# PROMOTING RELATIONSHIPS

Safe and Accepting Schools
Newsletter for Educators

**PREVNet**
PROMOTING RELATIONSHIPS & ELIMINATING VIOLENCE NETWORK

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## The Language We Use Matters

In recent years, there has been increased awareness and dialogue about bullying across Canada and the world. These are important conversations, needed to address the very serious concerns about the impact of bullying not only today, but also for future generations. We know that good work is happening and that there is more work to be done in Canada to build healthy relationships that support overall well-being.

The language we use in these conversations matter. The use of precise language allows us to meaningfully share our stories, develop a common understanding, and inform our actions. Our language can be used to support others or to cause harm. This newsletter addresses key language that is often misused in the media, by our leaders, in our everyday conversations, and in our schools. This issue explores the use of labels when talking about bullying, the role that educators play in promoting and modelling language related to bullying that supports healthy relationships; and the difference between bullying, aggression, and teasing.

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Thirdly, they stress that labeling children or youth can affect how they see themselves and how others see them, including their educators and their peers.  It is difficult to shift people's opinions once an image about the child or youth has been created. Applying a growth mindset that focusses on behaviour can enable those involved in bullying to move forward in a positive way, within a circle of support. Finally, they argue that the use of labels may cause people to view bullying as the "fault" of the child or youth, ignoring other factors that could have contributed to the bullying behaviour, such as peer dynamics and environment.[1] Addressing bullying requires a "binocular" [2] view that looks at the individual needs of those involved as well as social, environmental and other factors.

## BULLYING PREVENTION & INTERVENTION
The use of positive language also applies when we describe the work we do to address bullying. The expression "bullying prevention and intervention" implies the supportive nature of the efforts to reduce bullying. Using negative language, such as "anti-bullying" implies a stern, zero-tolerance approach that does not consider factors such as child and youth development and the complexity of bullying.

## MODELLING APPROPRIATE LANGUAGE & BEHAVIOUR
Educators play a key role in building understanding with children and youth, colleagues, and the broader community around the use of language relating to bullying.  This common language, along with discussions focused on support, help foster safe, accepting and inclusive learning environments. Educators also need to be self-aware, reflecting on what they say and how they act.  Children and youth model their behaviour from that of adults. When educators approach bullying from a place of support for all those involved, focusing on relationships, they set the tone for others to do the same.

# Bullying is a Behaviour, NOT a Label for a Person

There has been a shift in the language used when talking about those involved in bullying from focusing on a person to focusing on a behaviour.  Those involved in bullying include the individual(s) who engage in bullying, who witnesses bullying, and who is victimized by bullying. All those involved in bullying require supports. Labelling children and youth according to their behaviour through terms such as "bully," "victim" and "bystander" can be harmful for many reasons.

Reiney and Limber (2013) present four reasons to support the removal of labels from our language when talking about bullying. Firstly, they explain that using labels sends the message that behaviour does not change in different situations. In fact, given that bullying is a relationship problem, it is heavily influenced by context and social dynamics. Secondly, they argue that labels suggest that a behaviour is fixed and is unlikely to improve over time. By providing the appropriate supports and interventions that focus on relationship solutions, bullying can be addressed.

# The Difference between Bullying, Aggression, and Teasing

Here are definitions to help make the distinction between bullying, aggression, and teasing:

**1** Reiney, E. & Limber, S. P. (2013). Why We Don't Use the Word "Bully" to Label Kids [Blog post]. Available from https://www.stopbullying.gov/blog/2013/10/23/why-we-dont-use-word-bully-label-kids.html
**2** Promoting Relationships and Eliminating Violence (PREVNet). (2014). Fact Sheet" Scaffolding: Coaching Students Involved in Bullying.  Available from
https://www.prevnet.ca/sites/prevnet.ca/files/prevnet_facts_and_tools_for_schools.pdf#page=50

## BULLYING

Bullying is aggressive behaviour that occurs in a relationship in which there is a power imbalance. The combined use of power and aggression should be considered the essence of the definition; and for distinguishing bullying from peer aggression. Bullying creates a negative environment at school for all students and by definition, occurs in a context where there is a real or perceived power imbalance based on factors such as size, strength, age, intelligence, peer group power (popularity), economic status, social status, religion, ethnic origin, sexual orientation, family circumstances, gender, gender identity, gender expression, race, disability or the receipt of special education.[3] Bullying is typically repeated and the person bullying knows that the behaviour is likely to cause harm, fear or distress to the other person. This includes physical, psychological, social or academic harm, harm to a person's reputation, or harm to a person's property.

Bullying can take many direct and indirect forms, including:

- Physical (e.g., hitting, spitting, stealing, damaging property)
- Verbal (e.g., name-calling, mocking, humiliating, threatening someone, harassment)
- Social (e.g., exclusion, gossiping, spreading rumours, damaging friendships)
- Electronic (e.g., using electronic means such as texting and social media to threaten, harass, embarrass, socially exclude, or damage reputations and friendships)[4]

Bullying is a relationship problem that stems from complex interpersonal dynamics, not simply from one individual's difficulties managing aggression. Children and youth who engage in bullying use power and aggression within the context of a relationship. For the person who is bullying, the behaviour provides a sense of control that comes from the ability to cause distress to another person, decreasing that person's sense of well-being and belonging. As well, the person who is bullying often gets increased attention or status from the peer group.

## AGGRESSION

Aggressive behaviour is a response to conflict, threat, or an internal emotional state of anger/irritability. The intent to cause harm or distress to another person may or may not be present. It can take direct and indirect forms, including physical, verbal, social and electronic. Aggression can become bullying when a power imbalance in a relationship develops over time because repeated acts of aggression may intimidate the person on the receiving end.[5]

## TEASING

Teasing is a type of playful interaction that ranges from positive (e.g., bantering, joshing, ribbing) to negative (e.g., mocking, pestering, tormenting). Like rough and tumble play, it can sometimes be difficult to know where to draw the line to distinguish the two. Positive teasing takes place within a strong relationship, and communicates closeness, affection and familiarity. It is often viewed as good-natured "joking," evident in the tone of voice and facial expressions of the person who is teasing. The recipient of the teasing shows no sign of distress. Positive teasing is reciprocal, that is, the teasing goes both ways so that the person who teases a relationship partner is equally likely to be teased by that partner at another time.

3  Ontario Ministry of Education. (2012).  Policy, Program Memorandum No. 144. Available from http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/extra/eng/ppm/144.pdf

4 Promoting Relationships and Eliminating Violence (PREVNet). (n.d.) Types of Bullying. Available from https://www.prevnet.ca/bullying/types

5  Promoting Relationships and Eliminating Violence (PREVNet). (2014). Factsheet: The Difference between Bullying, Aggression and Teasing. Available from http://www.prevnet.ca/sites/prevnet.ca/files/prevnet_facts_and_tools_for_schools.pdf#page=9

Positive teasing can strengthen a relationship. Negative teasing alienates, criticizes, or embarrasses another person. Negative teasing undermines the relationship and causes distress to the person being teased. Negative teasing becomes bullying when there is a power imbalance in the relationship, the teasing goes in one direction only (not reciprocal) and the teasing behaviour is repeated and persists even when the person who is teased signals distress.[6,7]

## DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN BULLYING, AGGRESSION AND TEASING

The following questions can be helpful when distinguishing between bullying, aggression and teasing:

- Is there a real or perceived power differential?
- Is the behaviour reciprocated?
- Do both people look like they are having a good time?
- Is the behaviour fun?
- Is there an intent to cause harm or distress or a callous disregard for the other's distress?
- Has this happened before with these individuals?

PREVNet's document entitled "Critical Questions to Identify Bullying, Aggression and Teasing" [7]

outlines how answers to these questions vary depending on whether it is bullying, aggression or teasing.When reflecting on these questions, it is important that the educator not only consider his or her observations. Some children and youth may not show emotions such as distress or sadness, especially among adolescents who are trying to "save face." Considering the complex dynamics of social interactions, it is easy for the educator to misread the cues. It is important to speak with the child or youth privately to understand the situation from his or her perspective and to understand how he or she is feeling. By better understanding the type of behaviour, the educator can determine the level of response and reporting required, as well as what supports and interventions might be needed for all those involved.

### REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS:

- What are the differences between bullying, aggression and teasing?
- How can you support those involved in negative teasing, aggression, or bullying?
- How do you foster healthy relationships in your learning environment to reduce bullying?
- Do the resources used with children and youth in your learning environment reinforce that bullying is a behaviour, not a label for a person?
- Does the language used to describe bullying awareness and prevention efforts in your learning environment reflect the supportive nature of this work or does it imply a zero-tolerance approach? How do you show self-awareness as an educator that models desired behaviour for children and youth?

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**6** Promoting Relationships and Eliminating Violence (PREVNet). (n.d.). The Difference Between Teasing & Bullying. Available from https://www.prevnet.ca/bullying/educators/the-difference-between-teasing-and-bullying

**7** Promoting Relationships and Eliminating Violence (PREVNet). (2014). Toolkit: Critical Questions to Identify Bullying, Aggression and Teasing. Available from https://www.prevnet.ca/sites/prevnet.ca/files/prevnet_facts_and_tools_for_schools.pdf#page=11