

Peer Conflict, Mean Behaviour, and Bullying- What's the difference?

Helen Ritchie, Area Counsellor

As parents, it can be really worrying when your child discloses that there is a problem with another peer or peers at school. It can also be very challenging to make sense of what is really going on- is it bullying or something else? The Vancouver School Board has put together a handy document that helps address these concerns (see below).

The main factors to look at are as follows:

- the relationships between the students
- power imbalances- age, size, popularity
- if there is a targeted individual or not and
- if hurtful events are repeated over time.

Peer Conflict

If the children experiencing the conflict like each other and are both invested in solving the problem, it is likely that they are dealing with peer conflict. In these cases, the children may need help from adults to understand the different points of view involved. A common situation that I see is when student A tells student B that they want to play with someone else and student B has the perception that student A never wants to play with them again. In this instance, adults can help the students realize what they think the message is and then check in with the speaker to see if that was the intended message- usually they have the wrong idea!

Mean Behaviour

Mean behaviour is often a type of aggressive, lashing-out behaviour that often has a random target of any child nearby and occurs without planning. An example of this is a student who is frustrated with the outcome of a soccer game and throws the ball suddenly, hurting another student in the process. The child is frustrated and didn't intend to cause harm, and generally feels bad once they are more regulated and realize that they're hurt someone.

The importance of neuroscience- what is going on in the brain and nervous system:

The example listed above is a type of stress response where the child's nervous system perceives a threat or challenge (perhaps feeling incompetent in this case) and then the fight/flight response is activated where blood moves to the face, arms and hands and legs and feet to mobilize the body to deal with the challenge. Throwing things, hitting, kicking, pushing, punching, spitting, biting, using mean words, and running out of the

room are all examples of fight/flight (or sympathetic nervous system activation) behaviours.

Teachers, staff, and parents need to intervene quickly with mean behaviour to ensure safety and to help regulate the student's nervous system. It is important that the child is getting support for the root causes of the behaviour, that they (and classmates) know that this behaviour is not ok, and again to make sure that all children feel safe. Mean behaviour can escalate into bullying if there is no adult intervention.

Bullying

Children often use the word "bullying" to describe any peer interaction that they don't like, but most of the time, the problem is not actually bullying.

As the document states, there must be all three of these key features present for a situation to be called bullying: *a power imbalance (size, age, social status, etc.), an intention to cause harm, and a repetition and often escalation of the intensity of the behaviour over time.*

Children who are being bullied have increasing fear and distress over time and often want to avoid school or other activity where they will encounter the child or children who are targeting them. They need help to stop the bullying behaviour. Also, witnesses need to know that adults are aware of the situation and are taking care of it.

School staff will work with both the targeted child and the child doing the bullying *separately*, since it feels too unsafe for the targeted child to problem solve with their aggressor present. Adults will monitor the child who's aggressing to stop the behaviours, to figure out the causes of the behaviour and to encourage them to take responsibility for their actions. The targeted child will also be supported to increase their feelings of safety and confidence. Class-wide lessons to help all children recognize and report bullying are also employed.

The ERASE bullying website: <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/erase> has some great resources for parents and students and has a "Report it" tool where students can report bullying. Schools receive these reports.

Why it might be difficult to know if it's bullying or not: the brain and nervous systems of parents/caregivers.

Of course, children are not the only ones with nervous systems, and faced with the challenge of our child being in distress with some sort of peer problem, parents can easily go into the fight/flight nervous system response, especially if they have horrible memories of being targeted by aggressive children when in school. This can lead to

parents feeling very anxious and reacting quickly before asking teachers and staff to investigate the situation. In these cases, I have sometimes seen parents confront other parents on the school grounds and this can make the problem worse.

How can we support our children with peer issues?

It is very important that students report any problematic peer behaviour to school staff *immediately*. Staff can then investigate promptly and get the most reliable information. Children, especially young children, often forgot what happened if there's a delay in reporting.

It's helpful to remind children who they can report problems to at school: their teacher, the Principal, Ms. Steele, the Vice-Principal Ms. Coughlin, myself, support workers, and of course the supervision aides on the playground at recess and lunch. I remind students that if they tell one adult and the adult doesn't seem to understand or intervene, then they need to tell another adult. If your child has trouble speaking up, it can be helpful to have them report their concern with their friends as supports. It is important that students report both problems they're having and problems that they are witnessing.

In situations where you child has a conflict at school and tells you without reporting to school staff, please email your child's teacher promptly so that the concern can be addressed.

When the school is dealing with a bullying incident, confidentiality needs to be maintained for both the targeted child and the aggressing child. What this means is that while the school is dealing with the situation, parents of the targeted child will not be told what actions are being taken to stop the aggressive child's behaviour. This can be frustrating and difficult for parents but is essential to maintain privacy for all members of our community.

Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns. I'm at Gordon on Mondays, Wednesdays, and alternate Thursdays and can be reached at hritchie@vsb.bc.ca

Helen Ritchie, Area Counsellor



PEER CONFLICT, MEAN BEHAVIOUR AND BULLYING

What's the difference?

When a child is having a problem with her or his peers, it can be hard for parents to know what is really happening – is it bullying? Or is it something else?

Each type of behaviour must be handled differently, to keep children safe and help them learn how to get along with others.

Peer Conflict

Conflict between and among peers is a natural part of growing up. Children will have times when they disagree and can't solve their own problems. They may even become so frustrated that they say mean things or act out physically by hitting, kicking, or trying to hurt.

If it's peer conflict you will be aware that these children:

- usually choose to play or hang out together
- have equal power (similar age, size, social status, etc.)
- are equally upset
- are both interested in the outcome; and
- will be able to work things out with adult help (after calming down).

Adults can respond by helping the children talk it out and see each other's perspective. This is often referred to as "conflict resolution".

Mean Behaviour

Children may try out behaviours to assert themselves – sometimes saying or doing mean things – such as making fun of others, using a hurtful name, taking something without permission, leaving a child out, or "budging" in line.

If it is mean behavior, usually:

- it is not planned and seems to happen spontaneously or by chance
- it may be aimed at any child nearby
- the child being mean may feel badly when an adult points out the harm they've caused

When adults see mean behavior, they should not ignore it. Adults should respond quickly, firmly, and respectfully to stop the behavior, to let kids know that their actions are hurtful and to re-direct children to more positive behaviour.

This quick response stops children from developing a pattern of mean behaviour as their way of interacting with peers and prevents mean behavior from escalating into bullying. It is a lot easier to correct a child for one nasty comment than to change a pattern of cruelty that grows over time.

Bullying Behaviour

Bullying is serious behavior that has three key features – all three must be present for the situation to be considered bullying:

- **Power imbalance** -- One child clearly has power over the other(s), which may be due to age, size, social status, and so on.
- **Intention to harm** -- The purpose of the bullying behaviour is to harm or hurt other(s) – it's intended to be mean and is clearly not accidental.
- **Repeated over time** -- bullying behaviour continues over time and gets worse with repetition. There is a real or implied threat that the behaviour will not stop, and in fact will become even more serious.

The effect on the child who is being bullied is increased fear, apprehension, and distress. Often by the time adults find out about what is happening, the child has tried many ways to stop the bullying but cannot do so on their own.

Adults must address the bullying behaviour and ensure the safety of the student who has been targeted. They also need to reassure the children who may have witnessed the behaviour that adults are taking care of it.

When schools respond to bullying, staff will also help the child who has been bullying others to take responsibility for their actions and change their behaviour. They will monitor the situation to ensure the bullying stops and will support the child who has been bullied to regain confidence and a sense of safety. Staff may follow-up with the students who observed the behaviour to help them learn what to do when they see bullying.

The “conflict resolution” style of bringing the children together is not recommended in bullying situations, until considerable time has gone by, and all children are feeling safe enough to talk about what happened so that relationships can be healed.