

Sticks and Stones ...

How to talk with your kids about teasing and bullying

"Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me."

Don't we wish that was the case! Today, we consider bullying to be much more than just hitting or kicking. Verbal aggression – including name-calling, email rumors and threats ("I won't be your friend if you don't ...") – is the kind of thing that can leave kids feeling victimized and alone.

When I talk with classes about bullying, one of the first things we try to do is define it. And even though much of how students behave toward each other is not true bullying (because it would have to be intentional and repetitive, with an imbalance of power), kids still admit to crossing over the line and being "less than nice" from time to time!

But what can you do if your child comes home and says "So and so was really mean to me today?" If your first inclination is to say "Let me have a talk with their parents" ... or "You don't need to put up with that, give it back to them!" ... or "Not again! Wait 'til I get a hold of that kid...", you're not alone! As parents, it's normal to want to defend our kids.

But none of those responses will make the situation better. If instead we can teach our children to think through a response (or two) for themselves, they will be more likely to come up with a solution that works.

Some great messages you can convey to them:

- "I hear you, I believe you." (A good line to use: "Tell me more ...")
- "There are things you can do." (You are not powerless.)
- "It's not your fault." (Even if your child has done something to annoy someone, meanness is never deserved.)
- "I will help you if you need it." (Together, we can explore options.)

There are three key things kids need to develop into strong, caring young people who can stand up for themselves and others:

1. Kids need a strong sense of self.

The better your children feel about themselves, the more likely they will be able to fend off cruel behaviors from others. Positive self-talk ("I'm a good

person, I don't deserve this") develops confidence and self-respect. Kids don't just learn this in a book, though ... they need people to role model for them and give them encouragement, positive feedback and unconditional love.

2. Kids need to develop empathy.

Making and keeping friends involves the kind of skills that will last a lifetime. Much of friendship is based on empathy – the ability to recognize and understand another's feelings. Some kids need more help than others with this, and as parents, we can give them opportunities to listen, reflect back what they see and hear, and imagine "walking a mile in someone else's shoes."

3. Kids need to learn how to resolve conflicts.

It's important for children to be able to understand others' points of view yet be assertive about their own. Learning an effective problem-solving strategy that involves openness, cooperation and compassion can lead to a peaceful outcome. We certainly have the opportunity to lead by example here!

Bottom line, there are many things we can do to give children pointers when they complain about those "sticks and stones." First and foremost, we can LISTEN to them and let them know we hear their concern and worries. We can ENCOURAGE them in their own positive behaviors and help them BUILD UP their friendship skills so they can better deal with situations that arise. And we can HELP them to be assertive, whether that means standing up for themselves, getting help from their teachers or being a peacemaker with others.

We'll be talking with students throughout the year about effective ways to handle teasing and bullying. If you need any resources, don't hesitate to call!

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Some good books:

The Bully, the Bullied and the Bystander by Barbara Coloroso

Easing the Teasing by Judy S. Freedman

Sticks and Stones by Scott Cooper

Sticks and Stones by Karen Maudlin

Playground Politics by Stanley Greenspan & Jacqueline Salmon

