



# JPA

Juvenile Protective Association



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## What Makes a Bully?

What makes a bully? That question underscores a general attitude I've noticed recently. When we label someone a bully, we stop seeing the person. We think bullies are bad, ergo, bullies are bad people. But when you dig deeper, you'll generally find that bullies are misunderstood. They often lack the skills and confidence to deal with threatening or demeaning people or situations.

But let's be honest. Sometimes kids' behaviors are bad, but how many of us stop to wonder how we might be contributing? When we're quick to label someone a bully we're at risk of being bullies ourselves. When we make no effort to understand what prompts someone to bully—and assume that person did a bad thing or is a bad person—we lose the opportunity to change behavior for the better. It's often shocking for kids to learn, for example, that they have deep feelings, feelings that get hurt. If we punish them without making any effort to understand them, we risk encouraging them to double down—after all, no one cares about them anyway, right? So how should we respond?

I asked our Clinical Director this question. What he said made a lot of sense to me. First, seek to understand the behavior. Consequences might be warranted, but what's also needed is giving the bully the chance to feel understood. That feeling of being seen and heard is powerful. It may not change behavior immediately but it has a better chance of ending it than punishment alone.

Remember, when bullies feel punished and alienated, they get better at bullying. They're sneakier, smarter—and eventually bolder—about whom, when, and where they bully. Doubling down on bullying behavior is bad for us all. Next time, before you react, take a step back. Instead of asking, "What's wrong with this kid?" try "Why is he behaving this way?"

*Karen*