

# Rotten Classmates

Keep your little angels on the straight and narrow when they're up against bad apples

BY KRISTI VALENTINI | ILLUSTRATION BY ANNA GRAPE

In elementary school, your kids may encounter classmates with rude behavior — and their friends' bad manners might just rub off. Experts say parents can counter the influence of peers. Here are tips for keeping good kids good when they're up against rotten personalities.



## THE BULLY

We all know this kid: She tears up classmates' artwork, punches kids in the stomach and has to be first in line, no matter what she has to do to get that spot.

As many as half of all children will be bullied at some time during the school years, according to the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. And while no parent wants to see a child suffer at the hands of a schoolyard bully, they also don't want to raise a brute.

"Children (who) are tormented by bullies themselves sometimes become bullies in order to cope and regain a feeling of control," says Charlotte Reznick, child and educational psychologist and author of the book *The Power of Your Child's Imagination*.

If your child has become the aggressor, help replace the feeling of power he or she gets from bullying with the inner power of compassion. Get down on his or her level to have a conversation (shows you're in this together) and maintain a neutral tone when talking about behavior, says Reznick.

Through dialogue and open-ended questions, help your child reach conclusions about why bullying is bad. For example, "Gee, that must have felt good to punch that kid

that was looking at you wrong. I bet that made you feel strong. What do you think would happen if you did that to everyone? You probably wouldn't have a lot of friends, huh?"

## THE POTTY MOUTH

Your child's latest vocabulary is following the example of a new BFF, who says words best reserved for the bathroom nearly every time she speaks.

"I think children like saying potty words because it's a little bit of power, and we often laugh the first time they say those words," says Reznick.

Reinforce why off-limits words aren't appropriate by going over the house rules and discussing how certain words make people uncomfortable. If spewing off-limits words continues, admonish in a neutral voice, "We don't say that word in this house. If you say it again, you're going to your room," says Matthew Goldfine, a clinical child psychologist with practices in New York and New Jersey.

Alternatively, you can try taking the excitement out of bad words. Set a timer for a minute and let your child say the taboo word as many times as he or she can to get it out of his or her system, Reznick says.

## THE TEASER

This classmate's wounding words are more than fleeting meanness or a biting joke; they're meant to make a peer feel embarrassed and small.

"This is the modern-day version of bullying. I'm going to socially isolate you, give you terrible nicknames and start horrible rumors about you. It's the *Mean Girls* scenario," says Goldfine.

If you see your child put other kids down, intervene right away. "This trait can quickly seep into your child's character and is difficult to address once they are in their teen years," he says.

Explain to your child how his or her behavior is hurtful and give consequences. Then turn the situation into a chance to further your child's empathy: Ask your child how it would feel to be on the receiving end. Most importantly, be a model for your child in how to accept people who are different than you.

"Remember," says Goldfine, "just because your child exhibits bad behavior now doesn't mean that their personality is formed and they will be bad forever. These situations are teachable moments that happen to everybody."

## THE TROUBLEMAKER

This kid knows how to cause trouble. He leaves the classroom when the teacher isn't looking and writes on the bathroom walls for fun. You don't like your kid hanging around him, but what can you do?

"Just because your child is friends with a troublemaker doesn't mean they will be friends forever. If you try to destroy the friendship, it might backfire and only make their relationship stronger," psychologist Goldfine warns.

If you're about to blow over the buddies' latest infraction, cool off first. When calm, start by asking your child what he or she likes about doing bad things, says Reznick. Ask in a neutral tone, "Is it fun and exciting when you write on the board when the teacher isn't looking? I wonder how it makes the teacher feel? How would you feel if you were the teacher?"

You can also remind your child that he or she is a good kid and usually obeys rules. Ask, "What kind of kid do you want to be?"

Also try posting positively phrased house rules ("Be kind." "Respect other people's things.") that help define boundaries and let your child know when punishments will occur. ●