



NAME-CALLING AND TEASING: STRATEGIES FOR PARENTS AND TEACHERS

By Beth M. Levy, MA, CAGS, NCSP
 Bedford (NY) Central School District

Adults often underestimate the stress and anguish teasing and name-calling cause children. Teasing and name-calling are common social interactions, and can be used in a playful manner with friends and classmates and between parents and children. However, it is the hurtful way that teasing and name-calling often are used that may discourage school attendance for many children and erode their feelings of self-confidence. Children who name-call and tease typically view their comments as mild, but their victims' perceptions differ.

Developmental Issues

Young children. Name-calling and teasing are common with very young children. Preschool children display teasing, typically playful teasing, by laughing at others, saying silly things, and at times innocently commenting about something new or different about a child. Young children say what is on their mind and have not yet learned to filter comments. Based on the reactions of others, children begin to learn what it feels like to be teased as well as how to respond to teasing. Young children are aware that things they do can hurt others, but their teasing or name-calling tends not to be deliberate. If young children have older siblings, they may also be exposed to name-calling earlier than children without siblings. Children as they enter kindergarten learn to follow rules and want to belong to a group and fit in; that is, they want friends to play with and to be invited to parties and play dates.

Elementary school years. Social acceptance becomes increasingly important throughout the elementary school years. Children may take part in teasing and name-calling to show their power and affiliation with a peer group; conversely, children may express being the victim to gain attention and sympathy from the social group. Elementary school children tend to use more hurtful comments in their name-calling as they develop better language skills. They also learn to be subtle about when and where they tease to be sure adults are not around to hear them, and typically deny any wrongdoing when others report them.

Adolescence. While adolescents become more empathetic about situations such as illnesses or loss of a parent, they can become quite hurtful toward peers with what are perceived as negative attributes. Adolescents have developed the verbal skill and the cognitive ability to find an individual's vulnerabilities and so attack them. Teasing at this stage is meant to hurt, embarrass, and humiliate peers in front of others, often as a means of gaining social acceptance from a desired peer group.

Gender differences. There are differences between boys and girls in the types of name-calling and teasing. Boys tend to target and embarrass each other by commenting about areas of weakness or questioning their manhood. Girls tend to be more subtle with their name-calling and teasing by spreading rumors, excluding girls from the group, and making fun of their physical appearance. Teasing and name-calling in older school-aged children are often related to their interest in the opposite sex and their efforts to mask it for fear of being teased themselves.

Intervention Strategies

Many children and adolescents lack effective coping strategies and social skills to deal with teasing and name-calling. When they appear upset and hurt by teasing, that becomes a signal to others to continue the teasing because they have caused a reaction. Adult efforts to intervene, such as telling children to ignore the teasing, do not usually work because victims do not know how to effectively hide their hurt emotions. Children also feel that adults do not realize how much pain they are experiencing from teasing and name-calling. It is crucial that parents and teachers intervene to help children cope and interrupt the negative consequences of name-calling and teasing.

Strategies for Parents

Teasing and name-calling were difficult to deal with when we were younger, but it can be harsher today. Children need their parents to validate their feelings and help them feel supported. Role-playing various strategies and solutions can help your child feel more confident and less like a victim when facing difficult teasing situations.

- Listen and validate your children's feelings when they say someone is calling them names and teasing them.
- Try not to evaluate how well your children handled teasing; instead, praise your children for trying to handle this difficult situation.
- Strategies to help children cope with stress will be effective strategies to deal with teasing and name-calling.
- Help your children develop a repertoire of confident comebacks, using previous name-calling situations as examples for practice.
- Help your children practice hiding their emotions when they are called names or teased. Role playing (setting up a pretend situation) can provide safe practice opportunities.
- Have your children practice looking right at the teaser and maintaining eye contact. This shows confidence and strength.
- Teaching your children to remain calm and in control during stressful situations is an effective skill they can use throughout life.

Strategies for Teachers

Teachers have more impact on the life of victims of name-calling and teasing than they may realize. If teachers allow teasing to continue by not making attempts to stop this behavior, they can send a message that teasing is acceptable and the victims feel unsupported. Teachers need to use their power to help all children feel accepted and not allow anyone to be excluded.

- Encourage acts of kindness and compliments in the classroom. Set the expectation for kindness and do not accept teasing behavior.
- Work with the school psychologist or social worker to help support victims and change the interactions with the social group. Find ways to highlight the strengths or special talents of children who tend to be victims.
- Work closely with parents to help promote more positive social interactions and change inappropriate behaviors.

Resources

- Beane, A. (1999). *The bully-free classroom: Over 100 tips and strategies for teachers K-8*. Minneapolis: Free Spirit. ISBN: 1575420546.
- Freedman, J. (2002). *Easing the teasing: Helping your child cope with name-calling, ridicule, and verbal bullying*. New York: McGraw-Hill/Contemporary Books. ISBN: 0071381759.
- Kaufman, G., Raphael, L., & Espeland, P. (1999). *Stick up for yourself: Every kid's guide to personal power and positive self-esteem*. Minneapolis: Free Spirit. ISBN: 1575420686.
- Northway Ogden, S. (2002). *Words will never hurt me: Helping kids handle teasing, bullying and putdowns*. Seattle: Elton-Wolf. ISBN: 1586190318.

Websites

The Committee for Children—www.cfchildren.org
The Safe and Responsive Schools Project—
www.indiana.edu/~safeschl

Beth M. Levy, MA, CAGS, NCSP, is a school psychologist at Pound Ridge Elementary School in the Bedford Central School District, Westchester, NY.

© 2004 National Association of School Psychologists, 4340 East West Highway, Suite 402, Bethesda, MD 20814—(301) 657-0270.