The Other Side of Bullying
By Kathleen Tuck
Boise State University Communications and Marketing

Every school has at least one. The popular girl who spreads mean rumors about her classmates and shuts out all but her closest friends from her social circle. Or the big boy who picks on smaller children, stealing their lunch money and threatening to hurt them if they tell. They’re bullies, and they may be targeting your child.

Or even worse, the bully could be your child.

According to the National Crime Prevention Council, 74 percent of children ages 8-11 say bullying and teasing occur at their schools. The National Education Association reports that every day, about 160,000 children miss school because they are scared of a bully. Kids who are harassed are more likely to do poorly in school, be depressed, have low self-esteem and, in extreme cases, even turn to violence themselves for protection.

Several recent high-profile cases have illustrated how dangerous bullying can be. A 13-year-old English boy hung himself after being taunted incessantly because of his choice of music and clothing. Another 13-year-old in Kentucky shot himself after being teased about a lisp and his tall, gangly appearance. And a Missouri mother is accused of driving a former friend of her daughter’s to commit suicide in a celebrated cyber-bullying case where the mother pretended to be a teen-aged boy.

Not only can bullying have tragic consequences for the victims, it can also negatively affect the bullies themselves. The NCPC reports that bullies are more likely to do poorly in school, smoke and drink alcohol and commit crimes in the future.

So what can you do if you suspect your child is being a little too heavy-handed? First, the NCPC recommends taking the situation seriously. Don’t treat it as a passing phase. Even if you expect no long-lasting effects for your child, remember that another child is being hurt. Second, find out why your child is bullying others.

“From a psychological perspective, kids tend to become bullies for two reasons,” said Mary Pritchard, associate professor of psychology at Boise State University and director of the Family Studies Initiative.

The first is to avoid getting bullied themselves, and the second is because it gets them attention.

Pritchard suggests parents ask themselves two things: 1) are they giving their child plenty of positive attention and not just paying attention to them when they misbehave, and 2) what is going on in their child’s life — for instance, are they being bullied themselves, at school or even at home?
Boise State public policy associate professor Elizabeth Fredericksen, who has extensively studied bullying in the workplace, said insecurity can also play a role. “Unfortunately, just as in adult bullying, when people feel powerless in their private lives, they are likely to aggress in a public forum. Thus, if your kid is the bully, perhaps you need to consider what messages you are sending about managing conflict.”

Fredericksen also notes that many educators believe that media and movies are establishing models of behavior where the “tough guy” wins and if someone gets hurt, they usually deserve it. “This can play out in desensitizing others to the plight of the bully’s target,” she said.

By partnering with teachers and school administrators, and taking a close look at their own interactions with their children, parents can have a positive impact on decreasing bullying behavior. For more suggestions on dealing with both sides of the bully issue, visit www.ncpc.org/topics and click on “bullying.”