PSYCHOLOGY DEPARTMENT
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS
URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

SHARE PROJECT

FAMILY STUDIES LAB FALL 2007

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Inside This Issue:

Note From the Director

With the school year in full swing, the University of Illinois SHARE Project staff is looking forward to continuing our research with the local elementary schools and participating families. Currently, 609 children, ages 8 to 10, from 11 different elementary schools are participating in the SHARE Project. The goal of the project is to better understand the impact of bullying on children and to raise awareness about bullying in the schools.

In order to better understand bullying and its consequences, we ask children to complete surveys examining students' treatment by peers, emotional well-being, beliefs, and behaviors. These surveys are completed between January and March of each year. We also ask teachers and parents to provide their unique perspectives on children's peer relationships and well-being.

We would like to thank you for participating in the SHARE Project. As our research progresses, we gain new insights into children's peer relationships. In this newsletter, we report on some of our recent exciting findings!

We look forward to our continued collaboration with children, teachers, and parents to better understand how to improve children's social experiences at school, and sincerely appreciate the time and effort that you have contributed to the SHARE Project.

The Friendship Project

The Family Studies Lab uses a variety of approaches to gain a well-rounded understanding of children's peer relationships. Currently, we are conducting a study called the Friendship Project. We invite participating SHARE Project children to spend one Saturday afternoon with us at the Family Studies Lab on the UIUC campus. During this time, children have the opportunity to meet kids from other local elementary schools, earn prizes, play games, and do arts and crafts activities. In between these activities, participants fill out questionnaires about their thoughts and feelings. From this study, we hope to learn more about how children develop new friendships. If your child is interested in participating in the Friendship Study, please let us know! The kids really enjoy their afternoon with us, and parents enjoy the free time as well as the $25 reimbursement! You can call us at 244-9385 or email us at mbartlet@uiuc.edu , or banagale@uiuc.edu.

Teachers and Students Report Different Amounts of Bullying

The answer to how often bullying takes place at school depends on who you ask. Based on data collected from child and teacher surveys administered by the SHARE project staff we have learned that teachers' perceptions of how often bullying occurs differ from what the students report.

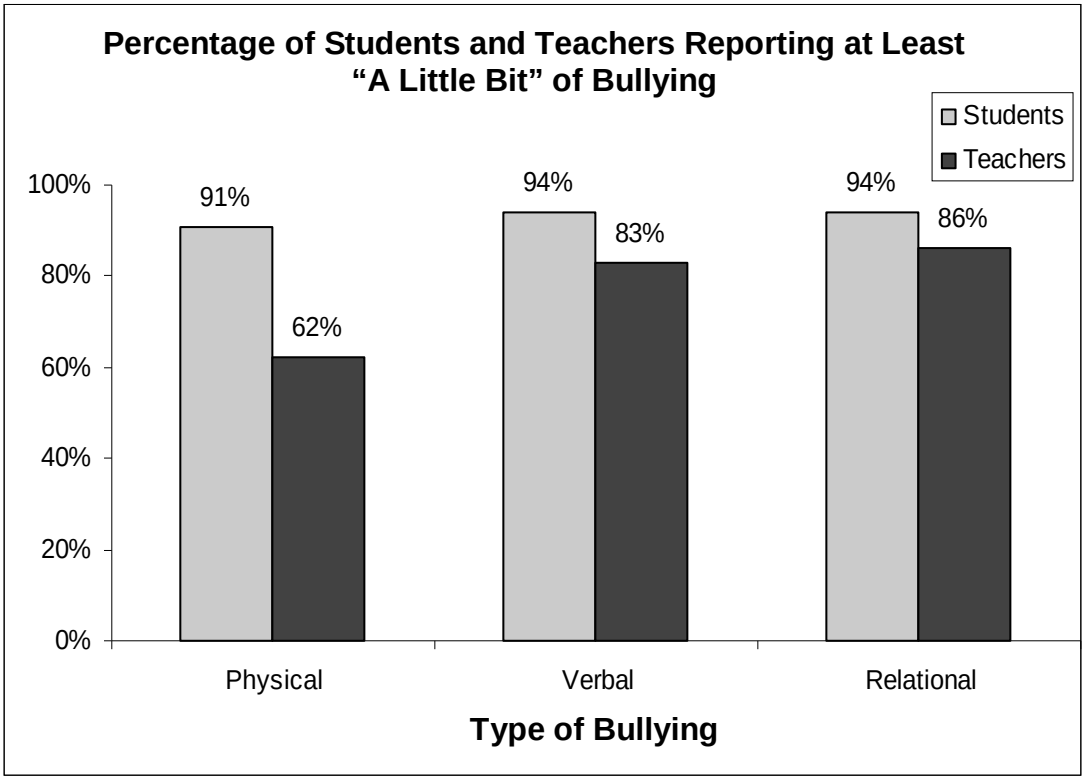
We asked students and teachers to rate the frequency of **overt** bullying (a combination of physical and verbal bullying) and **relational** bullying that takes place at school. Based on information from 373 surveys, we found that students said they experienced more overt and relational bullying than teachers said they witnessed. Teachers and students agreed that relational and verbal bullying were most common. However, students felt physical bullying was happening much more frequently than teachers reported.

Nearly 80% of students reported that they tell a teacher when they experience bullying. Since such a significant number of students are confiding in their teachers, it opens up a wonderful opportunity for teachers to teach kids how to handle difficult social situations.

Research has shown that bullying can have a variety of negative effects on students, which is why it is so important for teachers to be able to identify and take steps to prevent as much bullying as possible. Some effective techniques for accomplishing this are promoting cooperative play, reinforcing prosocial attitudes, and teaching positive conflict resolution.

Forms of Bullying

- **Overt**
  Is a combination of physical and verbal bullying
- **Physical**
  Examples include: Hitting, kicking, shoving, pinching, and tripping
- **Verbal**
  Examples include: Name-calling, rudeness, and swearing
- **Relational**
  Includes behaviors such as: spreading rumors, saying mean things, or excluding someone from a group



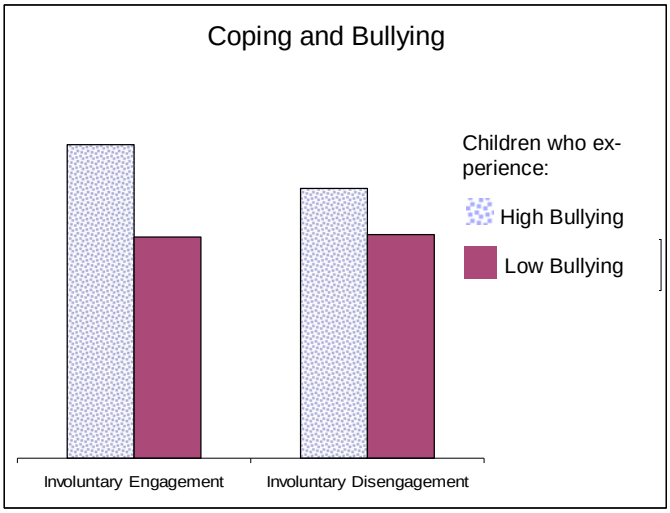
Why Are Some Children More Likely to be Bullied by their Peers?

Experiencing bullying at school can have many negative consequences for children. Unfortunately, according to our SHARE Project data, when a child is bullied in 2nd grade, they are more likely to be bullied the following year in 3rd grade. Because bullying is detrimental to children's well-being and seems to continue over time, it is important to understand why some children are more likely to be targets of bullying than others.

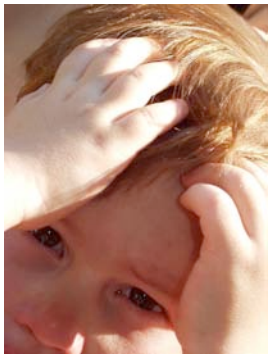
There are many reasons why some children are bullied, many of which are not under the children's control. However, we were interested in whether the way that children respond to teasing by peers affects whether they continue to be bullied. Here's what we found, based on what your kids told us:

When children show **problematic coping** in response to peer teasing in 2nd grade, they are more likely to be bullied the following year. Two types of problematic coping predict who will be bullied. First, when children get very physically and emotionally aroused or can't stop thinking about problems they have with their peers, they are more likely to be bullied. This type of response is called **involuntary engagement**. It might be that bullies feel like they are successful when they are able to make other children upset, and this encourages them to continue their bullying. Second, when children avoid dealing with peer problems, they are more likely to experience ongoing bullying. This type of response is called **involuntary disengagement**. If minor problems are not resolved, children do not have the opportunity to repair their relationships with their peers, and other children might continue to bully them. In contrast, when children show **positive coping**, they are less likely to bullied the following year, showing that dealing with peer problems effectively can be an important buffer against bullying .

So what does this all mean? Our data suggest that victimization may continue from year to year, but how children respond to teasing by their peers may change the course of victimization. The article on page 7 focuses on coping suggestions you can make to children when kids are mean to them.



Children who exhibit problematic coping in second grade are more likely to be bullied the following year.



- **Positive Coping** Children who employ positive coping actively attempt to problem solve and use positive thinking to help remedy the situation
- **Problematic Coping** Children who respond uncontrollably, avoid the situation, or simply do not react at all are using problematic coping
- **Examples of Problematic Coping:**
  1. Involuntary Engagement - When a child has difficulty calming down from a physically or emotionally aroused state or cannot stop thinking about the problem
  2. Involuntary Disengagement - When a child avoids problems or does not attempt to repair friendships with peers

How Boys and Girls Experience Bullying and Their Emotions

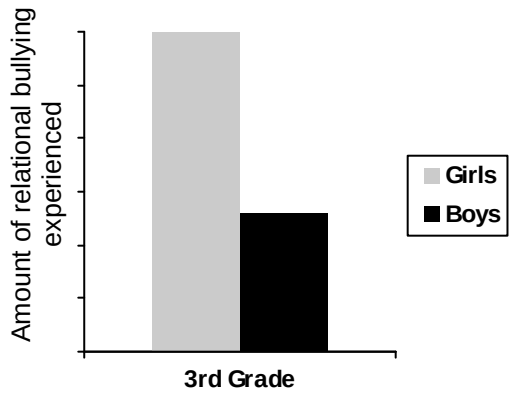
Third-grade girls report that they experience more relational bullying than boys.

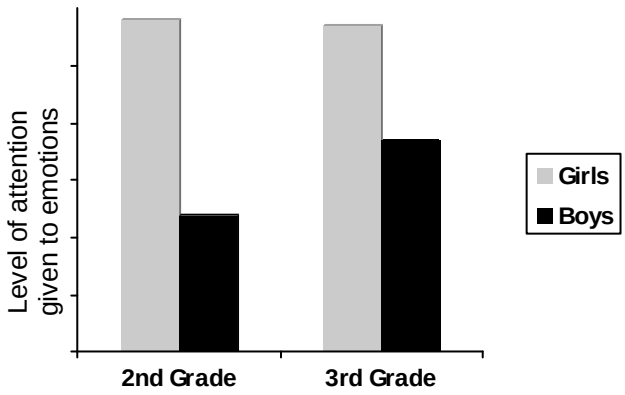
As boys and girls progress through elementary school, gender differences become increasingly apparent. This can be seen not only in physical changes but also psychologically and emotionally. We were interested in whether boys and girls experience relationships and confront conflict with their peers differently, and whether these differences increase as children grow older.

Peer bullying, as has been previously described, can be separated into overt (verbal and physical) and relational strategies. It may be surprising to learn that we did not find any differences between boys and girls in the amount and type of bullying experienced in second grade. However, third-grade girls did report that they experienced more relational bullying than boys. Might this be predictive of the relational strategies (spreading rumors, ignoring friends, threatening to not be friends) often attributed to adolescent girls? Information collected in future surveys will help us answer this question.

Emotional understanding also differs between genders at the elementary school ages. Our research divides emotional understanding into four types: the amount of *attention* paid to emotion, the *clarity* with which one recognizes emotions, and the ability to *describe* and *express* one's emotions. For both second and third-graders, a significant difference lies in the amount of attention given to emotions, with girls thinking about their emotions more than boys. However, girls and boys say that they are equally good at clearly identifying and accurately describing and expressing their emotions.

The ways in which boys and girls learn to confront conflict and understand their emotions has important implications for the development of self-esteem, stress management, and mood regulation. Relational bullying may put them at risk for low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression, whereas more overt types of bullying may lead to issues with aggression and other antisocial behavior. Understanding the different ways in which boys and girls deal with conflict and emotions can help us better assist them in developing the appropriate tools needed to form positive peer relationships.





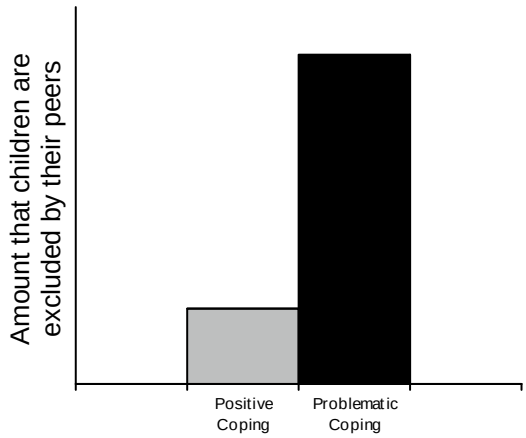
The Importance of Coping With Peer Conflict

Although we all wish it would not happen, the majority of children experience conflict with their peers at school. Peer conflict can occur both within the context of friendships as well as with other kids at school. For example, children might have an argument with a friend or experience peer pressure from other kids. Importantly, our research shows that children find these experiences to be quite stressful. Moreover, the manner in which children cope with peer conflict has consequences for their social, emotional, and academic development.

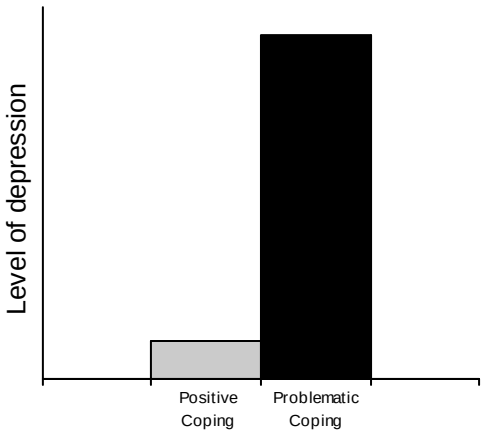
Some children tend to use **positive coping**, which involves active strategies such as problem solving and positive thinking. Conversely, some children tend to use **problematic coping**, which involves uncontrolled reactions such as responding impulsively, avoiding things, or not doing anything at all. When children use positive coping it is more likely that the conflict will become resolved, but when children use problematic coping the conflict is more likely to remain unresolved or to worsen. Findings from the SHARE Project show that the manner in which children respond to peer conflict influences their social experiences, emotional development, and academic performance.

When children use positive coping, conflict is more likely to be resolved.

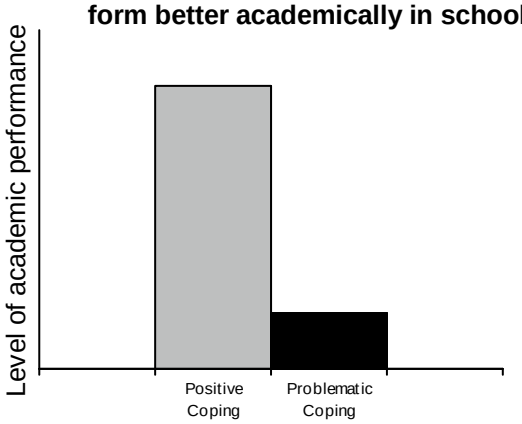
Children who use positive coping are less excluded by their peers



Children who use positive coping experience fewer symptoms of depression



Children who use positive coping perform better academically in school



So, what can we do to help children use more positive coping and less problematic coping? As parents and teachers, it is important to teach positive coping strategies so children learn how to effectively manage the problems they experience with other children. It is also helpful to teach prosocial behavior, such as empathy and effective conflict resolution, to help reduce the amount and severity of conflict that children encounter with their peers. Finally, it is important to use positive coping ourselves in order to model these behaviors for children. This way we can help our children to have positive interactions with their peers and to lead happy and healthy lives!

Children's Social Goals Influence Their Responses to Bullying

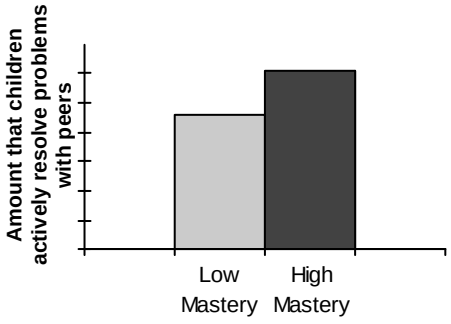
- **Mastery-oriented**
  Children who are mastery-oriented tend to focus on understanding and developing friendships with their peers
- **Avoidant**
  Avoidant children are often preoccupied with trying to *not* embarrass themselves in front of others

Children differ in what they think is important in their relationships. Some children, who psychologists call **"mastery-oriented,"** focus on trying to get along with others, being a good friend, and developing rewarding relationships. Other children, who psychologists call **"avoidant,"** are most concerned about avoiding teasing or other difficult experiences with peers.

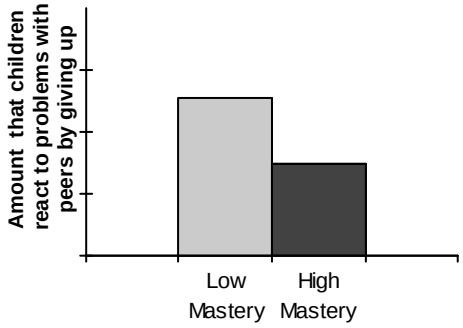
We are interested in understanding how children's goals in their peer relationships influence the way that they deal with challenging social situations, such as being teased. Children rated the importance of several mastery-oriented and avoidant goals, such as: "One of my goals is to get to know other kids better" and "One of my goals is to make sure other kids don't say anything bad about me." We also asked children how often they were bullied, and how they responded to teasing.

We found that children's social goals had a big impact on how effectively they dealt with peer harassment. When children were **mastery-oriented**, they were more likely to actively deal with peer problems and were less likely to feel overwhelmed and just give up. Because these children did not worry so much about peers' judgments, they were not overly upset when things did not always go well.

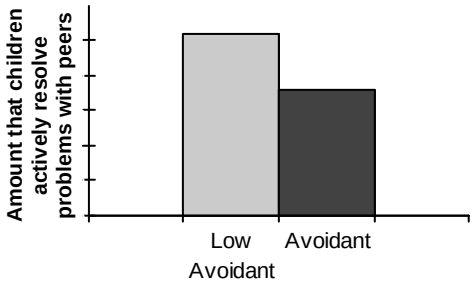
How much do mastery-oriented children actively try to resolve peer problems?

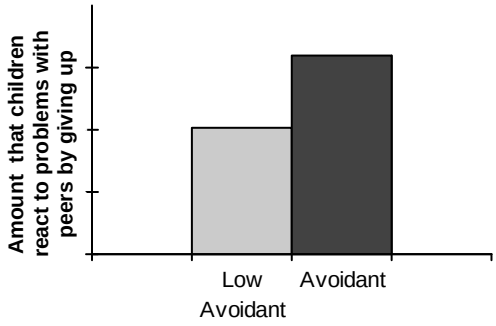


How much do mastery-oriented children react to peer problems by giving up?



When children were **avoidant** they felt overwhelmed and not able to cope well with peer harassment. This was especially true for the children who experienced very high levels of bullying at school.





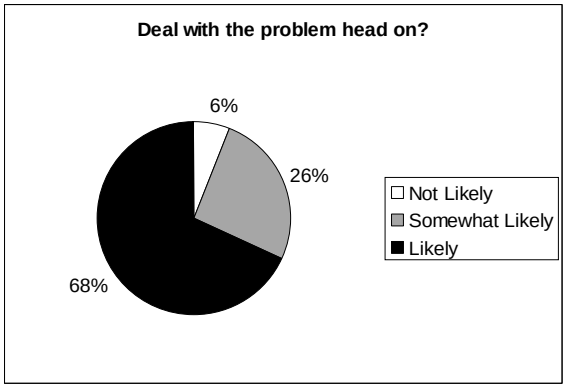
These findings are very important because they tell us that teaching children to focus on getting to know others and being a good friend, rather than worrying about their reputation, can help children to deal effectively with both everyday problems with peers and with more serious problems that some children face at school.

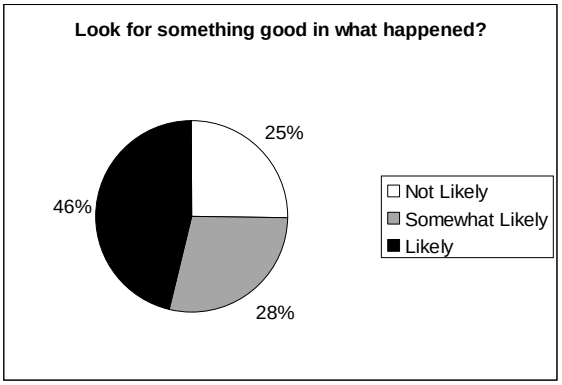
Problems with Peers – How Can Parents Help?

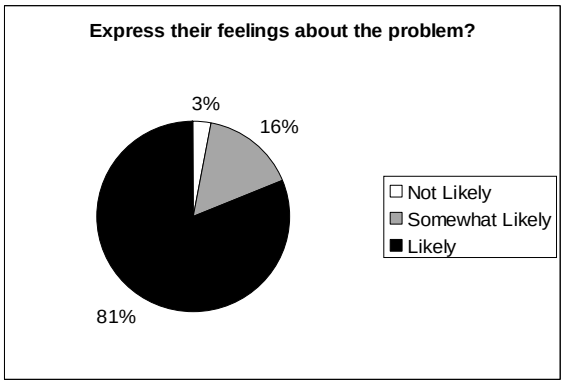
Helping children cope with problems with peers is on every parent's mind. Most parents have a lot of questions – What advice can I give my child about dealing with bullies? How do I help a child who is being teased or picked on? What *shouldn't* I say or do in these situations?

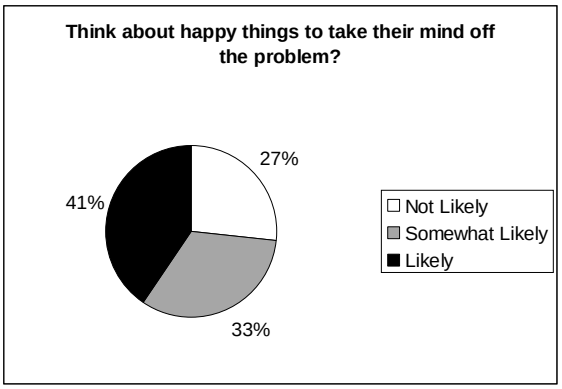
We asked parents to tell us how often they make certain suggestions about coping with problems with peers to their kids. Here are some examples of what we found:

How much do parents encourage their kids to. . .









As you can see, parents were *more likely* to encourage dealing with a problem head-on or expressing feelings and *less likely* to encourage taking one's mind off a problem or looking for something good in a problem.

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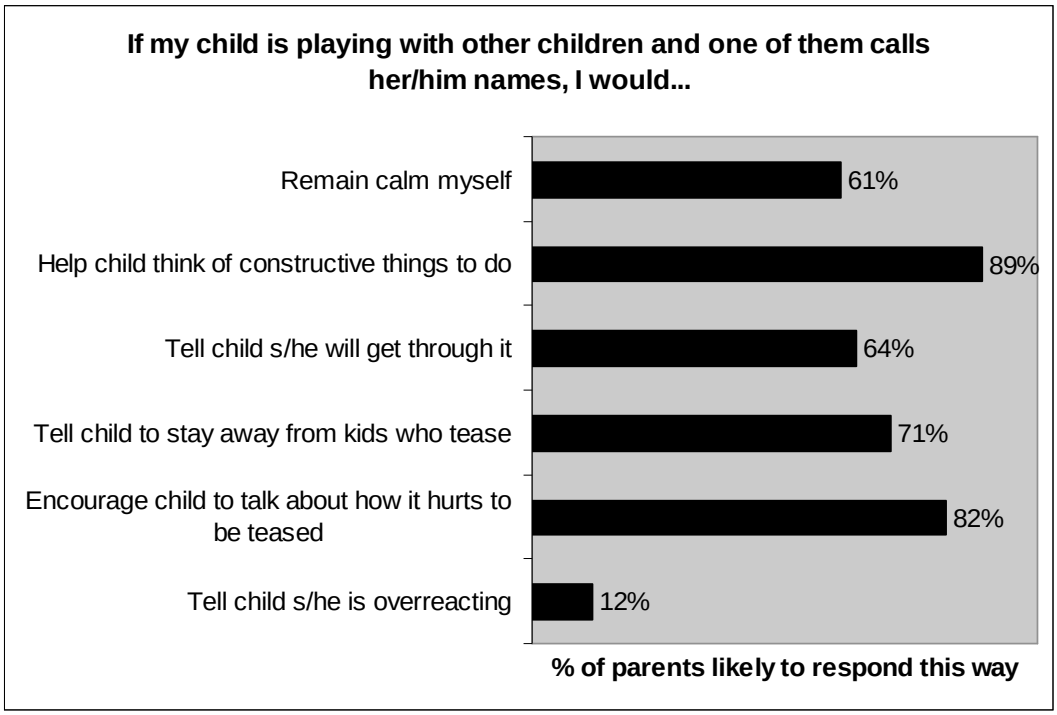
"The bottom line: what parents say matters!"

We also asked parents how they would react to particular problems with peers that kids might have. Here's an example:



But which suggestions are the "best" or the "right" ones to make? What can parents say that will help their kids the most? We found that parents who suggested their kids use *active, positive responses* (e.g., problem-solving, expressing feelings, positive thinking), had kids who were…

- ◊ less depressed
- ◊ less anxious
- ◊ less bullied by their peers

The bottom line: what parents say matters! We see better outcomes for kids whose parents encourage them to respond positively to problems with peers! Here are some general guidelines for helping your child deal with peer stress:

Consider the specific situation.
Is the problem an isolated incident or part of an ongoing conflict with a peer? Did it happen with the child's friend? Classmate?

Consider the things that make your child unique and special.
Every child has different abilities, which influence how they cope with stress. For example, some kids may be more comfortable with resolving a conflict with a peer directly than others. Encourage your child to play to his or her strengths in order to feel calm and confident in the face of stress with peers.