

Understanding Playful vs. Hurtful Teasing and Bullying Behavior



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This pamphlet is designed to help parents and students navigate the unclear roadways of behaviors that can be seen as hurtful teasing or bullying behavior. It is broken down into sections that will help the reader understand various aspects of behaviors that can be seen as inappropriate. Additionally, we have thought provoking questions throughout the pamphlet to help start a dialogue between you and your son or daughter.

To begin, we have a few questions that we would like for you to think about as you read this pamphlet.

- 1) Were you ever picked on as a child?
- 2) Were you ever bullied to the point that you did not want to attend school?
- 3) Did you ever hurtfully tease or bully someone else?
- 4) Do you know the difference between teasing and bullying behavior?

It is important to remember that our perceptions drive the way we handle and view various situations. For example, if you were picked on as a child, you may be more vigilant in addressing bullying behavior than someone who has never experienced bullying.

Current Research

There is a great deal of research indicating that approximately 30% of all kids are involved in bullying behavior (Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Nansel et al, 2001). These kids fall into three distinct categories; the bully, the victims/target, and the “grey” kids (the kids that bully and get bullied). Each group has various characteristics. As you read this list, think about your own child/teen. Do they seem to fit in any one of these groups?

Bully- Tends to be hyper-active, they often have a greater acceptance of antisocial behaviors (Nansel, 2004), oftentimes they are popular (Ormel, 2005), and are generally unaffected by inflicting pain and suffering (Nansel, 2004; Ormel, 2005).

Victim/Target- Tends to have lower levels of self-esteem, high anxiety, and higher degrees of loneliness (Hanish & Guerra, 2004).

Grey Kids- These kids get picked on and then turn around and pick on others. Oftentimes we are not sure if they start the bullying behavior or if it is a reaction to them being bullied. Of the three groups, the gray kids have the highest levels of anxiety, greatest issues with self-esteem, depression and suicidal ideations (Nansel, 2004; Ormel, 2005).

Something to Think About



Do any of these findings surprise you?

Parents, if you had to pick a category pertaining to your child's behaviors and how they view themselves, which category do you believe he or she would most closely align?

Student, do you think that you fit in any of the above categories?

When Teasing is Okay

Something to Think About



Do you think that it is ever okay to tease?

Yes or No

We live in a society where teasing is part of our culture. In order to assure that we are teasing in a fashion that does not cause pain or hurt to another, we must differentiate between the times when teasing is playful and when it is hurtful.

Teasing is playful when:

- We use teasing or roasting as a way of fitting in or when talking with our friends, and everyone involved is

getting an equal piece of the "teasing pie".

- People are not making fun of someone's disabilities, ethnicity, faith or other characteristics that are out of the other person's control.

- Can you think of anything else that would be out of someone else's control?
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- It is not meant to harm you in any way and if you asked the person to stop, they would stop.
- The teasing is done by someone you have a close relationship with.
- The teasing is not repeated over and over again .

Teasing is hurtful when:

- One person gets more than their fair share of the teasing and it becomes a group ganging up on one person.
- The teasing happens repeatedly, even when that person has asked them to stop.
- Hurtful teasing is done by someone you do not have a relationship with.
- People are making fun of characteristics that are out of that person's control (faith, disability, etc.).

When does playful teasing move into hurtful teasing?

If you think about it on a continuum, teasing in general is playful as long as both parties agree and the kids involved know it is not meant to harm them. It acts as a way to communicate and is usually done among friends.

Hurtful teasing is no longer playful. Comments are made between people where one begins to get offended or asks the person to stop and they do not. Hurtful teasing can be painful and uncomfortable for the person being teased, especially if it is done in front of their peers. Hurtful teasing can make a person feel like they are **less than**. Sometimes, people use their gifts to put people down instead of lifting them up. “Gifts” are positive attributes or qualities that allow us to excel. For example, some of us are good listeners, caring, empathic, and very organized. Some of us shine at academics, sports, art and music. Some have the gift of shopping or TV critic! Whatever your gifts are, it is important to use them to lift people up, not bring them down!

Something to Think About



So, what are your gifts?

As a family, take a few minutes to discuss what some of your gifts are?

Remember, when someone uses their gifts to bring someone else down it can make them feel “less than.”

Characteristics that distinguish hurtful teasing from bullying behavior

Most studies that define bullying behavior have three to four common characteristics. We have put together an acronym to help you remember the three main components that distinguish bullying behavior from hurtful teasing.

We call this acronym RAP®.

R– REPEATED OFTEN
TO THE SAME
PERSON OR
DIFFERENT PEOPLE

A– AN IMBALANCE OF
POWER

P– PURPOSEFUL WITH
THE INTENT TO
MAKE FUN OF,
EMBARRASS OR
EXCLUDE OTHERS

Typically all three of the above characteristics need to be in place for it to be called bullying behavior.

We want to clarify the phrase “*Imbalance of Power.*”

What do you think an imbalance of power looks like?

Most people believe this imbalance has to do with size (and it can), but an imbalance of power means so much more than size or strength.

Here are some ways in which an imbalance of power can be created:

Popularity (social status), race, ethnicity, faith, gender, social economic status, and/or number of people involved.

Questions for Review:

1. What do you see as the main differences between playful teasing and hurtful teasing?

2. Name the components necessary for it to be called bullying behavior.

What to do if the school calls you about your child being involved in bullying behavior.

1. Be open to the phone call. One of the biggest obstacles when addressing bullying behavior is that some parents are in denial about their son or daughter’s involvement.

2. Begin by asking your child how he/she is doing.

3. Ask them if they are aware that the school/parent has contacted you about their behavior.

4. Question them about the reports you have been receiving from a variety of sources that states he/she is involved in bullying behavior.

5. If they deny the behavior, reiterate the seriousness of the reports.

6. See if they can define what bullying behavior is. (Refer back to your children or teen’s class or school expectations and common language).

7. Let them know that this behavior goes against your **Code of Ethics** and will not be tolerated.

8. Let them know that they can talk with other adults in the community and at the school, including the counselor, to address some of the concerns that have come up. If the bullying behavior does not stop, then other consequences will occur.

9. Let them know that you are there for them and as a family will get through this.

10. Seek outside assistance as needed.

Code of Ethics:

In the above section, *"What to do if the School Calls you About your Child Being Involved in Bullying Behavior,"* # 7 mentions a Code of Ethics. Below is an example of one family's code:

Their Code of Ethics was organized in three sections: beliefs, ideals, and rules. Their beliefs section included items in which they as a family believed as a whole:

1. Families should be trusting, honest, and close to one another.
2. The way that we treat other people will help make us feel good about ourselves.
3. It is important to do our part in society.
4. It is important to help those in need.
5. It is important to remember people throughout the year, not just at the holidays.
6. We must be responsible for ourselves.
7. It is only human to make mistakes, but we should learn from our mistakes so we don't do them again.
8. It is wrong to judge another person by the things they have or do not have. People should be evaluated by their hearts and by the way they treat others, not by material possessions.
9. We believe that friends should be chosen carefully. We don't believe in hanging

around with people who do things we believe to be wrong, such as stealing or doing drugs. Although we don't judge people by what they have or don't have, we do judge people by the things they do and the way they treat others.

The second section is made up of ideals (values or principles). For most families, faith, religion, or spiritual beliefs would be listed here.

The last section is the place where each family member agrees to the rules in which he or she will abide. For this section, as well as the other two sections, each family member thought about what they wanted to say before meeting as a group. Here is what the young person wrote. He was in 6th grade.

- If anyone ever hurts me or makes me feel uncomfortable in any way, I will tell an adult that I trust (the child goes on to list those adults).
- I am responsible for my actions and myself.
- I will tell the truth so I can be trusted.
- I will do my best in school.
- I will live by our family's beliefs and ideals.
- I will do my household chores to contribute to my family.
- I will respect my elders.

Here is what the parents put down:

- We will respect you as a person.
- We will admit when we are wrong.
- We will apologize when necessary.
- We will treat you fairly.
- We will not embarrass you or insult you.
- We will always make time for you and be

there for you.

- We will always listen to what you have to say.
- We will always believe you, unless you give us reasons not to.

This example of a Code of Ethics works for this particular family. As with any idea or strategy, it may not work for yours. You can create a Code of Ethics at any time, but a good time to do so is when your children are in elementary school (between 3rd and 5th grade is ideal), so there is a solid foundation in place before they start junior high or middle school. As your children develop, so might your Code of Ethics, but the essence should always remain the same. Remember to make this fun!

Something to Think About



Do you have something similar to a Code of Ethics?

Do you think this type of code would be useful within your family?

So what now?

You have been offered this pamphlet because your child/teen has been told they are exhibiting behavior that may lead to bullying behavior, your child/teen has been issued their first consequence for bullying behavior, or you wanted more information on the topic of what distinguishes playful teasing from hurtful teasing and bullying behavior.

Thank you again for being open and willing to look for ways to reduce bullying behavior among young people! We think that it is important to point out that bullying not only occurs among youth, it is prevalent within the adult community as well. Take a look around; do you know adults that exhibit bullying behavior? Many adults would say yes. We must be vigilant when tackling the issue of bullying behavior. This is a problem for all age groups. It really is everyone's responsibility to reduce bullying behavior in our communities!!

**Jeff Dess and Dr. Tammy White with
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Everyone Has a Part

Hurtful teasing and bullying behavior is not only an issue for the bully and target/victim; it is a systemic issue that affects everyone. The following list discusses what bystanders (people that witness the behavior) can do to help minimize its impact.

Bystander Strategies:

- *Distraction.* If you are with a friend who begins to hurtfully tease someone else, quickly distract your friend by changing the subject or asking him a question. You would be keeping your friend out of trouble, but more importantly, helping the person who is being hurtfully teased or bullied. Distracting the person who is being hurtfully teased or bullied works as well.
- *Support the target/victim privately.* If you could not get the person or persons to stop the hurtful teasing or bullying behavior, for whatever reason, go back to the target/victim of the behavior and support them privately. You could say “*I am sorry for what my friend said, or those other kids said, and I will talk to them about it to see if I can get the bullying behavior to stop.*”
- *Support the person openly.* We only recommend this strategy to kids who feel confident or have a certain amount of respect among their peers.
- Do not feed into the behavior. Don’t laugh at their jokes if they are humiliating someone, and do not promote or attend a fight. As bystanders, it is our responsibility to de-escalate the situation, not feed fuel to an already hot fire.
- Telling an adult. Tell an adult that will listen and is willing to take a report that someone is being hurtfully teased or bullied.