

Teasing: Helping Handout for School and Home

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INTRODUCTION

Teasing generally refers to attempting to provoke someone in a playful manner, verbally or nonverbally. When used in this manner, it is marked by laughing or smiling, obviously exaggerating, or making an ironic joke. This type of teasing is *prosocial*—done in good fun, as when two friends are kidding and participating in playful banter. Such teasing can help establish and maintain friendships and promote bonding. However, teasing also can be *antisocial*—a form of verbal bullying. Whether or not teasing is verbal bullying depends on how the student being teased perceives the teasing. If the student perceives it as playful or lighthearted joking, then it is not bullying. It is bullying, however, when the teasing is hurtful, causing emotional or social harm. Thus, prosocial teasing is welcomed, antisocial teasing is not. Prosocial teasing also differs from bullying in that hurtful teasing is ongoing, and occurs in the context of an imbalance of power. It is important that students learn the differences between teasing and bullying. Teasing is acceptable when it is reciprocal, done within the context of a close relationship, not meant to harm, and not repeated over and over again.

WHAT TO CONSIDER WHEN SELECTING INTERVENTIONS AND SUPPORTS

Whether or not the teasing is prosocial or antisocial lies in the perceptions of the recipient. Too often, the person being teased views the teasing more negatively than the teaser does. How a student interprets the teasing depends on his or her age or developmental differences, gender, environment, individual differences, and previous experiences with teasing.

Developmental and Age Differences

Students may tease others for many reasons: to test limits, define the power in a relationship, get attention from others, or fit in with a peer group, or they tease simply because that is the way they have been taught to talk to others. The reasons students tease, and how they perceive the teasing, varies with their developmental level. Younger children may tease as a way of testing their growing need for independence and control, as a response to new situations, and as an aggressive technique to get their way. As children approach preschool age, they begin to develop a sense of humor and engage in teasing to show affection and encourage others to laugh. Young children often perceive teasing as mean because they have a limited ability to interpret complex emotions and social situations. As children mature, and their language, social, and emotional skills develop, they come to understand and use joking language in a reciprocal and socially acceptable manner.

Gender Differences

Teasing differs between boys and girls, especially during adolescence. More so among boys than girls, teasing functions to establish a hierarchy that defines each boy's role in the friendship group. Status is determined by characteristics such as physical size, pubertal status, verbal ability, and attractiveness. Boys typically show teasing through small and minor insults, which can be either prosocial or antisocial in their intent, and tend to accept the teasing as a social norm. In contrast, in girls more so than boys, the function of teasing is to establish and enforce social norms. Teasing in girls tends to be more relational, meaning that the teasing aims to hurt others' social status or relationship—through spreading rumors,

excluding others, calling people names, and gossiping. Although this form of teasing may occur in boys, it is more likely to be seen in girls.

Environmental Differences

Teasing is done as a way of fitting in and having social connections with others, so it is more likely to be seen in a school setting where students spend the majority of the day with their peers. Though teasing can happen in any environment, students are more likely to engage in teasing in unsupervised activities or social settings, and when teachers are not attuned to the social interactions that are occurring.

Individual Differences

Students are often teased for being different than their peers. Common differences for which students are teased include physical features (being shorter, taller, skinnier, or heavier than peers); being very intelligent or lacking academically; having a different sexual orientation; having lower physical performance (e.g., clumsiness) or being more fearful; acting like they are superior to others; and having poor or different hygiene habits. Children who tease are commonly high in social status, strong athletically, and respected by their peers.

Interpretation Differences

Often, what is viewed by some students as teasing is not viewed as teasing by others. That is, whereas some students interpret what is said as playful or funny, others interpret the same teasing as hurtful. If the student is sensitive about the characteristic highlighted in the teasing, that student is more likely to perceive the teasing as a negative interaction rather than a positive one. Additionally, if the student being teased does not feel a close relationship with the teaser, the student may interpret it as more aggressive. When teasing is done by friends who are considered good friends, the target perceives the teasing as more positive and better intentioned (Gorman & Jordan, 2015).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Most recommendations for preventing and responding to teasing apply both to the school or classroom and to the home. However, some differ depending on the setting. Recommendations are grouped accordingly in three sections: (a) recommendations for students who respond negatively to being teased,

(b) recommendations for students who tease others, and (c) additional strategies and interventions. (If you consider the teasing to be bullying, please see *Bullying: Helping Handout for School* and *Bullying: Helping Handout for Home*.)

Recommendations for Students Who Respond Negatively to Being Teased

1. **Teach the student to use self-talk strategies.** Self-talk is what individuals—both children and adults—say to themselves. Students can use positive self-talk strategies such as “I am good at this,” “I tried my hardest,” and other positive statements to encourage themselves to think positive thoughts when faced with difficulties such as teasing.
2. **Encourage the student to ignore the teasing.** Students can deflect teasing by learning to react in a positive way (e.g., ignoring) rather than reacting negatively (e.g., yelling, crying). The teaser is more likely to stop participating in the behavior if the student being teased does not respond. However, these approaches may not always work if the teasing escalates to bullying. In such cases, the teacher should examine the behaviors that are occurring and determine if ignoring the teasing may make the situation worse.
3. **Encourage the use of “I-messages” to communicate how the student feels when being teased.** Rather than blaming others, the student may tell the teaser “I feel upset when you say that because ___.”
4. **Use humor.** Students can use humor to remove themselves from the situation or to lighten the message behind the tease. They may make a joke about themselves to show the teaser that they are not affected by the negative remark made toward them.
5. **Practice asking for help.** Teach the student to use positive assertive communication to respond to teasing. Practice these communication skills so that the student feels prepared when encountering a teasing situation.
6. **Educate students on the difference between teasing and bullying.** Provide examples for students to understand why and how teasing and bullying are different.
7. **Encourage the student to participate in positive activities with peers.** Students who are engaged in school activities with peers are more likely to develop better social skills, improve

self-confidence, and feel part of the school community, which may lead to more positive relationships.

8. **Recognize signs in the student that the teasing is a form of bullying.** For example, the student who is teased may have a fear of going to school, lack of friends, items going missing or things being stolen, or increased anxiety or depression. These signs are likely to indicate that bullying is occurring.

Recommendations for Students Who Tease Others

9. **Talk to the student about teasing situations.** Students may deny or minimize what is happening to them, so adults should be prepared to encounter resistance. Have open communication about the behaviors that are going on. Adults should speak openly about the teasing behaviors they recognize so that the child is aware of their actions and the impact on others.
10. **Educate the student on when teasing might be appropriate.** Explain the difference between positive teasing and negative teasing. Teasing can lead to bullying when communication becomes aggressive.
11. **Make clear to the student that you will not tolerate bullying behavior.** Set boundaries regarding what type of behavior is appropriate and what is not, making the classroom, school, and home no-tolerance zones for bullying.
12. **Discuss the negative impact of teasing and verbal bullying on others.** Discuss with children why teasing and bullying can be harmful to others. By having open discussions regarding the negative impacts of bullying, children can become more aware of how their words may affect others.
13. **Set limits and nonviolent consequences for the student's actions.** These consequences should be age appropriate and proportional to the student's behavior. Encourage a reward system for positive behaviors, in which rewards and consequences are given consistently.
14. **Where feasible, increase supervision of the student's social activities.** Arranging supervision would be especially appropriate when the anticipated interaction is with others the student has teased inappropriately before.
15. **Explore why the student may be teasing.** Adults should consider the following: How is the student benefiting from being the teaser? Does the student

get attention from others? Does it help the student feel involved? Does the student need more skills or tools to use in social situations? Are there other ways that the student can receive the same benefit in a more positive manner?

Additional Strategies and Interventions for Schools

16. **Establish a no-tolerance policy.** School systems should have clear expectations for student conduct to prevent teasing and picking on other students. Close supervision of students will ensure that the no-tolerance policy remains in place.
17. **Create and enforce rules of respect and responsible behavior.** Classrooms or schools should incorporate programs that reward students for kindness rather than punish them for negative behaviors. This can be done through social-emotional programs that are delivered in general education classrooms. Teasing can be talked about and respectful behavior can be taught through these programs.
18. **Educate students in the classroom on how to intervene when they see teasing behaviors.** Students will be able to help when they are taught to recognize the signs of teasing, how to stand up for the victim, and ways to get help. Encourage students to report episodes of teasing.
19. **Educate and train school staff on the nature of the problem and ways to intervene.** School staff should receive professional development on teasing behaviors so that they can recognize when teasing may be aggressive and intervene early.
20. **Involve parents.** Parents should be notified of their child's teasing behaviors or if their child is a recipient of such behaviors, especially when the student's safety is at risk.
21. **Educate school staff on signs that a student is being bullied, and the differences between bullying and teasing.** By educating staff on the signs and symptoms of bullying, schools are better equipped to recognize and support students once bullying has begun.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Websites

<https://www.loveandlogic.com/articles-advice/tease-proof-your-kids-helping-children-deal-with-teasing>

The website of Love and Logic provides caregivers with information on how to support their children if they are being teased.

<https://childmind.org/article/how-to-know-if-your-child-is-being-bullied/>

The website of the Child Mind Institute provides caregivers and educators information on the difference between teasing and bullying.

<https://centerforparentingeducation.org/library-of-articles/handling-bullying-issues/playground-politics/>

The website of the Center for Parenting Education gives caregivers and educators information on how to react to teasing and ways to diffuse teasing situations.

Books

Cooper, S. (2000). *Sticks and stones: 7 ways your child can deal with teasing, conflict, and other hard times*. New York, NY: Times Books/Random House.

In this book, parents learn to teach children how to speak up for themselves more assertively, gently, and effectively. Each chapter uses examples and imaginative exercise to give children the confidence to speak up.

Kaufman, G., Raphael, L., & Espeland, P. (2014). *Stick up for yourself! Every kid's guide to personal power and positive self-esteem*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit.

Students can use this child-friendly guide to building relationships, becoming responsible, developing a vocabulary of feelings, making good choices, solving problems, and setting goals to learn to deal with the pressure of teasing and bullying.

Ross, D. M. (1996). *Childhood bullying and teasing: What school personnel, other professionals, and parents can do*. Alexandria, VA: American

Counseling Association. This book provides detailed procedures for the primary prevention and management of bullying and teasing in the school system. It presents a comprehensive overview of bullying and teasing, along with practical assessment and intervention procedures designed to help students.

Related Helping Handouts

Bullying: Helping Handout for Home

Bullying: Helping Handout for School

Peer Relationships: Helping Handout for School

REFERENCES

Gorman, G., & Jordan, C. H. (2015). 'I know you're kidding': Relationship closeness enhances positive perceptions of teasing. *Personal Relationships, 22*(2), 173–187.

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