

Teasing and Bullying Behaviors: School-Aged Children, Kindergarten through Middle School

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We tend to think of teasing as playful fun. We teach toddlers to tease in a game like manner. Most children will tease and call others silly names by age three or four. But, children don't tease out of anger or to be mean, until after age five (Butler & Kratz, 2000). We tend to quickly address children's minor complaints about teasing. We tell children, 'sticks and stones will break your bones but names will never hurt you'. The American Heritage Dictionary defines teasing in this way, "to annoy or make fun of someone persistently". Maybe teasing is not such innocent fun, or at least maybe it isn't always innocent fun.

When you think about it, teasing is double-edged behavior. On the one hand, the teaser is having fun with the other person, on the other hand the teaser is making fun of the other person. When people tease each other, intentions can be quite mixed or blurred. When a bigger child teases a smaller child, when a parent teases, or when a smarter, stronger or more quick-witted peer teases, the teasing becomes a power play. The child being teased is in the down or powerless position. Some experts feel that teasing is a coping strategy to deal with feelings of shame in ones self, and to trigger this feeling of shame in others (Kayton, n.d.).

When teasing becomes more serious, it is called bullying. Bullying involves repeated verbal or physical mistreatment, when there is an imbalance of power (Wiler, 1993). There doesn't seem to be a great deal of difference between making fun of someone 'persistently', and mistreating someone repeatedly.

Bullying can be indirect as when children isolate a target child and intentionally exclude the child from the group. It can be direct and open too, when repeated hurtful acts and words are used. It is a game of one-upmanship (Lingren, 1997). Bullying is more aggressive than teasing. It is an expression of power through aggression (Pepler, Connolly & Craig, 1997).

Step it up to still one more level, and bullying becomes harassment. The Federal Department of Education defines harassment to include crude name-calling, threats, or physical or sexual assaults. Bullying can also involve active shunning of a target child (US Dept. of Education, 1998). Schools are responsible to act in cases of harassment, and a school district can be held responsible when it responds indifferently to charges of harassment among students (Office of Civil Rights, 2001, January).

We tend to look at teasing one child at a time, but teasing can also be looked at in a family, or school, or community. Teasing is pervasive in our culture. Teasing and bullying are problems in schools not only in the United States, but worldwide. There has been considerable research on teasing and bullying in the Scandinavian countries, in Great Britain and in Japan (Banks, 1997). In fact, a great deal of what we know about teasing has been learned from studies in other countries.

How common is teasing?

Teasing begins as early as kindergarten in schools. One study showed that almost half of kindergarten children complained that they were picked on, or that kids said bad things about them. Boys and girls were equally likely to be victimized in kindergarten, and verbal aggression is more common than physical aggression in this age group (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996).

About 20% of kindergarten children, and 10% of third to sixth graders, are victims of teasing and bullying in schools (Leff, Kupersmidt, Patterson & Power, 1999). Researchers study teasing using measurement scales or surveys of children's perceptions, parents' perceptions, and teachers' perceptions. In addition, observers go into schools to collect data by observing children directly.

When observers watch children, they find that a child is bullied on the playground once every seven minutes. Surprisingly, observers also report that bullying occurs in the classroom once every twenty-five minutes. Children say that more boys do the bullying, but the observers reported that both girls and boys bully at about the same rate (Pepler, Connolly & Craig, 1997). Girls' behaviors are not always interpreted as bullying.

When you ask students, boys report that physical aggression is more hurtful than social aggression, but girls rate social and physical aggression equally harmful. As girls get older, they rate social aggression as increasingly hurtful and girls say it gets worse as they get older. Boys say it decreases (Galen & Underwood, 1997).

When does teasing and bullying occur most frequently?

School transitions appear to be particularly common but critical times, during which children are teased or bullied. Researchers think that as children's groups form and reform, students try out aggressive behaviors randomly on everybody. Once they figure out who will react and who won't, they tend to narrow the focus of the teasing to specific children. After the transition time, the group figures out from which children they can get a reaction. The bullying then tends to concentrate on a smaller group of students (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996).

As students move from elementary school to middle school, they report an increase in teasing and bullying. Students know this, and worry about the transition. The only small positive in this, is that after the groups reform as children adjust to the new school and the new groups stabilize, the teasing and bullying tends to decrease somewhat (Asidao, Vion & Espelage, 1999; Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996; Pellegrini & Bartini, 1999). Research shows that direct bullying increases until it peaks in middle school, and then declines (Banks, 1997). >

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What can we learn from studies of middle school students?

Three important studies were shared in Boston at the American Psychological Association Conference in the summer of 1999. In one study, 80% of middle school students said that they had behaved as bullies in the previous month. Teasing, name-calling, threatening, social ridiculing and physical aggression appears to be common in middle schools. However, for whatever reasons, the students did not describe it as serious (Asidaio, Vion, & Espelage, 1999). On average, the studies show that 80 to 90% of middle school students report being victims as well as engaging in the bullying behavior. Those who engage in both bully and victim behavior, are described as bully-victims (Asidaio, Vion & Espelage, 1999).

The second study of middle school students found that both students and teachers identified more students whom they described as bully-victims, than they identified as just bullies, or just victims (Paulk, Swearer, Song, & Tam Carey, 1999). Some of the students who participate in bully behavior, don't feel very good about it but they do it anyway (Asidaio, Vion, & Espelage, 1999).

The third study of middle school students, found that students rated by their teachers as very high in emotional intensity are bullies in elementary school. These students continue to exhibit the same bullying behaviors in middle school. They continue to exhibit bullying behavior, even after they have made new friends and have adjusted to the new environment. It seems to be the primary way that this group of students establishes peer group status (Pellegrini & Bartini, 1999).

Why do children tease or bully each other?

Some children tease to get negative attention. It is often said that 'negative attention is better than no attention' at all. Some students imitate what happens to them at home. Their parents tease them, or older sisters and brothers tease them. Some students tease and bully others because it is

'cool'. They think that they be accepted by popular children if they behave this way. Some students tease because they are trying to understand what makes a particular victim child different or special. They tease children who are not as competent academically or who are handicapped. 'SPED' kids tend to get teased a good deal in some schools, where there is no sanction against teasing. Many students tease because they see teasing, put-downs, sarcasm and lack of respect on television, in the movies or in video games (Freedman, 1999). Teasing continues because many adults think it is normal and that it is important for children to learn to stand up to negative behavior (Asidaio, Vion & Espelage, 1999; Barone, 1997).

Who are the bullies?

Bullies tend to be active children. Many bullies tend to be impulsive, disruptive, and aggressive. They are easily provoked. Bullies need to be in control, and when they are caught they may say they were provoked into it (Banks, 1997).

Bully behavior is different in boys and girls. Boys who bully threaten to hit or take things from peers. Boys who bully tend to be stronger than their peers, and need to control others. Girls spread rumors and leave a child out of the group. Strength is not as important for girls who bully; in fact, girls who bully tend to be physically weaker than their peers (Banks, 1997; Pepler, Connolly & Craig, 1997).

A very interesting study of fourth to sixth grade boys, showed that aggressive boys could be very popular and accepted by the other children in the school. These boys were good at sports and were considered 'cool', tough, and skilled in exploiting others. They were not considered good students. Bullying is a major part of their social status (Rodkin, Farmer, Pearl, & Van Acker, 2000). Bullies enjoy the rewards of bullying, lack empathy, and like to control and dominate peers (Olweus, 1991; Pepler, Connolly & Craig, 1997; Miller, Rubin & Carroll, 1998).

Although many parents tell their children that bullies tease and are mean because they don't feel good about themselves, or are jealous of the child who is being teased, research does not support this point of view. Bullies typically have positive feelings about aggressive behavior. Bullies don't feel bad about themselves, they have strong self-esteem and low anxiety (Banks, 1997). Telling children that bullies have low self-esteem will be difficult to buy, when a powerful peer is badgering the child. It is clearly inaccurate information to give a child and could be dangerous if the child decides to fight back with put-downs, which might exacerbate the bully behavior.

Some aggressive children act alone. These isolated bullies may be acting out because they aren't part of any group. Bully behavior is frightening enough when one child bullies another, but groups of students engage in bullying behavior. Aggressive students attract each other which helps them feel that their behavior is really okay. When aggressive boys group together, the groups are formed of bullies, boys who are secondary helpers, and onlookers. The onlookers give the group positive feedback for the negative behaviors, and support the behavior of the group (Rodkin, Farmer, Pearl, Van Acker, 2000). >

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Who are the victims?

Children who are victims tend to be anxious and cautious children. They don't retaliate when they are mistreated. They tend to be isolated. Victims usually don't tell, but if they do they tell their parents. Victims tend to be close to their parents and are often quite protected children (Banks, 1997). Victims may be physically different from their peers; smaller, weaker or disabled (Asidao, Vion & Espelage, 1999). However, more typically, victims do not differ from their peers or stand out significantly (Miller, Rubin & Carroll, 1998).

Boys and girls are equally likely to be victimized, but boys get hit and pushed more; whereas, girls receive more verbal aggression (Barone, 1997; Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996; Pepler, Connolly & Craig, 1997). Students, who are victimized in one class, or at one grade level, tend to be victimized again. By the time they reach middle school, the pattern of victimization is well established and may even intensify (Miller, Rubin & Carroll, 1998; Pepler, Connolly & Craig, 1997).

One in five children provoke the teasing and play the victim role. These children are referred to as provocative victims. They may behave in this way to get attention or because in this way they can control when, where and how they are teased (Kayton, n.d.). Other provocative victims are simply very impulsive children who are talking or moving before they think, and aggravate their peers with their persistent immature behaviors. Some children are best described as provocative bully-victims. This group of bully-victims is insecure and is less likable than their peers. They are easily provoked, get angry quickly, and are at risk for adjustment issues (Pepler, Connolly & Craig, 1997).

Teasing does not equally effect children. The children who have a strong temperamental trait of emotional reactivity, are more sensitive to the shame involved in teasing (Kayton, n.d.). These children react quickly. They may cry or fight back both of which may instigate more teasing.

What are the effects of being teased or bullied?

Studies generally show that 15 to 20% of all students have experienced a degree of teasing that could be considered to be damaging at school (Kayton, n.d.). Victims react to teasing and bullying with sliding grades and absenteeism. They react with decreased self-esteem, low risk taking, anxiety, and even depression (Banks, 1997; Leff, Kupersmidt, Patterson & Power, 1999; US Dept. of Ed, 1998). Bullying can leave lasting emotional and psychological effects (Barone, 1997). Verbal abuse is as damaging as physical abuse, and often has more serious consequences, (Cushman & Johnson, 2000).

When students don't feel safe, they don't do well academically. Children who are victims of teasing or mild bullying feel that school is not a place where they can be happy. They learn to feel uncomfortable and anxious around other children (Hoover & Hazler, 1991). Girls who bully learn to be aggressive in interpersonal interactions. Researchers think that this could effect their parenting style in the future (Garrity, Jens, Sager & Shor-Camilli, 1995).

There is a strong relationship between victimization and school attendance. In one study, 15% of children, who were frequently absent, said that bullying was the reason for not attending school. A serious effect of teasing and bullying is that children may begin to believe what is said about them, and their adjustment to school is effected. All types of teasing and bullying have the effect of making the victims feel lonely in school, but only verbal aggression predicts a student's attitude toward school. Students who become victims in school by age 8 or 9, tend to continue to be teased and picked on by peers (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996). The victims don't tell, because they think that the teasing will only get worse (Banks, 1997). Aggression toward victims becomes more indirect as students get older and it is more difficult to catch (Pepler, Connolly & Craig, 1997).

How well do the bullies do?

The bullies don't fare well either. They perform less well in school, do not follow school rules as well as others, and are absent or late frequently. They are not as invested in academic performance and their peers (Song, Swearer, Eagle & Cary, 2000). Bullying behavior may be an early indicator of antisocial behavior patterns (Pepler, Connolly & Craig, 1997). There is a strong correlation between chronic bullying and negative outcomes for the bullies (Banks, 1997).

Are there any consequences for the children who watch but don't help?

Boys support bullying more than girls (Pellegrini & Bartini, 1999). Bystanders tend to give positive attention to the bully, which helps the bully stay in control. Students who watch the teasing and bullying may get excited and join in. Bullies get their power from the children who support their behavior, by paying attention to it (Pepler, Connolly, & Craig, 1997).

The students, who stand by and don't help, behave in this way for several reasons. In common with the feelings of some adults, bystanders don't help partly because they feel the victim is learning something, or because the victim asked for it. In fact, most students feel that victims are at least partly responsible for bringing on the teasing. Students say that they believe bullying toughens the victims and helps them learn to behave properly.

However, many students who watch bullying do not like what they see, wish it wasn't happening and feel guilty that they don't stop it. Bullying and teasing effect the bystanders too because if they can't control the situation, they aren't safe either. Some worry about being drawn into the bullying because of peer pressure (Asidao, Vion, & Espelage, 1999; Banks, 1997; & US Dept. of Ed.)

In addition, bystanders worry that if they help, they will be bullied themselves. They fear losing their place in the peer group and feel a need to go along with the crowd. There is a strong sanction against telling. But, bystanders as noted above, feel guilty about their behavior. In a study of Jr. High students, 33% of students said that they knew that they should help victim, but they don't. Unfortunately, 24% of students said that bullying was none of their concern (Banks, 1997). >

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How can we decrease teasing and bullying?

It is more likely that children will tease others if the adults and children around them engage in teasing behaviors (Butler & Kratz, 2000). One way to decrease teasing is not to accept it in your home. Equally important, parents of children who are teased need to teach their child to control emotion. This is called 'affect regulation training' (Kayton, n.d.). Parents and teachers can control aggressive behaviors by limiting children's exposure to aggression. An interesting experiment was recently conducted in an elementary school. Third and fourth grade students participated in a series of classroom lessons, and then agreed to reduce the time that they spent watching television and videos. Peer and parent ratings of aggressive behavior, as well as direct observations of the children's behavior, each demonstrated that aggressive behavior decreased in the school. Student's perceptions of school as safe also increased (Robinson, 2001).

How can we prevent teasing and bullying in schools?

When low levels of teasing such as name-calling, teasing or shoving are tolerated in schools, some students will push the envelope further (Wilmes, 1997). Bullying is less prevalent in schools when there is a clear policy against it (banks, 1997).

The attitude of teachers toward bullying plays an important role in the amount and frequency of bullying in a school. When asked by researchers, very few students believed that adults would help them if they complained. Students do not believe that teachers will stop bullying (Banks, 1997). In one study, 40% of students in elementary school and 60% of students in junior high said that teachers don't try to stop bullying very often (Wiler, 1993). When they were actually observed in an important study, teachers stopped only one in 25 bullying incidents (Pepler, Connolly & Craig, 1997).

Bullying occurs during recess, at lunch, and in the corridors and bathrooms in schools. Teachers and other adults in schools may have become so used to seeing the behavior that they no longer react to it. Perhaps they miss it. Because some of the teasing behaviors fit the male stereotype, teachers may not take it seriously (Barone, 1997; Paulk, Swearer, Song, & Tam Carey, 1999; Wiler, 1993). For example, teachers often think that pushing and shoving in the hallways is accidental. Yet, middle school age students report that the hallways are the key areas where bullying takes place (Barone, 1997).

Middle school teachers are actually less accurate in identifying bullies and victims than elementary school teachers. Middle school teachers have less contact with individual students, and the teasing and bullying behaviors are more hidden or covert by middle school. Teachers identify only 50% of the bullies and victims that students identify. In teachers defense, adults tend to rate student behavior according to the relationship that they have personally with individual students, just as student do when they judge their peer's behaviors. Teachers may have positive relationships with some bullies (Leff, Kupersmidt, Patterson & Power, 1999; Paulk, Swearer, Song, & Tam Carey, 1999).

What do the experts recommend?

Some experts believe that the self-esteem movement has contributed to teasing behaviors. The self-esteem movement has been interpreted by many people as advocating 'do whatever you want as long as it feels good'. Attitudes must change if teasing and bullying behaviors are going to be reduced. Parents and teachers must recognize teasing and bullying behavior, and agree to deal with it. There must be consequences for bullies. But, this may not be enough. The students who support the behavior also need consequences. Students need to be taught how to stop helping the bullies and how to support the victim. They do have the power to stop teasing and bullying (Pepler, Connolly & Craig, 1997). And, victims need to be directly taught to speak up. There is ample evidence that teasing and bullying in schools can be decreased. The most effective program in the world is the program developed in Norway where bullying behaviors were decreased by 50% (Barone, 1997).

Schools can agree to stop teasing, name-calling and bullying (Cushman & Johnson, 2000). Effective interventions in schools must include rules in class and rules for the school as a whole. Curricula dealing with appropriate social interactions are important for all children, at all levels. An increase in adult supervision is critical especially in the unstructured or low structured areas in schools (Banks, 1997; Barone, 1997).

This is easier to say, than it is to accomplish. Comprehensive interventions include a 'needs assessment' and program planning. It involves keeping records of incidents so that records of incidents can accumulate. It is critical to teach onlookers how they contribute to teasing. All adults in the school need to be trained to identify and act when they observe bullying and teasing. School rules must be enforced once they are established, and once again supervision everywhere in school where teasing and bullying takes place, is critical (Greenbaum, 1989; Leff, Kupersmidt, Patterson & Power, 1999; Pepler, Connolly & Craig, 1997; U.S. Dept. of Education, 1998).

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