

Tips to bully-proof your (pre)teen.

May is celebrated as a mental health awareness month in America, the least we can do in Africa is to create awareness on important mental health issues. Bullying & Cyber-bullying is a serious issue this generation of (pre)teens are faced with. New research indicates both bullies & victims are at a high risk of suicide if not corrected.

Here are a few tips for parents to build resilience in their teens against bullying:

- **Provide psychological & emotional safe space:** Your home should be a space where your child feels safe to share their feelings, thoughts & beliefs without being judged or worrying about repercussions. Such an environment helps in building a healthy self-image & boosts their confidence.
- **Acknowledge emotions:** Allow your teen to express their emotions. Probe them with "how do you feel about this situation? why do they feel in this manner?" Help them dig deeper when dealing with any messy situation. Encourage them to show their feelings including free-falling tears. It's okay to be vulnerable, it aids in being courageous.
- **Look for the solution:** Once your teen has expressed their feelings, help them address the problem by focusing on finding the solution. This approach helps them feel like they are in control of the situation. Ask them how would they wish to address the bully? Nudge them to think of different ways they can handle this adversity. Is parental intervention needed or can this be resolved by speaking up to the bully or taking it up with a teacher/counselor?
- **Understand the bully:** It's important to share with your child that nobody is born a bully. Bullies most often suffer from issues like insecurity, low self-esteem, fear, guilt, sadness & anger. They do not have a safe space to vent their feelings and hence these negative feelings convert into unhealthy behavior of harming others. Bullies are the ones who need real help & hence it is imperative that we stand up to the bully, be assertive, address

the issue with concerned authorities if it's serious, so the right help is offered.

- **Vet your Virtual World:** Inform your (pre)teen to cautiously vet friends before adding them to their virtual world. Refrain from commenting anything mean or toxic on social media. Pause before you hit send.
- **Laugh & Move on:** Remind your teen such experiences are part of growing up years. Real-life isn't much different either, bullies are found in every corner of the world, but with the right mindset & attitude every problem can be solved. Some of these incidents become funny stories when we look back, so laugh a little as this too shall pass!

Do not ignore or avoid any matter of bullying, whether virtual or real. You have to allow your (pre)teen the freedom to share and express so it's out of the system. Avoiding, ignoring or too much coddling isn't going to resolve the situation but it will only aggravate the problem for your (pre)teen and eventually, it re-surfaces in an unhealthy manner. Seek an expert's intervention if necessary.

Ciao,

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