



8.5 Peer Conflict, Mean Behaviour, and Bullying: What's the Difference?

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

Each type of behaviour must be handled differently in order to keep children safe and help them learn how to get along with others.

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 themselves or 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.
- 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".

MEAN BEHAVIOUR

Children may try out behaviours to assert themselves by 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 behaviour, 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 behaviour they should not ignore it. Adults should respond quickly, firmly, and respectfully to stop the behaviour, to let kids know that their actions are hurtful, and to redirect children to more positive behaviour.

This quick response stops the child 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

Bullying is a 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.
- **Intention to harm** – The purpose of the bullying behaviour is to harm or hurt other(s); it is 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.

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 behaviour. They will monitor the situation to ensure the bullying stops and will help the child who has been bullied to regain confidence and a sense of safety. Staff may follow-up with the students who observed the behaviour 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.

REFERENCES

[Policy 310: Code of Conduct](#)

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School District No. 39 (Vancouver), October 21, 2022

RESOURCES

[ERASE](#)