

# Teasing among Children: The Good and the Bad

Teasing can be positive because it shows closeness, affection, and familiarity with another person, which may strengthen the relationship. At the same time, teasing can alienate, criticize, and embarrass the other person, which may weaken the relationship. Teasing is common among children, with 96% of elementary school children reporting involvement.

## Why do children tease?

- Children most often report one or more of the following reasons
  - It's fun
  - They want to provoke someone to see their reaction
  - To reciprocate being teased themselves



## How do we know when the teasing is POSITIVE?

- Takes place within a strong relationship with two people who appreciate the teasing as affectionate.
- Teaser is using a “joking” (rather than aggressive) tone of voice and smiling.
- Person being teased does not look distressed.

## Benefits of POSITIVE teasing:

- Teasing helps to show others what behaviours are appropriate in society, by indirectly communicating that some behaviours may not be appropriate. For example, teasing someone for talking with his/her mouth full communicates that this is not a polite and socially accepted behaviour without direct confrontation.
- Teasing represents an indirect and non-threatening (perhaps even playful) method for resolving conflicts, by providing an outlet for expressing frustration or disapproval.
- Teasing communicates affection, since you would only tease someone with whom you are familiar and to whom you feel closeness. If someone is teasing another person, it is assumed that these two people have a strong and close relationship that can handle, and may benefit from, teasing.

## When does teasing become BULLYING?

- Teasing is hostile when the person being teased is distressed by the teasing.
- Teasing becomes bullying if/when:
  - There is a power imbalance between the two children involved, such that the person teasing has more power among peers compared to the person being teased.
  - The child who is teasing intends to upset or hurt the child being teased.
  - The child being teased is upset or hurt by the interaction.
  - The teasing occurs repeatedly.



## How can leaders know when teasing becomes BULLYING?

- Watch the reaction of the child being teased to see if the impact is negative. 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.
- Be aware of the content of the teasing, and think about whether the teasing is affectionate or hostile in nature.
  - For example, 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.
- **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!**

## What can leaders do to prevent **BULLYING**?

### Role of Adults:

- Be aware of your own use of teasing.
  - If you are teasing children within the group you lead, 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.

### Among Children:

- Talk with the whole group of children about bullying and treating others with respect.
  - It can be helpful to 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 other when they are speaking)
- Talk with the whole group about how to repair a relationship after being disrespectful.
  - This will likely include a discussion of 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.



## What can leaders do when **HOSTILE** teasing or **BULLYING** is happening?

- **INTERVENE!**
  - **Be sure to acknowledge that the bullying is unacceptable and will not be tolerated.**
- Talk with the child who is teasing about why they are teasing and use that information to inform a discussion of alternate ways of connecting with peers.
  - Perhaps this child does not know how to engage with others, and resorts to teasing or bullying as a way of getting attention and connecting with peers.
  - Perhaps 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 and ensure they know that you believe they deserve to be treated with respect.
  - If the child has trouble asserting himself/herself, then it may be helpful to discuss and practice ways to assertively tell a child who is teasing or bullying to stop.
- Discuss alternative actions that the child can take if the teasing or bullying continues (e.g., tell the child to stop, talk to a trusted adult, or talk to supportive peers).



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