accused of bullying but remember that although some will come from dysfunctional families where there is a lack of warmth, unconditional acceptance, consistent discipline or appropriate role models, many do not.

The role of the parent is of utmost importance. The bully may have learned an inappropriate way of coping and may need to "unlearn" ways of behaving and be taught to manage and express themselves in ways that are socially cohesive rather than destructive.

It is worth preventing your child from being a bully. Statistics show that childhood bullies are more likely to develop poor social relationships in adult life (including more marriage break-ups), poor functioning in the workplace, higher incidence of drug and alcohol abuse and a greater chance of having a criminal record (one

in four chance of by the age of 30).

If your child is a bully a little help early on often goes a long way.

**Jutta Dempsey** is a child and family psychologist and principal of Directions Learning & Behaviour Guidance. For more info call 4721 5859 or go to [www.directionspsych.com.au](http://www.directionspsych.com.au)

### Parent checklist

- What is the communication style within the family and home? Is it respectful of others?
- How do family members express frustration, anger and hurt? Is it aggressive or assertive?
- Are the children held accountable for their behaviour and thus taught appropriate ways of behaving?
- Is the value of empathy and understanding of others important within the family?
- Is the media and gaming negatively influencing my child's values and behaviour?
- How is my child going academically at school?