



Teasing and gifted children

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From The SENG Newsletter. 2002 2(1) 3-4.

"Shut up!" "Stop humiliating me!" "Stop it before I destroy you!" I had been observing a second grade classroom when I was jolted by these screams. Remembering these desperate words still causes chills to race up my spine. What could have triggered a boy who was peacefully reading a book to erupt into a frightening fury of anger? Teasing and taunting. After making fun of him for reading in class, the boy's classmates tattled on him. The teacher responded by taking his book away. As it turned out, the boy had been reading instead of completing work he had mastered in kindergarten.

Many gifted children and adolescents are targets of teasing and bullying. Some of their peers and teachers may perceive them as "too verbal", "too bossy", "too smart," "too nerdy." Because gifted children and adolescents tend to be highly sensitive to others, their reactions to being teased are extremely intense. One only has to look to recent shootings around the country, committed by kids who have been described as very bright, for examples of this kind of intensity.

Often the teasing and bullying is subtle- name-calling, shoving, social ostracism, or intimidation. While girls use more psychological manipulation like spreading malicious rumors, boys account for the majority of physical bullying. Too often their victims suffer in silence. Parents need to look for signs of distress: crying, not eating or sleeping during the school week, not wanting to go to school, stomachaches or headaches.

What can you as a parent do if you suspect your child is being teased or bullied? One of the first things is to help your child distinguish between harmless rough and tumble play and harmful behavior. Try to find out what is happening from your child's point of view, and accept what your child tells you as fact. Ask for specifics: Who is teasing? What does she or he do? How do you feel about it - scared, angry, hurt? What did you do about it? Did it work? Do any teachers know? What did they say or do? Offer reassurance to your child. Sharing an experience of a time when you were teased can help them understand that it is normal to be upset about what has happened. Tell them that you will help them solve this problem.

McCoy (1997) offers the following problem solving strategies that you can use when your child is teased or bullied:

1. clarify the problem with your child;
2. ask for other ways your child could respond the next time the situation arises
 - postpone judgment: answers can be inappropriate, vindictive, silly;
 - include appropriate responses: walk away, be assertive, go for help;
3. think through the consequences of each suggestion on the list and pick one to try;
4. make a plan and try it; and
5. evaluate what happened.

What shouldn't parents do? Don't minimize the situation by suggesting that everyone gets teased. Telling children it's their problem and to stand up for themselves only makes them feel even more inadequate and powerless. Don't call the teaser and "reward" him/her with an invitation to discuss and negotiate a plan to stop the teasing by offering rewards. Don't call the teaser's parents to complain. It may make the situation worse.

Teaching gifted kids alternative strategies besides exploding in anger or suffering passively is important. In our practice, we use role-playing to explore techniques that can be used to deal with teasing. One of the first tactics is how to stay calm and ignore the situation. Counting backwards from "10 squared", or ignoring by yawning or becoming interested in something else has proven effective. Another strategy that works is self-talk. Expressions like "Calm down. I'm smart enough to handle this," or "I know what's going on and what they're trying to do. I'm not going to let them take my power away," can help a child go from being victimized to being assertive. We teach children that body language and tone of voice matter. McCoy (1997) offers suggestions on how to appear relaxed and in charge:

- Look people in the eye
- Stand up straight, with feet slightly apart
- Keep your hands in your pockets
- Move closer to the person rather than backing off as you talk
- Speak loudly enough and use a firm and determined voice

One little boy who was consistently being teased by an older girl used his “brilliant retorts” to make her really listen when he decided to be assertive. The statement, “I don’t like it when people push me around,” and saying something silly in a foreign language took her off guard. Doing the unexpected worked for him.

Because many gifted children and adolescents are perfectionistic, they feel that telling an adult what is happening is a reflection on their ability to control their lives. It is critical that parents tell them that informing an adult is not tattling or a measure of their abilities. Getting help from an adult is important, but they need to know when and who. Make a list with your child when he or she should run away and get help from an adult immediately (if another child threatens, hurts physically, or touches inappropriately). Say, “Try to stop their teasing or name-calling yourself, but if you can’t or someone does something that makes you feel unhappy or scared, don’t wait. Tell me or your teacher, so we can help you stop it” (McCoy, 1997). Who should they get help from? You or a “personal support network” at school. Make a list with your child of who these people might be. Let those on the list know that they have been selected to be part of this safety network. Ask for their assistance.

The price of being teased or bullied can be devastating. For a gifted child it may lead to intense anger, withdrawal, and/or depression. Too many suicides and murders have resulted from a bright child being teased. What can parents do? Notify your child’s school immediately when your child becomes a target of teasing and bullying. Do not accept a “kids will be kids” policy. Work to have a “Zero Tolerance for Teasing” program in your school or district, that includes counseling for both the victims and the bullies. More importantly, help your gifted child by providing her/him with strategies to end this pervasive and harmful practice.

Resources

McCoy, E. (1997). *What to do... When kids are mean to your child*. Pleasantville, NY: Reader’s Digest.

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