The Difference Between Teasing & Bullying

Teasing is common - 96% of elementary school children report involvement

Positive Teasing

Children tease because it can be a fun way to provoke a reaction in someone else, and they may want to reciprocate being teased themselves. Teasing can strengthen a relationship by showing closeness and affection with another person. It can help show others what behaviours are appropriate in society: for example, teasing someone for talking with his/her mouth full communicates – without direct confrontation - that this is not a polite and socially accepted behaviour. Teasing also represents an indirect and non-threatening (perhaps even playful) method for resolving conflicts by providing an outlet for expressing frustration or disapproval.

Teasing is positive when:

● It takes place within a strong relationship with two people who appreciate the teasing as affectionate.
● The teaser is using a “joking” (rather than aggressive) tone of voice and smiling.
● The person being teased does not look distressed.

When Does Teasing Become Bullying?

While teasing can be used to strengthen a relationship, it can also be used to alienate, criticize, and embarrass another person, which may weaken the relationship. The affectionate interaction of teasing can turn hostile when the person being teased is distressed by the teasing. Teasing about
physical appearance is almost always hostile and hurtful. This is not surprising since appearance has so much influence on social acceptance and is out of the individual’s control.

**Teasing becomes bullying when:**

- The content of the teasing turns from affectionate to hostile.
- There is a power imbalance: the person teasing has more power among peers compared to the person being teased.
- The teasing occurs repeatedly.
- The child who is teasing means to upset or hurt the child being teased.
- The child being teased is upset or hurt by the interaction. Keep in mind that some children, boys especially, may not show that their feelings are hurt. If you are not sure whether the teasing is hurtful, pull the child being teased aside to ask them how they feel about it.

**What Adults And Educators Can Do When Teasing Turns To Bullying**

**INTERVENE!**

**Always acknowledge that the bullying is unacceptable and will not be tolerated.**

- Talk with the child who is teasing about why they are teasing. Use that information to inform a discussion of alternate ways of connecting with peers. Does the child know how to engage with others, or is he/she resorting to teasing or bullying as a way of getting attention and connecting with peers? Maybe this child has learned to use power to hurt others by observing similar dynamics at home, in which case it will be important to discuss that those behaviours are not tolerated in the group and must be adjusted.
- Talk with the child who is being teased to find out how they are feeling. Let them know they deserve to be treated with respect. If the child has trouble asserting himself/herself, discuss and practice ways he/she can confidently tell a child who is teasing or bullying to stop. Make sure the child knows they need to talk to a trusted adult or supportive peers if the teasing or bullying continues.

- **TRUST YOUR GUT INSTINCTS!** If you feel that the teasing is negative for anyone involved (even yourself as a witness), then it is worth further investigation!

**Always consider your own behaviour**

- Be aware of your own use of teasing - make sure that the impact is positive.
● Keep in mind that younger children may not understand teasing, especially sarcasm, and may experience your teasing as hurtful.
● Think about your own experiences with bullying, and how those experiences and associated feelings and/or opinions may be impacting the way you handle bullying situations.

What To Do In The Classroom To Prevent Teasing From Turning Into Bullying

● Talk with the whole group of children about bullying and treating others with respect.
● Create a list of group rules that focus on what it looks like to treat someone with respect (e.g., respect an individual’s physical space, encourage others as they try new things, listen to others when they are speaking).
● Talk with the whole group about how to repair a relationship after being disrespectful. For example, discuss apologies (both giving and receiving), as well as acting respectful in the future to show the person you hurt that you have learned from your relationship mistakes.