



## The Difference Between Teasing & Bullying

- Teasing and bullying are different.
- Not all teasing is bad or bullying behavior. Sometimes it's playful and helps kids bond.
- When teasing is meant to hurt and done over and over, it can change into bullying.
- Bullying often happens online, whereas teasing is usually done spontaneously while interacting with friends.

**Here's what you need to know about the difference between teasing and bullying, and how to help kids navigate these tricky social waters.**

We know that bullying can be verbal as well as physical. But where does teasing fit in the picture? Is it bullying? The short answer is: It's complicated. Sometimes teasing is harmless and playful. Other times it can be used to hurt others. And even playful teasing can hit raw nerves or be misinterpreted, especially when kids struggle with social skills.

### Teasing Is a Type of Communication

Good-natured teasing is a way for people to communicate with each other. It's a social exchange. In middle school, many kids tease each other to bond or form relationships. When the best kid on a basketball team misses a dunk, and a teammate says, "Hey, Magic, nice shot," they can both laugh it off. The teasing shows each other they can joke around and still be friends. However, feel the difference with one small word exchange in this statement: "Hey, loser, nice shot!" Children need to be taught that there are some words that are always going to be hurtful no matter the context.

Done in the right spirit, teasing banter can be positive. When kids tease each other about clothes, musical tastes, or behavior, it helps them learn to deal with constructive criticism. It's part of how they relate. Kids also use teasing to influence each other, and change behavior for the better. If a teen keeps staring at a boy she likes at lunch, her friends might say, "Seriously, are you looking at Kevin again? Just talk to him already!" This teasing teaches a social rule (don't stare too much) and encourages her to act in an appropriate way.

But when teasing just becomes a justification or excuse for name-calling, it can also be used to communicate the negative. It's often used to establish "top dog" among kids. For example, a group of girls might tease one in the group about her weight by describing her as a "skinny noodle" or a "chubby/fat kid". Or kids might tease to encourage bad behavior: "What a little wimp, Sam, you won't even try the cigarette."

Also, what's playful to one child may not be playful to another. In those cases, teasing can lead to hurt feelings. Like any communication, teasing has its purpose. Some topics that are awkward to raise in serious conversation are easier to raise through teasing. Teasing can also be fun. (Think, for example, of the back-and-forth banter that happens between the adults in any romantic comedy.)

Bullying, though, involves an imbalance of power. Bullying victims usually don't provoke it. Rather, kids may not be able to defend themselves because of their physical size, or because of their social position in school or in a group. And if a victim gets upset, bullies typically don't stop without the intervention of an adult.

Unlike kids who are being bullied, kids who are being teased (which is not the same as being called names) can influence whether it continues or ends. If they get upset, they tell the teaser and the teaser usually stops.

## **Bullying Is Meant to Hurt**

Verbal bullying is different from teasing. It's not done to make friends, or to relate to someone. Just the opposite: The goal is to embarrass the victim and make the bully look better and stronger.

The tricky thing is that bullying may start out as teasing. But when it's done over and over and is meant to be hurtful or threatening, it becomes bullying. Verbal bullying includes calling a victim names, taunting, and sexual harassment. It can happen in person, through texting, and online through social media and email.

## **Teasing and Kids Who Struggle Socially**

Teasing can be hard to understand for kids who struggle with conversation or reading social cues. One big challenge is knowing how to respond. Some kids can't yet tell if someone is teasing them in a good-natured way, or trying to bully them. This can be confusing and lead kids to say or do inappropriate things.

Many kids also have trouble making friends. This can lead them to put up with teasing that hurts because they want to remain part of a group or be liked.

Sometimes, kids, who are trying to tease, end up on the borders of bullying behavior. For example, a child may say something mean-spirited to another, thinking it's playful. This can lead to an argument. Or a child may react angrily to a comment that's friendly, which may cause other kids to keep their distance.

To address these struggles, it's important to teach kids about the rules of conversation. Help kids sort out when teasing is OK and when it becomes hurtful or borders on bullying. One way to do this is by role-playing with them. This lets kids practice a situation where they get teased, don't like it, and need to respond. A very important skill for both the child who is being teased **and** the child who is doing the teasing is to learn to express their needs and to respond respectfully when they are doing the teasing. It's the person on the receiving end of "teasing" who decides whether it hurt them or not – never the person doing the teasing.

## **Questions to Ask Kids About Teasing**

As responsible parents, we want to know that our child won't become a target of someone else's hurtful teasing. But we are equally responsible for teaching our children to know and respect the difference between name-calling and friendly teasing that they direct at others. And we're often presented with the perfect teaching opportunity when two siblings are arguing! Brothers and sisters seem to know instinctually how to hurt each other with the fewest number of words. One of the best ways for fostering a peaceful family life is to teach our children to take responsibility for their words – not only with friends and peers, but with the others living within their household. Through dinner conversation practice when everyone is calm, effective parents are able to role-model thinking about how something is said and how to choose words that may tease (when humor is appropriate) instead of words that are always hurtful in all situations or are simply name-calling. It's also important to model for children how to speak up for themselves when a sibling or friend has unintentionally hurt their feelings and to show that they can still be friends.

Maybe you've heard that kids are teasing your child or your student at school. You can ask a few questions to see whether it's good-natured or harmful:

Are the kids who tease you your friends?

- Do you like when they tease you?
- Do you tease them back?
- If you told them to stop teasing, would they?
- If you told them that they hurt your feelings, would they say sorry?

If the answer to any of these questions is "no" or "I don't know," then it may be a case of negative teasing or even bullying. But it's important to find out more from your child's teacher **BEFORE** labeling it as bullying.