

# in the face of force

## helping deaf children cope

*By Jennifer Tresh*

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These are very uncertain times for our children. When I was little, I remember walking to the bus alone, playing at the park all hours of the day, and going places with my friends without adult supervision. Nowadays, our children cannot do these things safely unless they have the skills and the knowledge to protect them from danger. Bullies—children who pick on others—are an ever-present hazard.

If someone is bullying your child, you may not know it. Bullies often intimidate their victims verbally, and their basic repertoire includes such scary, humiliating statements as, “If you tell on me, it will be worse tomorrow” or “You are a big baby! Go cry to Mommy!” Often this is enough to make your child afraid to report the bully to you or to a teacher at school.

Bullying happens everywhere—in residential settings, schools, neighborhoods, and even at home with siblings or relatives. We cannot ignore the fact that bullying can occur within the deaf school community as well. Students can be victimized in the hallways and playgrounds, and residential students can be victimized in the dormitories.



Bullies typically target children they see as easy victims—students who are physically weaker, may have poor communication abilities, or are often alone. Deaf and hard of hearing children can be at an even greater risk. In their ignorance, bullies may see deaf or hard of hearing children as weaker because they cannot hear and defenseless because they cannot tell what has happened to them. Our job as parents and professionals is to educate our children first, and the public second, about such misconceptions.



Fortunately, you can help your deaf or hard of hearing children deal with bullies and bullying. First of all, don't wait until your child becomes a victim. Early intervention can help your children become more self-confident. It also tells them they can always count on your support.

Start educating your deaf or hard of hearing child now about what's acceptable and what isn't. I have worked with a number of parents, both deaf and hearing, whose deaf or hard of hearing children have been bullied at school or in the neighborhood. The number one piece of advice I give them is, "Talk to your child every day about self-defense and what is right and wrong."

### **Basic Self-Defense Techniques:**

- **Teach your child the meaning of the word "stranger."**

Role playing is a very successful technique for teaching deaf and hard of hearing children about strangers; visualizing a situation helps them integrate it faster. Role play different situations so that your child understands that even someone who offers candy or toys can be dangerous and is a stranger if he or she does not know the person.

- **Use local resources.** Seek out free seminars on self-defense and self-protection in your local community. There are basic self-defense moves that even my 4-year-old can perform with great success! Many local communities have karate schools and other forums where your child can learn basic self-defense maneuvers. These types of forums teach your child self-discipline and self-confidence so he or she can defend him- or herself more readily against a bully.

- **Teach your child, again through role play and discussion, that adults are there to protect them.**

Teach them also that when someone is hurting or threatening them, this is wrong and needs to be addressed. Be sure to include information about such things as stealing lunch money, teasing, making fun of a person's handicap or disfigurement, scaring or intimidating, physical abuse, etc.

- **Tell your child that no harm will come to him or her for sharing information about a bully.**

The biggest fear a child has is that a bully will retaliate if he or she tells someone, and it is important to reassure the child right away.

- **Teach your child what to do if someone grabs his or her arm.** Tell him or her to scream as loud as possible. By screaming, your child will attract attention to the fact that he or she is in distress and alert those in the surrounding area that help is needed. Your child can be taught simple self-defense moves to break free from a grip on the wrist or upper arm.

- **Teach your children basic home safety: Do not answer the door or give out any information on the phone or through the door.** Give your child a code word or sign that only you and he or she knows. If a stranger stops your child and says, "Your mommy sent me here to pick you up. She had to go to the store." Your child should ask, "What's my code?" Teach your child to run to the nearest adult if the person does not know the code word or sign.

- **Most important, communicate with your child as often as possible.** Be sure to ask your child about his or her day. Watch for unusual behaviors such as an empty lunch box combined with a request for additional money or food. Talk to your child's teachers about your child's social circle at school. Does your child play with others or is he or she isolated and alone? Does your child cry often or seem overly afraid? Look for any unusual break in his or her routine or change in appearance. Other subtle signs are sudden changes in attitude toward school, whether you observe this at home or in the dormitory. Examples of this include vague physical reasons (i.e., a headache, a stomachache, or crying) for not wanting to go to school, combined with the inability to explain why he or she doesn't want to go.