

## PEER CONFLICT, MEAN BEHAVIOUR AND BULLYING

### What's the difference?

When a child is having a problem with her or his peers, it can be hard for parents to know what is really happening – is it bullying? Or is it something else?

Each type of behavior must be handled differently, to keep children safe and help them learn how to get along with others. There is also many programs in Elementary schools that assist in the social-emotional development of students such as Respectful Relationships, Zones of Regulations, WITS, Roots of Empathy to name a few.

#### Peer Conflict

Conflict between and among peers is a natural part of growing up. Children will have times when they disagree and can't solve their own problems. They may even become so frustrated that they say mean things or act out physically by hitting, kicking or trying to hurt others.

If it is peer conflict, you will be aware that these children:

- usually choose to play or hang out together;
- have equal power (similar age, size, social status, etc.);
- are equally upset;
- are both interested in the outcome; and
- will be able to work things out with adult help (after calming down).

Adults can respond by helping the children talk it out, and see each other's perspective. This is often referred to as "conflict resolution". In younger grades, we mostly see that 'peer conflict' and bullying is rare.

#### Mean Behavior

Children may try out behaviors to assert themselves – sometimes saying or doing mean things – such as making fun of others, using a hurtful name, taking something without permission, leaving a child out, or "budging" in line.

If it is mean behavior, usually:

- it is not planned and seems to happen spontaneously or by chance;
- it may be aimed at any child nearby;
- the child being mean may feel badly when an adult points out the harm they've caused.

When adults see mean behavior they should not ignore it. Adults should respond quickly, firmly and respectfully to stop the behavior, to let kids know that their actions are hurtful and to re-direct children to more positive behavior.

This quick response stops children from developing a pattern of mean behavior as their way of interacting with peers, and prevents mean behavior from escalating into bullying. It is a lot easier to correct a child for one nasty comment than to change a pattern of cruelty that grows over time.

### Bullying Behavior

Bullying is serious behavior that has three key features – all three must be present for the situation to be considered bullying:

- Power imbalance - One child clearly has power over the other(s), which may be due to age, size, social status, and so on.
- Intention to harm - The purpose of the bullying behavior is to harm or hurt other(s) – it is intended to be mean and is clearly not accidental.
- Repeated over time – bullying behavior continues over time, and gets worse with repetition. There is a real or implied threat that the behavior will not stop, and in fact will become even more serious.

The effect on the bullied child is increased fear, apprehension and distress. Often by the time adults find out about what is happening, the child has tried many ways to stop the bullying, but cannot do so on their own.

Adults must address the bullying behavior and ensure the safety of the targeted student. It is also essential to reassure the children, who may have witnessed the behavior, that adults are involved and are working to improve the situation.

When schools respond to bullying, staff will also help the child who has been bullying others to take responsibility for their actions, and change their behavior. They will monitor the situation to ensure the bullying stops, and will support the bullied child to regain confidence and a sense of safety. Staff may follow-up with the students who observed the behavior to help them learn what to do when they see bullying.

The “conflict resolution” style of bringing the children together is not recommended in bullying situations, until considerable time has gone by and all children are feeling safe enough to talk about what happened so that relationships can be healed. The relationships of adults and students involved is very important in dealing with bullying situations.

If you have any questions regarding the above information, or have concerns about your child at any time, please do not hesitate to contact me.

*Darryl Turner*

Darryl Turner  
Principal – Edgewater Elementary School  
[darryl.turner@sd6.bc.ca](mailto:darryl.turner@sd6.bc.ca)  
Rocky Mountain School District No. 6