

Mean Behaviour – Not Every Act of Meanness is Bullying



At times a student or parent reports to us that bullying has occurred, more often than not and actually in most cases it is an act of meanness that has been perpetrated. The article below defines bullying, and one of the defining aspects is that the behaviour needs to be repeated, targeted and cause physical or psychological harm. If your child is being bullied, the school would like to know and as we are committed to the students' well-being, we wish to help both the perpetrator/s and the victims.

Quite often children experience single negative encounters, and it's the adults' role to help them to learn about the choices they have when responding. One option is to help a student understand that when people have been mean, possibly they are hurting, and then help them to acknowledge the emotion the perpetrator is feeling. For example, 'It seems that you are upset, perhaps hurt by someone, would you like to talk?'

Acknowledging mean behaviour, e.g. 'that was insensitive/rude/mean/unkind of her or him to say/do that', then working through the choices of action to help your child establish the boundaries for future. Ask, 'what are your choices? What are the likely outcomes of these choices?' Rushing in to solve the difficulty for the child inadvertently tells the child that they lack the capacity to solve their own problems; it does not set them up for future problem solving and your child may continue to feel victimised and inhibit the development of resilience.

To learn more, we have included the following article:

'Not every act of meanness is bullying'

By **Michael Hawton**, Child Psychologist (MAPS) and Parentshop founder.

One of our jobs is to help children and young people to interpret events proportionally. However, in recent times, I have seen a shift involving the wrong application of words like trauma, depression and bullying. When these very meaningful words are misused, their misuse can result in unwanted consequences. What might be the 'unkind' behaviour of another may, in fact, not be 'bullying'. In this article we discuss the differences between unkindness and bullying, and how defining the two correctly, can teach kids resilience and how to cope with conflict.

Anyone who spends a great deal of time with children or simply remembers their own childhood would know that children can be downright mean. An experiment by Debra Pepler at York University brought together children from Year 1 to 6 who were identified by their teachers as particularly aggressive or particularly non-aggressive. What the study found was

that, on average, mean behaviour from the aggressive children was displayed every two minutes and, most revealingly, from the non-aggressive children every three minutes.

Conflict is unfortunately a part of life that we all deal with, no matter what age.

Bullying is, however, way more than that and can have serious and sometimes tragic consequences. Yet the term 'bullying' seems to be readily bandied around these days for all forms of 'mean behaviour'.

According to 'Bullying No Way', the national Australian definition of bullying is:

'An ongoing misuse of power in relationships through repeated verbal, physical and/or social behaviour that causes physical and/or psychological harm. It can involve an individual or a group misusing their power over one or more persons. Bullying can happen in person or online, and it can be obvious (overt) or hidden (covert)... Single incidents and conflict or fights between equals, whether in person or online, are not defined as bullying.'

The key terms in the definition of bullying are 'misuse of power' and 'repeated'. The key terms in the definition of what is not bullying is 'between equals', and while conflicts or mean and hurtful behaviour may upset a child tremendously, by labelling the mean behaviour 'bullying' we may be disempowering children.

It is important for children to understand the difference between someone being insensitive or mean and what constitutes bullying behavior, because being able to successfully resolve and navigate these situations is a huge step in their emotional growth and maturity. If the situation is deemed to be simply mean or hurtful behavior, it is important not to over-play this through misleading terminology (i.e. bullying) and offer ways for the child to address and resolve this themselves.

Teacher and writer Braden Bell spoke in his article for the Washington Post about his own personal experience when hearing about one of his children experiencing negative and disparaging remarks from a co-worker. His initial fury led him to a biased judgement, defining the perpetrator as a bully, but when he eventually calmed down, he realised it did not fit the definition (it was offensive behaviour but not bullying) and so he talked with his wife - and then teenager - to find a viable coping solution, which worked out in the end.

A way parents can assist with this is by first acknowledging the mean behaviour, e.g., 'that was mean/rude/unkind of her/him' and then, as Bell suggests, prompting the child to seek some form of resolution or solution by asking "what are your choices?", and, as a follow-up, 'what are the likely outcomes of those choices?'. This may not be easy because of heightened emotions and the initial responses may not be great.

Parents who react too defensively for their child at every negative encounter with their child's peers may be doing more harm than good. In later years, the child may not have the necessary tools to independently handle conflict and may feel 'victimised' in situations that don't go their way, potentially causing social engagement and relationship difficulties in later life.

Further, in her article in Psychology Today, **Eileen Kennedy-Moore**, wrote:

'... calling every act of meanness 'bullying' sends an unhealthy message: It says to kids, 'You're fragile. You can't handle it if anyone is even slightly unkind to you.' As these children grow older, they demonstrate less resilience, sometimes publicly. The kids got more easily and deeply upset about perceived offenses, including situations that were unpleasant, but

weren't really bullying. Beyond stunting their emotional maturity, their heightened reactions had negative social consequences, as peers responded by disengaging from them.'

By defining the behaviour correctly, we are encouraging our kids to assess and respond in a way that with long term practice, creates resiliency and emotional maturity.

Michael Hawton is the founder of Parentshop, providing education and resources for parents and industry professionals working with children. He has authored two books on child behaviour management: *Talk Less Listen More* and *Engaging Adolescents*. You can find more information, including his books and self-paced online parenting courses at <https://www.parentshop.com.au/parent-courses/>