

**“They don’t like me”
Preschool Bullying
&
What to do about it**

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Jane Katch (2003) writes:

“We don’t like you.” Hearing those harsh words, I look up quickly from the art table, where I am mixing the mornings paints. It is only the first week of school but I know they come from 5 year old Toby, already the vortex of conflict in my class.”

- In my first years of teaching I **ignored** such statements fearing I would make the ostracized child feel worse.
- In the next years I **lectured** the children about the importance of kindness and inclusion.
- Now I feel a need to **understand** why a young child feels such a need to keep another child out.

Katch, J. (2003) *They don’t like me: Lessons on bullying and teasing from a preschool classroom*, Boston: Beacon Press

Vivian Paley (1992) writes:

“Turning sixty, I am more aware of the voices of exclusion in the classroom. “You can’t play” suddenly seems too overbearing and harsh, resounding like a slap from wall to wall. How casually one child determines the fate of another...

By kindergarten, a structure begins to be revealed & soon will be carved in stone. Certain children will have the right to limit the social experiences of their classmates. Henceforth a ruling class will notify others of their acceptability and the outsiders learn to anticipate the sting of rejection. Long after hitting and name-calling have been outlawed by the teachers, a more damaging phenomenon is allowed to take root, spread like a weed from grade to grade”

Paley, V. (1992) You can’t say you can’t play, Harvard University Press

Preschool Bullying

- Veteran teacher Vivian Gussin Paley witnessed a peculiar phenomenon in her kindergarten classroom year after year – without fail,
 - a caste system developed within each group of students.
 - Certain children were granted the status of “boss” by their peers, giving them the power to create the games, make the rules, and determine who would be allowed to join the group and who would be consistently excluded from those games.

I want to challenge your thinking today

- Consider the following questions:
 - Is exclusivity part of human nature?
 - Can we legislate fairness and still nurture creativity and individuality?
 - Can children be freed from the habit of rejection?
 - Is it fair to tell children “you can’t say you can’t play”?
 - Will children easily or willingly give up the power & status accorded to them when their classroom is designed to support a hierarchical structure

Learning Objectives

- To understand what bullying is
- To understand what it looks like in preschool
- To understand why preschoolers might bully others
- To develop some strategies for addressing bullying amongst preschoolers
- To develop strategies that inhibit children's need or desire to bully

What is bullying?

- Intentional hurtful behavior
- Purposeful
- Imbalance in power
- Occurs repeatedly over time
- Becomes more serious over time
- Directed to one or a few individuals
- Meets desires for power, status & control

Bullying is

- The abuse of **power**
- Committed by the **powerful**
- When there is an imbalance in **power**
- Felt to be oppressive by the target
- Who feels **powerless** to defend him/herself

Yoneyama & Naito (2003)

Bullying is about **POWER**

- The use of interpersonal power in an aggressive way
- The ability to capitalize on another's vulnerability
- Power & aggression lead to dominance & status
- Kids watching bullying learn to align with the dominant person for protection & status & to avoid being a target.

Bullying versus Aggression

- Repeated roughness
- Directed to one or a few children
- Premeditated rather than reactive

Why talk about bullying?

- Prevalent misconception that bullying is a normal phase of development
- May think this is a stage children will out grow - especially young children
- May lead to tolerance for high levels of aggression in young children

Informed Caregivers, Parents & Teachers:

- Build safe, supportive environments that do not support bullying
- Know what bullying is, when it is happening, act to stop it and support those involved
- Manage incidents that have serious impact on individuals & or the school in effective ways

There are three main types of bullying

■ Physical

- Hitting, kicking, shoving, biting, taking belongings

■ Verbal

- Name-calling, insulting, teasing, slurs

■ Social/Relational

- Ignoring, excluding from the group, manipulating the peer group to hurt another's social relationships

Form the Bullying may take

■ Direct

- More overt -to the child's face
- Straightforward
- *"You are not getting invited to my birthday unless you do what I want"*

■ Indirect

- Hidden & covert-behind the child's back
- *"I am having a party and I am inviting everyone except Sara."*

Examples from a Preschool Classroom

J. Katch (2003)

Toby, Sean & Russell

- *“Lets go smash his guy,”* Toby tells Sean and Russell as Toby hits 4 year old Noah’s small plastic truck driver with his own.
- Noah slowly stands up and walks silently to the block area, his shoulders slumped and his face impassive.

Toby, Sean & Russell

- Sean

“Noah, can you tell me what you are afraid of?”

(Noah is pleased to have the attention of his favorite older boy.)

- Noah

“The only thing I am scared of is sharks,”

- Sean

“Ha, ha, ha, ha!” (laughs). *“He’s scared of sharks!”* (he announces to Toby and Russell). *“We’re not scared of killer whales! We’re not even scared of sharks!” We’re not scared of anything!”*

- *Noah’s face goes blank as he realizes he has made a big mistake*

Toby, Sean & Russell

- Zoe (has previously admitted that she is afraid of “roaring”)
“Sean was roaring at me!” (shouts).
- Russell
“Zoë keeps bothering us, We’re roaring, and she keeps following us,”
- Toby
“And she kepted on following us and she kepted on telling us,”
- Russell (quietly, his head down)
“We said, ‘Come look at something special,’ and then we roared at her.”

Zoë

- *“Zoë kicked me! She has been on the tire swing since recess started and I told her I wanted a turn and that’s when she kicked me!”*
- Zoë turns and gives Brooke a hard shove making her stumble against the table. *“She’s making announcements!”* Zoë shouts. *“I don’t like announcements!”*
- *“Don’t shout at me!”* Zoë is shouting herself. *“They screamed at me not to bump the table!”* Zoë is crying now and hard to understand. *“She made us mess up our bead patterns!”* Ariel explains. *“We told her not to bump the table and then she did it some more.”*

More Zoë

- *“My socks are wet! I hate wet socks! Zoë screams. She pauses a moment and then adds dramatically, “This is the worst day of my life!” Timmy laughs nervously. Zoë flings her shoe hitting him squarely in the head. The teacher tells her to stop. “You expect everyone to be perfect!” Zoë yells back at the teacher.*
- *The morning 5 year old Cassie comes to visit Zoë has a bad day. “Cassie can’t come here! If she came here, everyone would play with her! And then what?”*
- Michelle’s gym shoes are missing and the teacher suspects Zoë. She hears Gwynn whispering to a group of girls that someone threw them in the wastebasket. The teacher talks to Gwynn. *“I put them in the wastebasket in the bathroom when Michelle was out sick”* she says. *“Why?”* the teacher asks stunned. *“Zoë was angry with Michelle. I knew if I didn’t do it, Zoë would be mad at me.”*

What would you do to help Toby, Sean & Russell, Noah or Zoë?

- How do you feel about
 - Toby, Sean & Russell?
 - What about Noah?
- Do you like or understand Zoë?

Development of Physical Aggression in Early Childhood

- Aggression & violent behaviors are
 - **learned** responses to frustration
 - **learned** as instruments for achieving goals
 - **learned** by observing aggressive models
- Models may be observed
 - in families & homes
 - In neighborhoods & communities
 - through mass media

When is Aggression **Learned**?

- Studies of preschoolers show that
 - children learn not to be aggressive
 - takes place during the first 18-24 months of life.
- Preschool is a **sensitive period**
 - **learning to regulate** physical aggression.
 - Emotion regulation
 - Behavioural inhibition
- Preschool is the **best window of opportunity**
 - for helping children at risk of becoming chronic physical aggressors to learn to regulate their behavior.

Child-Environment Interaction

- Over and above whatever predisposition a child is born with, aggression as a way of interacting with another person is learned from a developing child's interaction with their environment
- Transformation of the child's initial aggressive behavior into habitual aggressive behavior depends on the responses of the child's environment to the aggression.

Becoming Aggressive

- Children do not learn to be aggressive rather they learn not to use physical aggression through interaction with their environment
- Most children learn alternatives to PA during their preschool years
- Those who do not learn to regulate aggression before they go to school are at great risk for later adjustment problems

What does this mean for you?

- **Challenge** every incident of bullying that comes to your attention
- **Teach** children the skills to deal with conflict in a prosocial manner, skills that are incompatible with bullying:
 - Empathy
 - Inclusion
 - Acceptance of diversity
- **Show** children that adults mean business & that they are effective in their interventions.

Preschool Teacher's Awareness of Bullying

- Aware of most physical bullying
- Often intervene effectively
- Aware of less than 30% of social bullying
- Never intervene except to say
 - “just come away and ignore them”
 - thus rewarding the bullying behaviour

When do children start to use relational aggression to bully?

- Peers and teachers have reported the use of relational aggression in children as young as three years of age (Crick, Casa & Mosher, 1997; McNeilly-Choque, Hart, Robinson, Nelson & Olsen, 1996)
- An example of preschool social aggression (Underwood, 2003)

“How was your day at school?”

Great! Nicole told the whole class that she made a list of who could come to her birthday party, and she crossed off all of the girls but me.

How did that make you feel?

Good. But then she told me that I would not get a goody bag at the party unless I play what she wants every single day.” (pg. 65)

Louisa, 5 years old

What Does RA Look Like in Preschool?

- Walking away when another tries to join the group
- Telling others not to play with someone
- Whispering or saying mean things about another
- Telling a child to go away
- Not listening to another child- covering ears
- Telling another child he/she will stop liking them unless they do what they want
- Telling another child they can't play unless they do what the individual wants them to

Examples of RA

- “Mary and I were invited to a birthday party on the weekend and you weren’t invited”
- “Why don’t you go and play with the girls in the other room. We don’t want you to play with us.”
- “When we are 8 we are going to have a sleep over and you aren’t invited.”
- “How about Jane and I play with this sled and you can have the one over there.”

In Preschool What Should We Be Looking For?

- Excluding certain children from friendship groups with the intent to cause distress
 - “Are you my friend?”
“No, I only play with 5 year olds.”
 - “They say I can’t play.”
We’re just saying that we don’t want people to spoil our games with Unicorns. We only have room for Pokemons not Unicorns.”
- Using others as a means of attacking an individual instead of physically attacking
- Manipulating the social relationships of the group or class
 - “Cassie can’t come here! If she came here, everyone would play with her! And then what?”

What to Watch for:

- friends always do what they want
- Are not intimidated by any of the others
- High levels of exclusivity
- High levels of control
- Ignoring or excluding certain children
- Charming to adults
- Won't take responsibility for others' hurt feelings
- If wronged feels they have the right to seek revenge
- Has an eye-for-an-eye view of the world

Wiseman (2002)

How does bullying start?

- Children see others in their world use their power over others to get their own way or to hurt someone
 - Parents
 - Teachers
 - Caregivers
 - Siblings
 - Friends
 - peers

How to deal with bullying in the preschool

Bullying is about power

- Using your power to harm others
 - Can be physical, social or psychological power
- Want to teach small children
 - How to have a sense of power and control in ways that does not hurt others
 - How to deal with anger/conflict in a prosocial way.

Power = Choices

- What choices can you give to preschoolers?
- How can you help preschoolers to feel powerful?

Ineffective advice that adults give kids

- Just ignore it
- You should solve your problems yourself
- It's not that bad
- You just need to stand up for yourself
- What did you do?
- I don't want to hear about it
- You two are such good friends I am sure you can work it out.

Cautions

- Avoid blaming the victim
- Be careful not to revictimize
- Don't get caught up in the pursuit of truth
- Be hard on the problem but soft on the person

Preventative Strategies

- Emotion Coaching

- Gottman (1997) The Heart of Parenting: Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child

- Develop empathy

- Gordon (2005) Roots of Empathy: Changing the World Child by Child

- Teach SPS -cognitive flexibility

- Implement Preschool Prevention Programmes

- Leadbeater WITS Programme <http://web.uvic.ca/wits>

- Reduce exposure to TV and video violence

- Offer prosocial opportunities for power, & control

Creating a Safe & Caring School Community

- Clarify your expectations for behaviour
- Develop the language to talk about
 - feelings, including difficult emotions that might otherwise be rejected by the group
- Helping children talk directly about issues
 - of fairness, anger and other difficult emotions will give them permission to bring up problems as they occur, rather than letting them build up and become larger
- Be inclusive
 - Ensure all children are included in play activities
 - Allow children opportunities to make connections with children they might not ordinarily notice - develops comfort with a wide range of boys and girls
 - Allow children to find common interests among a diverse group of children

Dealing with Exclusion, Bullying & Teasing

- No right way to approach this problem
- Children need to know that the problem will be discussed until a solution is reached that all the children involved agree is fair.
- Children involved in conflict stop playing until a solution is found
- The system for dealing with each problem may be very different
- It must be very clear what will happen when a member of the community feels he or she has been treated unfairly.
- Every complaint is given a high priority and is dealt with quickly
- The students have an integral part in these discussions
- The students need a common language for discussing what has gone wrong.
- Your form need not be perfect
- What is essential is the ongoing conversations between adults & children about what is fair and what is moral that will over time help children resist the impulse to tease & bully

Children who use bullying behaviours:

- Enjoy feeling in control
- Find bullying exciting
- Feel destructively entitled
- Achieve their goals
- Have little empathy for their victims
- Feel no guilt for their behavior
- Are not loners
- Have friends
- Feel justified in their behavior

Signs of a potential bullying problem:

- Peer ecology supports positive attitudes toward bullying behaviour
- Competitive environment

Keep in mind

- You **don't** need to know exactly what to do or how to help
- You **do** need to understand the problem and understand the core philosophy:
 - All children are entitled to be free of the fear of bullying
 - All children are entitled to feel that they are a valued and accepted member of the group

For those who only stand and watch

- Watching numbs reactions to violence
- Risk becoming desensitized to cruelty
- May become highly aroused & excited
- May experience break down in inner controls against antisocial behavior
- May not be aware of potentially serious consequences
- Perceive victim as deserving of abuse
- Hinders the development of empathy and compassion

What is your Goal?

- “ I want my classroom to be a respite, a place of safety. But more than that, I want each child to have the opportunity to belong, to learn to be a valued member of the group.”

Jane Katch (2003)

- When a young child is rejected year after year, he or she does not have the opportunity to develop and practice the ability to become a constructive group member.

Preventative Measures

- Design and implement programs for preschoolers-don't adopt a watch and wait attitude
- Develop prosocial, positive ways for children to meet the needs that are being fulfilled by aggressive strategies
 - Power, control, intimacy, cohesion, feelings of belonging
- Provide an environment that endorses an inclusive atmosphere
 - "You can't say you can't play"
- Provide curriculum that endorses diversity & acceptance
- Examine the structures and processes in the classroom that may lead to exclusion (i.e. picking teams)
- Talk to parents about the extent to which physical aggression & relational aggression is an issue in your classroom
 - Mothers show least concern about RA
 - Mothers who do show concern were less RA aggressive themselves and were more prosocial
 - Parents may transmit a message about the acceptability of RA
 - RA is first practiced with siblings then generalizes to friends

Ten Critical Steps to Creating a Social Climate Free From Bullying :

1. Team build **early**
2. Develop inclusiveness & empathy
3. Establish a positive climate
4. Set clear expectations for behaviour
5. Learn the language
6. Identify hidden behaviours
7. Understand power misuse
8. Hold children accountable
9. Meet needs for a sense of group belonging
10. Empower children

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What to do and say (instigator)

- Focus on teaching, not punishing (formative consequences)
- Identify the behaviour as hurtful
- Explore motivations
- Discuss the negative use of power
- Make a plan for using power positively

What to do and say (instigator)

- Discuss negative emotions and positive/constructive ways to express them
- Listen without judging
- Recognize that conflict is an ordinary part of life
- **Together**, develop ideas to repair harm done

What to do and say (target)

- Listen without judging/rushing to fix:
 - “I am so glad you talked to me about this. It must be really hard for you. I promise that we will keep talking about it and working toward change. We will figure this out together.”
- Indicate that what is happening is not OK:
 - “What happened to you is not OK. I am so sorry this happened to you.”

What to do and say (target)

- Continue to listen and guide their understanding about the situation:
 - “Tell me more about this.”
- Discuss strategies for action that s/he’s comfortable with
- Ensure s/he is not re-victimized by the solution
- Check-in to ensure problems have not continued

Some Things to Think About

- How do you present the nature of friendships to children?
- Is one best friend the ideal?
- Is it bad for children to always play/interact with the same best friend?
- Can girls be taught to prefer larger more inclusive groups? Should they be?
- What are your own beliefs about anger and girls?
About aggression in boys?

Long Term Responsibilities:

- Adults cannot mandate friendships, but they can ensure that all students feel included as members of the school community.
 - You don't have to be friends with everyone but it is not OK to be hurtful or harmful to anyone.
- Your objective should be to ensure that all students develop the skills necessary for effective social relationships in later life – being respectful to others, regardless of differences.

Resources

■ Children's Books

- see WITS & Roots of Empathy book lists
- Some favourites
 - Recess Queen
 - Chrysanthemum
 - My Secret Bully
 - The English Roses

■ Adults Books

- Katch, J. (2003) They don't like me: Lessons on bullying and teasing from a preschool classroom, Boston: Beacon Press
- Paley, V. (1992) You can't say you can't play, Harvard University Press
- Coloroso, B. (2006) The bully, the bullied & the bystander, Harper Collins Publisher

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