Is it bullying, or is it kids being kids?

This guide helps parents and caregivers recognize bullying and cyberbullying, tell them apart from ordinary conflict, and spot the warning signs children often can't put into words. It also explains why neurodivergent children are targeted more often, so you know what to look for before you decide what to do.

Is this BULLYING??

The CASEN Guide to Bullying, Cyberbullying & Online Safety



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RECOGNIZE the signs

UNDERSTAND the differences

SUPPORT your child

Is This Bullying? The CASEN Guide to Bullying, Cyberbullying & Online Safety

Your child tells you a classmate keeps "joking" with them. Or the group chat went quiet the moment they joined. Or they come home and say, "Everyone was laughing, but I don't think it was funny."

You find yourself asking: Is this bullying, or are these kids being kids?

The answer matters, because **bullying and ordinary conflict need different responses.** This guide helps you recognize bullying and cyberbullying, tell them apart from conflict, and understand why neurodivergent children are targeted more often.

Which Guide Do You Need?

CASEN has two guides on this topic. They do different jobs and are meant to be used together.

If you are asking	Open
What is bullying? What is cyberbullying? Is this bullying or ordinary conflict?	This guide
Something happened. What do I do now, and how do we prepare for the next time?	What to Do When Something Happens: The CASEN Guide to Understanding Bullying & Cyberbullying

What Bullying Is

Bullying is unwanted, aggressive behavior among peers where one person has more control or greater skills than the other, and the behavior is repeated or could be repeated. That is the definition CASEN teaches students, and it has three parts.

Part	What it means	What it can look like
Unwanted, aggressive behavior	Your child did not ask for it and does not want it. It is meant to hurt, scare, or embarrass.	Threats, rumors, name-calling, hitting, leaving someone out on purpose.
	One child uses an advantage to control or harm another.	Physical strength, popularity, a group against one, or access to embarrassing information
	It has happened more than once, or it is likely to happen again.	The same child every day at lunch. A post that keeps getting shared.

Two things about power are easy to miss. Power is not only size. A smaller child with more friends, more social skill, or a screenshot can hold the power. And power can shift, so the same two children may be on different sides in different settings.

All three parts matter. One mean comment hurts, and it still deserves your attention. It becomes bullying when the power is uneven, and the behavior keeps coming.

Bullying or Conflict?

It is not bullying when two children with no power imbalance argue, fight, or disagree. That is conflict. Conflict is a normal part of growing up, and it still deserves your attention. It needs a different kind of help.

Ask	Ordinary conflict	What it can look like
Who has the power?	It is roughly even. Both children can hold their own	One child has the advantage and uses it.
How often does it happen?	Once, or now and then.	Again and again, or it is likely to continue.
Who is upset?	Usually both children	Mostly one child. The other may seem pleased or unbothered.
What happens when someone says “stop?”	It usually stops, and the children work it out	It keeps going, or it moves where adults cannot see
What does it need?	Coaching. Help both children solve the problem.	Protection. Adults step in.

The last row is the reason the label matters. Asking a child to "work it out" with someone who has power over them puts the burden on the child being hurt.

One caution. Some single incidents need action whether or not they meet the definition of bullying. A threat, a physical attack, or a request for private images is a safety issue first.

See Step 3 of What to Do When Something Happens.

The Three Types of Bullying

CASEN teaches students three types of bullying. Children often do not realize that the second one counts.

Type	What it is	Examples
Verbal	Saying or writing mean things.	Teasing, name-calling, taunting, inappropriate sexual comments, threatening to cause harm.
Social	Hurting someone's reputation or relationships. It is sometimes called relational bullying.	Leaving someone out on purpose, telling other children not to be friends with someone, spreading rumors, embarrassing someone in public.
Physical	Hurting a person's body or belongings.	Hitting, kicking, pinching, spitting, tripping, pushing, taking or breaking someone's things, making mean or rude hand gestures.

Social bullying is the hardest for adults to see. It leaves no bruises and no broken glasses, and it is easy to dismiss as drama.

Where and when it happens. Most reported bullying happens in the school building. A large share happens on the playground, on the bus, and on the way to and from school. Cyberbullying carries it home.

What Cyberbullying Looks Like

Cyberbullying is bullying that takes place over digital devices like cell phones, computers, and tablets. It includes sending, posting, or sharing negative, harmful, false, or mean content about someone, and sharing private information to embarrass them.

A child does not need a social media account to be cyberbullied. A game with chat or a class group text is enough.

Where	What it can look like
Group chats	Being removed from the chat. A new chat started without them. Screenshots passed around.
Social media	Mean comments. Embarrassing photos or videos posted or shared. A fake account pretending to be your child.
Gaming	Harassment in voice or text chat. Other players gang up on them or kick them out again and again.
Texts and direct messages	Repeated insults or threats. Messages telling your child that nobody likes them.

Three things make cyberbullying different from bullying in person.

It is	Which means
Persistent	Devices are on 24 hours a day, so home is no longer a break from it.
Permanent	What is posted can stay public unless it is reported and removed.
Hard to notice	Parents and teachers do not overhear it, so it can go on for a long-time unseen.

In the most recent federal survey, about 1 in 5 students ages 12 to 18 said they were bullied at school. About 1 in 5 of those students said it happened online or by text. Source: StopBullying.gov, What Is Cyberbullying.

The Roles Children Play

Bullying is rarely just two children. Research estimates that witnesses are present in many bullying situations, and what they do can keep it going or help stop it.

Role	What the child does
The child who is bullied	Is the target of the behavior.
The child who bullies	Starts or leads the behavior.
Children who assist	Join in and help, without starting it.
Children who reinforce	Laugh, react, or share. They give it an audience.
Onlookers/Bystanders	Watch and stay silent. Many want to help and do not know how.
Children who defend/Upstanders	Comfort the child being bullied, speak up, or get an adult.

Most children play more than one role over time. A child who is bullied in one setting may bully or laugh along in another, and children who are both bullied and bully others are at higher risk of depression.

That is why it helps to talk about behavior and avoid labels. Say "the child who bullied," not "the bully." A label tells a child the behavior is who they are. Behavior can change.

For what your child can safely do as a witness, see Part Two of What to Do When Something Happens. Source: StopBullying.gov, The Roles Kids Play in Bullying.

Why Neurodivergent Children Are Targeted More Often

Children with disabilities, including autistic children and children with ADHD, are at increased risk of being bullied. None of the reasons below are faults in your child. They describe what other children take advantage of.

What raises the risk	What it can look like
Fewer friends nearby	Friends protect against bullying. A child who eats alone or plays alone is easier to target.
Social cues are harder to read	Your child may miss sarcasm or not realize a joke is at their expense.
Differences that others can see	Stimming, intense interests, the way your child speaks, sensory needs, or leaving class for support.
Big reactions	A child whose upset is predictable may be provoked on purpose, for an audience.
A strong wish to belong	Your child may do what others dare them to do, hoping to be included.

When a "friend" is not a friend. Some children may not know they are being bullied. They may describe someone who mocks, tricks, or uses them as a friend. These questions help your child check:

- Do they talk to you only when they want something?
- Do they ask you to do things that get you in trouble?
- Are they laughing with you, or at you?
- How do you feel after you spend time with them?
-

When bullying is aimed at a child's disability and creates a hostile environment at school, it can become disability harassment, which the school must address. What to Do When Something Happens explains how to raise it with the school. Source: StopBullying.gov, Bullying and Youth with Disabilities and Special Health Needs.

Warning Signs

Many children never say the words "I'm being bullied." It is estimated that few school bullying incidents are reported. Look for changes in your child

Where to look	What you may notice
Body	Unexplained injuries. Frequent headaches or stomachaches. Trouble sleeping or nightmares. Coming home hungry because they skipped lunch.
School	Not wanting to go. Falling grades. Loss of interest in schoolwork.
Belongins	Lost or destroyed clothing, books, or electronics.
Friends	A sudden loss of friends. Avoiding social situations.
Mood	Feeling helpless. Lower self-esteem. Talk of running away or of hurting themselves.
Devices	Much more or much less time online. Hiding the screen. Upset after being on a device. Accounts closed or new ones appearing.

In a neurodivergent child, the same distress may show up as more meltdowns or shutdowns, school refusal, or dropping a game or interest they loved.

Signs your child may be bullying others. They get into physical or verbal fights, have friends who bully, grow more aggressive, are sent to the office often, have unexplained money or new belongings, blame others, or worry a great deal about popularity.

Why children do not tell. They may feel helpless, fear payback, feel humiliated, believe no one would understand, or fear losing the friends they have. *Speak Up, I've Got You: The CASEN Family Speak-Up Plan*, a free guide in the CASEN Resource Library, helps you remove those barriers before they are needed, with named trusted adults, ready-made words, and a family promise that telling will not cost your child their device.

A sign is a reason to ask, not proof. These changes can point to other problems too. If your child talks about hurting themselves, call or text 988. Source: StopBullying.gov, Warning Signs for Bullying.

Read the Situation With the CASEN Compass™

When you are not sure what you are looking at, the CASEN Compass™ gives you four directions to check.

Compass point	Your child asks
❤️ Connection	Is this relationship healthy? Is the power even, or does one child have the advantage?
🛡️ Safety	Is my child being hurt in body, feelings, or reputation? Does it keep happening?
📣 Advocacy	Does my child know this is not okay? Do they have the words to tell someone?
🧭 Navigation	Is this conflict to coach, or bulling to stop? What is our next step?

What to Do Next

If what you are seeing fits bullying, or you are still not sure, open *What to Do When Something Happens: The CASEN Guide to Understanding Bullying & Cyberbullying*. It walks you through the first conversation, saving evidence, working with the school, and preparing your family for the next time.

No one deserves to be picked on or bullied. If you see something, say something.

How Ready Is Your Child?

Take the free CASEN Social Media Readiness Assessment to see your child's strengths and areas for growth across Connection, Safety, Advocacy, and Navigation.

TAKE THE FREE ASSESSMENT

Sources

The definitions and the three types of bullying come from the CASEN Connect bullying lessons. The rest was checked against these StopBullying.gov pages on October 10, 2026:

- Warning Signs for Bullying
- Other Types of Aggressive Behavior (peer conflict)
- What Is Cyberbullying
- The Roles Kids Play in Bullying
- Bullying and Youth with Disabilities and Special Health Needs

About CASEN

CASEN (Collaborative Advancement for Social-Emotional Needs) prepares neurodivergent children to navigate social and digital environments with greater confidence through social-emotional learning, social media readiness education, and guided practice.

Educational and Safety Disclaimer

This guide provides general educational information and is not a substitute for individualized legal, medical, mental health, law-enforcement, or other professional advice. Circumstances differ. When a child may be in immediate danger, contact emergency or law-enforcement services.