

On Purpose: Addressing Teasing and Bullying in Early Childhood

**Merle Froschl and
Barbara Sprung**

*In the words of a kindergartner,
"Boys usually chase girls because
that's what boys do—boys chase."*

In a first-grade classroom, a boy goes up to another boy and close to his face says in a loud voice, "What's up?" The second boy uses his arm to brush aside the first boy, then pushes him. The first boy pushes back, then each boy knees the other in the crotch.

Merle Froschl and Barbara Sprung are cofounders and codirectors of Educational Equity Concepts, Inc., a national nonprofit organization in New York City that promotes bias-free learning through innovative programs and materials. Since 1995, in collaboration with the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, they have conducted research and developed curriculums addressing young children's teasing and bullying behavior. The ideas in this article are adapted from their book coauthored with Nancy Mullin-Rindler: *Quit It: A Teacher's Guide on Teasing and Bullying for Use with Students in Grades K-3.*

Teachers of young children know only too well that teasing and bullying behavior begins very early and can become a disruptive force in the early childhood classroom. The opening quote and vignette tell us quite a bit about the myth and the reality of teasing and bullying.

The myth is that teasing and bullying is a given of childhood, a "boys-will-be-boys" kind of thing. The reality is that while boys are most often the perpetrators of teasing or bullying incidents, all children—girls and boys—can find themselves the targets of bullies and may themselves initiate teasing and bullying. The research bears this out.

In one study conducted in grades K-3 by Educational Equity Concepts and the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, boys initiated 78% of incidents observed, more than three times as many incidents as started by girls, although boys and girls were equally likely to be recipients of such incidents (Groppe & Froschl 1998). This finding is in keeping with the growing body of research on bullying, most of which involves children in upper elementary- and middle-school grades (Olweus 1993; Ross 1996). It is important to keep in mind that this evidence is not about "boys being bad" but rather the need for us to take notice so we can do a much better job of addressing aggressive behavior in young boys to counteract the persistent messages they receive from the media and society at large.

A prevailing definition of bullying is "exposure, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions (words, physical contact, making faces, gesturing, or intentional exclusion from a group) on the part of one or more other students" (Olweus 1993, 9). Researchers also believe that even occasional incidents of bullying can harm children (Stephenson & Smith 1989; Tattum 1989).

While there is no body of research investigating teasing and bullying at the early childhood level, a great deal of literature on sex

differences in aggressive behavior exists that predates the more recent interest in teasing and bullying (Maccoby & Jacklin 1974; Parke & Slaby 1983). This literature is in agreement with the research on teasing and bullying in its finding that aggressive behavior, at least direct forms of aggression, is more prevalent among boys (Bjorkqvist 1994).

About teachers' responses

Teachers' attitudes play a major role in determining the extent of teasing and bullying in a school or classroom (Olweus 1994), but, in general, researchers have found that teachers do relatively little to put a stop to bullying behavior (Olweus 1993). In the K-3 study mentioned earlier, teachers and/or other adults, although present at all times, were uninvolved or ignored 71% of the observed incidents. In the same study, interviews with children revealed that they yearn for adults to intervene. For example, children said, "Teachers should make kids explain and make them apologize" and "Kids won't stop until the teacher makes them" (Groppe & Froschl 1998).

Teachers fail to intervene in teasing and bullying incidents for a variety of reasons: They may be unaware of the incident; they may want children to work things out on their own; they may want to discourage tattling behavior; or they may feel that this a natural part of childhood. However, when teachers do not intervene, children perceive this as condoning the teasing and bullying behavior. Because boys are the predominant initiators of teasing and bullying, it is very likely that children also see teachers' lack of response to the behaviors as giving boys license to act in these ways.

The need to begin early

At any age, teasing and bullying are harmful and can create a classroom climate that negatively affects children's ability to learn and

the teacher's ability to teach (Ross 1996). Therefore, it seems critical for teachers and parents to address this behavior in early childhood before it becomes ingrained.

Early childhood teachers are first in importance, next to the family, in helping a young child become a comfortable and cooperative member of society. And, early childhood is the time when parents and other family members have the closest communication with their child's school, which again presents opportunities for positive socialization. Finally, the early childhood curriculum ensures many occasions for using a proactive approach to reducing teasing and bullying. Familiar activities—storytime, reading, meeting-time discussions, experience charts, drawings, art projects, creative story writing or dictation, puppet plays, charting or graphing—all are avenues for exploring the topic of behaviors within the daily curriculum. Here are a few examples.

Talking about teasing and bullying. Give children time and space to talk about teasing and bullying. Use books such as *Rosie's Story* by Martine Gogoll, *Oliver Button Is a Sissy* by Tomie dePaola, or *Crow Boy* by Taro Yashima as discussion starters. Make the classroom a place where children can talk about what makes them feel welcome, comfortable, and safe in school. The experience chart below is from one kindergarten class where such a discussion took place.

I feel welcome when

- ... someone says, "Play with me"
- ... someone is nice to me
- ... I play with the teacher
- ... someone says, "Happy birthday"

I feel **un**welcome when

- ... someone says, "I don't care"
- ... someone pushes
- ... someone says, "Stupid"
- ... someone's whispering

Classroom rule making. Classroom rules have more meaning if children have a hand in creating them. When children help to develop their classroom rules, they are more likely to follow them rather than use them as a tattling device or as a way to wield power over others.

Rules should be stated in the children's own words. One kindergarten said, "Don't say bad words like *stupid*; it hurts people's feelings," and that became a classroom rule.

Another way to help children take ownership of their rules is to help them work in pairs or small groups, with each group creating an illustration for one of the rules.

Then tape or glue together their illustrations to create a classroom "rules quilt."



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Don't assume that the older (or the boy!) is always the perpetrator.

Noncompetitive games. Use outdoor time as a way to foster cooperation and friendship. There are many sources for ideas of noncompetitive games in which children help each other rather than try to win or gain power over another. Here are some samples of cooperative tag games:

Stop and Go: In a group of players, a few children act as "taggers" and some others have gloves. Once a child is tagged (on the shoulder), she is "frozen." When someone who is frozen yells, "Help," a child with gloves can pass on a glove, which "unfreezes" that player. The number of taggers and gloves depends on the number of players, the size of the playing area, and the aggressiveness of the children involved.

Circle of Friends (a variation of the game above): A number of chil-

dren begin the game acting as taggers. They can freeze others by tagging them on the shoulder. In this version of the game, if a frozen child calls for help, two children hold hands to encircle him. This circle of friends unfreezes the child so that he can continue playing. Children cannot be tagged while making a circle.

Quieting activities. These are exercises that can become part of the daily life of the classroom and help children cope with frustration, anger, and stress. During the class meeting time, use sounds such as those made by a chime, xylophone, or water poured through a sieve to create a calm atmosphere. Or set up a quiet "safe haven" (with items that soothe like a fish tank, modeling clay, or portable tape player with earphones) where one or two children can go to cool off when they're feeling stressed.

Involving parents

Parents are essential partners in teachers' efforts to create a climate in which teasing and bullying are unacceptable behaviors. Parents need ongoing communication about what is going on in the classroom as well as suggestions for ways to communicate with their own children on the topic. For example, if the teacher and children in a class create a set of rules, a discussion of those rules is a good way to connect with family members on behavioral issues. Here are some suggestions:

- Share with parents details on how the children created their own rules and examples of some of the class discussion around the rule making.
- Send a letter home suggesting that parents play a "What If..." game with their children. For example, parents could ask their children, How would it feel if
 - ... no one ever brushed their teeth?

