

Teasing, Fighting, Bullying....What's the difference?

Kenzi Bisbing, Youth Services Manager, Oakland Mediation Center

Bullying has been the hot topic on TV, radio, newspapers, blogs, etc. Generally if someone is talking, chances are it is about bullying. Pause the conversation for just one moment and take an opportunity to clarify what is being talked about. If a behavior is called bullying and it is really fighting then a disservice is being done to our youth in how adults respond. The same can be said if a behavior is called teasing and it is really bullying. Once a behavior is appropriately labeled, then it can be appropriately responded to.

Dr. Dan Olweus defines bullying as "when someone repeatedly and on purpose says or does mean or hurtful things to another person who has a hard time defending himself or herself." Bullying behavior has three key components. First, it is a form of aggression. Second, it is a repeated behavior. This is not to say that adults should wait until they see a pattern before intervening. Adults rarely see the pattern. Third, there is an imbalance of power or strength. This imbalance of power can be physical, emotional, verbal, and subtle and makes it difficult for youth to defend themselves. There are several things that influence how much power a person has— social status, gender, race, religion, abilities, money, real or perceived sexual orientation, etc. Overall, it is important to remember that bullying is a form of peer abuse.

So how do people differentiate bullying from teasing and fighting? Teasing is when two or more people who are usually friends push, chase, or joke in a playful manner. The expression of teasing shows those involved that they are a special part of their social group. Fighting is when two people who may or may not be friends show some type of negative, aggressive behavior with the desire to inflict injury or discomfort. Teasing differs from bullying in the relationship between the people involved and the expression and atmosphere. Fighting differs from bullying in the repeated nature of the behavior and the imbalance of power between those involved.

To better grasp the differences between teasing, fighting, and bullying imagine you are back in school sitting at the lunch table. You and your friends are eating lunch and catching up. Suddenly, your friend says something hysterical; you start to laugh; and you snort milk out your nose. Milk is running down your face and everyone, including you, is laughing. Your friends start calling you Milk Nose and offering napkins. While walking down the hall they call out "See you in math, Milk Nose!" and later that day they post Milk Nose on your Facebook wall. This is a form of teasing. It is playful and lets you know that you are a special member of their social group.

The next two days at school your friends keep calling you Milk Nose. You thought it would have blown over by now. Using the conflict resolution skills being taught in school; you tell your friends at lunch that you are feeling annoyed by them continuously calling you Milk Nose and that you want them to stop. While putting away your lunch tray one of your friends calls you Milk Nose again. You are fed up and dump your tray of garbage right on top of their head. Harsh words are exchanged and the two of you are sent to the principal's office. This is a form of fighting. It is negative, aggressive behavior with the intent to cause discomfort. The principal may refer you to peer mediation as a way to address this conflict. Peer mediation is where students in a school are trained as mediators, neutral third parties, to intervene and assist other youth in the resolution of interpersonal disputes. If this was bullying, a referral to peer mediation would not have been appropriate. Bullying is a form of victimization, not conflict. It is

no more a “conflict” than child abuse or domestic violence. Only conflicts can be addressed through mediation. Mediating a bullying incident can send inappropriate messages to students as well as dismiss the concerns of the person being bullied or worsen the situation.

Now let’s say that a couple students sitting at a nearby lunch table start calling you Milk Nose at lunch, in class, and on Facebook. They also have more power than you because of physical, emotional, verbal, or social reasons. They are not calling you Milk Nose as a way to let you know you have been transported into their social group. They are calling you Milk Nose to put you down and get power over you. This is a form of bullying. It is verbal aggression, repeated, and there is an imbalance of power. If adults do nothing and view this behavior as innocent teasing that toughens kids up for the real world, students may perceive a lack of control or caring by adults and feel they have been given permission to continue the behavior.

There are proven ways to both prevent and intervene in bullying behavior. There is no magic wand...it takes a comprehensive approach grounded in universal prevention that reinforces protective factors and reduces risks for all students. Oakland Mediation Center is your local expert to provide schools with evidence based and sustainable programs that reduce student misconduct, violence, bullying and the risk factors that lead to school drop-out. Oakland Mediation Center is the only entity credentialed in Michigan to train school staff in the implementation of the peer mediation program Peers Making Peace, is one of five certified Olweus Trainers in the state, and is the Michigan State Leader for the Olweus Bullying prevention Program. In addition, OMC is qualified to train teachers in the most updated Second Step Middle School curriculum. To learn more visit www.mediation-omc.org/YouthTraining.aspx.

To learn more about best practices and misdirections in bullying prevention and intervention visit the fact sheets developed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Health Resource Services Administration at www.stopbullying.gov.

So what is the answer to “Teasing, Fighting, Bullying...What’s the difference?” The difference is expression, relationship and power, but most importantly it is how we respond!

Resources:

Olweus Bullying Prevention Program ©2011 www.olweus.org

Olweus Bullying Prevention Program Teacher Guide. Similarities and Differences between Rough-and-Tumble Play, Real Fighting, and Bullying. Document 3. (2007)

Nancy Mullin, Director, Bullying Prevention Solutions.