

Teasing and Harassment



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Eleven-year-old Brian has mild cerebral palsy and learning disabilities. Until a few months ago, he had a “sunny” disposition and loved going to school each morning. Last April, Brian’s parents noticed a change. Brian seemed unhappy on school days, and his parents had difficulty rousing him out of bed in time to catch the bus. He rarely discussed the events of his school day, as he had in the past. He frequently had a morning stomachache, and he began to beg to stay home from school.

Fortunately, Brian, while reluctant, eventually told his family what was happening to him daily. He revealed that he was the object of constant teasing by several classmates.

Brian and his parents are fictitious, but many families of children with disabilities know his story all too well.

“All children need a school environment that is safe and supportive for learning,” said Virginia Richardson, parent training manager at PACER.

Telephone calls from parents to PACER Center indicate that Minnesota children with disabilities often encounter teasing at school. “We want to give families some tools so that a child is not consistently made miserable by teasing,” said Richardson.

Teasing is often part of the school experience. It lies along a continuum that ranges from friendly bantering to bullying to harassment. Dictionaries draw distinctions among teasing, bullying, and harassment. *Teasing* involves pestering or making fun of someone. *Bullying* is when someone is cruel or overbearing toward another person who may be weaker physically or mentally. Bullying is also the constant teasing that makes life miserable at school. *Harassment* is the most severe of the three and involves severity, persistence, and pervasiveness of the behavior.

Minnesota statute on harassment and stalking (Section 609.749, Subd. 1)

This statute’s definition of “harass” is:

“to engage in intentional conduct which:

1. the actor knows or has reason to know would cause the victim under the circumstances to feel frightened, threatened, oppressed, persecuted, or intimidated; and
2. causes this reaction on the part of the victim.”

Minnesota law requires schools to have a policy against sexual, religious, racial, and violent *harassment*, but disability is not specifically included, said Darren Kermes, due process supervisor for the Department of Children, Families, and Learning (CFL). On the other hand, school districts are to provide a climate conducive to learning. That applies to the district knowing that other students are harassing a student with disabilities, as well, Kermes said.

In real life, explained Richardson, teasing, bullying, and harassment may overlap. A frequent scenario of unwanted teasing is when one student leads in “picking on” another child, and other children join in, she said. If that happens, schools can send a message that “we are a school family and need to show respect for each other, and we don’t make another’s life miserable by teasing,” she suggested. The leader may not quit teasing, but many of the followers will, because most children do not want to get in trouble, Richardson said.

In the end, said Richardson, the expectation is not that schools can prevent all teasing, but that the adults at school consistently send a message that harmful or unwanted teasing will not be tolerated. In schools where this occurs, parents notice diminished teasing.

Fact sheet provided by the Early Child Project, a project of PACER Center, Inc.

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Parents can take steps if a child is taunted constantly or incessantly, said Richardson. She recommended the following:

1. Listen to your child and observe any changes in behavior. Realize that each child is an individual. What may not affect one child may extremely distress another.
2. Discuss the situation with your child.
3. Teach your child specific words to use in response to the teasing.
4. Look at ways your child can stay away from the children doing the teasing. That may include sitting in a different location in the lunchroom, participating in different activities on the playground, or sitting in a different place on the bus.
5. Keep a record of what your child describes as happening at school. Be sure to include:
 - a) dates;
 - b) who was involved;
 - c) what was said; and
 - d) the name of someone who might have seen or heard the incident.
6. Discuss with your child what the next step might be, such as your speaking to the teacher about what has happened. (Be aware that your child may not want you to tell the teacher for fear of retaliation or being labeled a “tattle-tale.”)

7. Inquire if your child’s school has peer mediations. If so, have your child request mediation with students involved.
8. If you speak to the teacher about the teasing or bullying and the issue is ignored, send the school principal a letter containing:
 - a) the date on which you spoke to the teacher;
 - b) your concerns;
 - c) specific information about the incidents; and
 - d) the adverse effects of the taunting on your child

Ask for a meeting to discuss the situation.

9. Inform the principal that you expect school staff to send the message to all children that teasing and bullying will not be tolerated.
10. If the principal does not intervene, send copies of the letter you sent the principal to the chair or members of the school board and the superintendent of schools requesting a written reply on the action the school will take. Include the date you contacted the principal and his or her response.

If parents and school staff intervene appropriately, it is likely that teasing and bullying will not escalate to harassment.

PACER’s Count Me In Project uses puppets in classroom presentations to inform young children about disabilities and to foster inclusion. Call PACER for information.
