

Mean Behaviour, Peer Conflict and Bullying: what is the difference? ... a Summary.

The following information is taken from the Erase Bullying Violent Threat Risk Assessment. It is meant as a help for you to understand the different levels of social interaction and conflict among students.

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

Each type of behaviour must be handled differently, to keep children safe and help them learn how to get along with others. This process of learning takes time, warmth and support from the adults in their lives.

Peer Conflict

Conflict between and among peers is a natural part of growing up. Children will have times when they disagree and can't resolve their problems. They may even become so frustrated that they say mean things or act out physically by hitting, kicking or trying to hurt. If it's peer conflict, you will be aware that these children:

- often choose to play or be 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 approach is often referred to as "conflict resolution". If these behaviours persist, it may be a situation for the social inclusion stream at our school. (see student support handbook)

Mean Behaviour

Children may try out behaviours 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, lashing out physically at another child.

If it is mean behaviour, usually:

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

When adults see mean behaviour, they should not ignore it. Adults should respond quickly, firmly and respectfully to stop the behaviour, to let children know that their actions are hurtful and to re-direct students to more positive behaviour. This quick response stops them from developing a pattern of mean behaviour as their way of interacting with peers and prevents mean behaviour 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 Behaviour

We are very careful at our school to speak about bullying behaviour and not bullies. Bullying is serious behaviour 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.
- Premeditated and intent to harm is present - The purpose of the bullying behaviour is to harm or hurt other(s)
 - it's intended to be mean and is clearly not accidental.
- Repeated over time - bullying behaviour continues over time and gets worse with repetition. There is a real or implied threat that the behaviour will not stop, and in fact will become even more serious.

The effect on the child who is being bullied 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 behaviour and ensure the safety of the student who has been targeted. They also need to reassure the children who may have witnessed the behaviour that adults are taking care of it.