

Gateway Behaviors: What to Do When Mean Acts Emerge



Arriving at school in the morning, fifth graders take down their chairs as Ms. Hernandez collects homework and oversees lunch sign-up. Max approaches Jason. "Did your mom let you watch *Terminator* last night or did she make you go to bed early?" he asks. "Naw," Jason replies, a little abashed, "She told me I had to go to bed." Max looks at Jason with a smirk while Jason turns away, clearly uncomfortable. In the competition for who gets to be the most grown-up, Max is the winner because he got to stay up until midnight on a school night. Moreover, he got to watch an R-rated movie. Is Max's behavior bullying? No, of course not. But it is a first step in social competition.

Next door, as children trickle into their third grade classroom, Missy whispers to Laticia, "Your hair is nappy. You'll never get a boyfriend." Is it bullying? Maybe. We'd need to know more to be sure. Whether or not it's bullying, it's certainly social aggression.

When these small aggressive acts are unchecked, they grow to permeate a classroom and become the accepted mode of interaction. Mean acts and words become the norm. It's only a few steps from competition about who is allowed more privileges at home to openly calling Jason a "baby" and next to excluding Jason from games at recess. It's even fewer steps

from directly insulting Laticia about her hair to repeatedly insulting her and organizing other girls to do the same.

Once such disrespectful behaviors are normalized, they can take on a life of their own in classrooms. Classmates watch and sometimes even laugh at the cruelty, bringing the child who initiates these behaviors attention and social cachet. This attention encourages the child behaving meanly to escalate the unkind behaviors.

Barbara Coloroso, in her book *The Bully, the Bullied, and the Bystander* (2003), paints a picture of a typical bullying scenario. Children are playing on the playground. The child who is going to bully brushes up against another child as if by accident. When no one comes to the targeted child's defense, the child who is bullying snatches his classmate's ball and throws it away. If no one objects, the behaviors escalate first into name-calling, then into shoving, hitting, and more.

Stephen Wessler, in his book *The Respectful School* (2003), tells stories of children who are first insulted behind their backs. When no one objects, classmates begin to insult them to their face. When no one stops the direct insults, classmates begin to push and shove the child. When no one stops the pushing and shoving, the actions escalate into dangerous violence.

“We Need to Focus on the Small Stuff”

If we catch the small initial behaviors, referred to as “gateway behaviors” by Elizabeth Englander of the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center (MARC), and nip them in the bud, they won't have an opportunity to grow and blossom into out-and-out bullying. As Englander says, “We need to focus on the small stuff.” The first step in meeting this challenge is to notice the small and subtle acts of aggression that may be going on in classrooms (Englander & Schank, 2010).

In the two examples cited at the beginning of this chapter, neither teacher was aware of the comments. A great deal of research demonstrates

that teachers are often unaware of both small acts of social aggression—gateway behaviors to bullying—and out-and-out bullying (Craig & Pepler, 1998; Olweus & Limber, 2010). Children make comments under their breath, give a classmate a quick kick when the teacher’s back is turned, or pass notes with mean comments. Amazingly, we teachers often miss these behaviors even when they happen in the classroom when we’re present.

Although it’s true that teachers miss many mean behaviors, it’s also true that such behaviors often happen when teachers are not present, during less supervised times of the school day and in less supervised places. Children surrounding someone in a less supervised area of the playground, mocking someone on social networking sites in ways that then affect that child’s feelings while at school, and picking on younger children on the school bus are all-too-common occurrences that hurt children deeply and often go undetected by adults.

School, however, doesn’t need to be this way. In this chapter I describe some strategies that you can use to hone your skills of noticing mean behaviors. I discuss how to tell the difference between developmentally appropriate behaviors and gateways to bullying. Finally, I provide some guidelines for stopping the gateway behaviors.

Observe Students’ Interactions

If teachers are to reduce or prevent bullying, they first need to notice the many small, mean-spirited acts that can lead to bullying. Making time for this noticing might seem daunting in a day already packed with responsibilities. Nonetheless, by making small adjustments to daily routines, you can find time for quick observations. Here are some ideas:

- **Use arrival time to observe students’ interactions.** It’s tempting to use arrival time for catching up on paperwork or to do administrative tasks such as lunch count and homework check-off. However, you can give students responsibility for tasks such as these. If you also put aside your other paperwork and spend time observing, you’ll gain valuable information about students. With such an arrangement, Max and

Jason's teacher might have noticed their arrival time interactions. Missy and Laticia's teacher might have heard their whispered conversation.

- **Get to the lunchroom a couple of minutes before it's time to pick up the students.** Use this time to quietly observe and learn about what the students are doing at lunchtime. I arrived at the lunchroom a few minutes early one day, just in time to hear Joey say to Michael, "Look at your ugly pasta." Bullying? No, but possibly mean and hurtful words that could escalate into bullying if we don't investigate further and intervene if the situation is truly mean teasing.
- **Use informal moments during choice time, indoor recess, or independent work time to observe the social culture of the classroom.** Notice who gravitates toward whom and who is alone. These are both indicators of the climate of inclusion and exclusion, clues that might alert you to behaviors that are potential gateways to bullying. An inclusive classroom is protective against bullying.

Assess What You're Seeing

For observation to be useful, you'll need to assess what you're seeing and hearing so you can understand what it's telling you about your classroom and guide possible interventions. Following are some key things to pay attention to.

Notice children's words

Is the tone mean and insulting?

Take the case of Joey, Michael, and the "ugly pasta" described above. Teasing can be mean and hurtful or it can be a bonding experience between close friends. Body language can give you clues. Is the joking followed by shared laughter or is only the person who made the joke laughing? Do the children lean in together or does the person joked about pull away?

Who is enjoying the joke? Who is made uncomfortable by it? Jokes about someone else's body (the nappy hair), family ("Your mother . . ."), abilities ("You read like a baby"), and food (the ugly pasta) are often meant to demean. Jokes about shared events leading to shared laughter can solidify a friendship.

In the "ugly pasta" situation, I spoke with Michael privately and asked him how he felt when Joey made the comment about his pasta. "It hurt my feelings when he made fun of my food," Michael responded. Later on I had a serious private talk with Joey. For a few weeks I kept a close eye on the two boys, looking for any signs of further mean behavior. I found, though, that the early intervention appeared to stop it.

Is code being used to indicate who is "in" and who is "out"?

Besides mean words and casual insults, no matter how small, there are more subtle things to listen for. Children's conversation reveals a lot about who is "in" and who's "out." One year the boys in my class started calling each other "Bubba." I noticed that some boys were not called "Bubba," and were left out of the "Bubba" inner circle. I followed these observations with a class discussion about nicknames. I explained that sometimes the use of nicknames can be hurtful or a means of excluding children; we agreed that in school we'd call everybody by their given name.

Notice children's interactions

Who's in charge? Who's included? Who's left out?

When students work together in small groups, whether in reading, writing, math, science, or social studies, take a minute to observe their interactions. Notice who gets a turn and who is left out, who takes charge and who sits back. These moments will give you rich information that will help you protect your classroom climate, keeping it kind and inclusive.

If someone is chronically left out, listen to conversations around that child. What are the other children saying to or about the chronically isolated child? If someone is consistently in charge, listen to the words that child uses to maintain control.

I sat quietly on the side while a group worked on a social studies project. Manuel and Sarah were planning their diorama while Justin sat and listened. Were Manuel and Sarah excluding? Was Justin sitting back and letting the others do the work? As I observed Justin over time, I noticed that no one spoke to him, and no one made a place for him in the circle, much less sought him out for work and play.

I came to discover that Justin, seemingly surrounded by classmates, was nonetheless an ignored child in the social life of the classroom. Aware of that fact because of my observations, I arranged for Justin to partner with children who might share interests with him. For reading, I partnered him with Allan, who also loved to read *Danger Guys* books. I noticed that Justin really enjoyed working with his kindergarten buddy and so did Miguel. I arranged for the two of them to help the kindergartners with their snowsuits at the end of the day. Soon, Miguel, Allan, and Justin were seeking one another out in the classroom. Justin was moving into the circle of our community.

Investigate why a child is isolated

Are one or more of the students in your classroom, like Justin, always alone? If there's an opportunity to choose partners, are these students the last chosen? Where is this isolation coming from? Finding answers may take a bit of investigating, including a conversation with the child who is isolated.

Be sure to check in with the child privately. My experience and that of many experts who work to prevent bullying is that children who are targeted for bullying are so intimidated that they're unlikely to be truthful in front of the children who are being unkind (Moretsky & Thomas, 2010; Parker-Roerden, Rudewick, & Gorton, 2007; StopBullying.gov, n.d.).

When I noticed that Suzy was always alone on the playground, I asked her about it in a private moment. "Clarisse doesn't like me anymore," she explained. It turned out that Clarisse had told all of the other girls not to play with Suzy. I knew I needed to act on that information.

I had a private talk with Clarisse. I told her that I'd noticed that Suzy was alone on the playground. I asked her what she'd noticed about who was included in the group of girls who played together. Her response was "Suzy's a baby; we don't like to play with her." I let her know that it wasn't OK to exclude Suzy. "Suzy's a member of our classroom community. You need to include her in games on the playground, just the way you include others," I said.

I also told her that I'd heard from a couple of sources that she had been telling others not to play with Suzy. I didn't open it up for discussion. I simply said, "Our rule says we'll be kind to all. It's not OK to tell others not to play with someone. I know that you can be kind and include everyone. I'll be watching to make sure that you do."

I helped other girls in the class connect with Suzy by arranging reading and writing partnerships. I also used some strategies with the whole class such as revisiting our rule to be kind and leading a role-play on how to include everyone. Soon Suzy was back in the mix of girls playing together on the playground.

Lastly, keep in mind that a child's sitting alone does not always indicate exclusion. For example, one day I arrived to pick up students in the lunchroom. As I stood and watched for a minute, I saw Halima sitting alone on the edge of the group. Later on I asked her, privately, about her lunchroom seat. "I like to sit there because then I can talk with Dortha, my friend in Mrs. Kelly's class," she explained. So she wasn't being excluded; she was just making a choice.

If You Suspect Bullying, Do Not Use Conflict Resolution

In the situation involving Suzy and Clarisse, I did not use the strategy of a conflict resolution meeting. When one child tells others not to play with a classmate, this is not a conflict to be resolved between the child doing the telling and the one being excluded. It's an aggressive act that needs to be stopped. Conflict resolution meetings are a strategy used between equal participants to help them learn to listen to each other. When there's behavior that could be bullying, as in the situation with Suzy and Clarisse, it's unfair—and possibly dangerous—to the child who is targeted to expect her or him to take part in a conflict resolution meeting.

Consider children's stage of development: Is this typical behavior? Is it OK behavior?

Was the spate of "Bubba" nicknames in my classroom a developmentally predictable behavior? Perhaps. Nevertheless, it was exclusionary and thus not acceptable in our classroom any more than "clubs" were.

In contrast, some developmentally predictable behaviors may look unkind but in actuality be OK, not necessarily destructive to the classroom feeling of community. When two eleven-year-old girls pick each other out as "best friends" they're learning how to have a close friend, an important part of life. It's important to make sure that they are friendly to all their classmates and continue to work with children who are not part of the dyad, but no one would benefit from trying to prevent the selective friendship.

How do you know whether children are engaging in cruel behaviors, a step along the continuum toward bullying? How do you know how to respond? Here are some things to look for:

Look for equity

Kindergartners sometimes express displeasure by saying "You can't come to my birthday party," never mind that the birthday is six months away, in the summer, and no party is planned. Usually "You can't come to my birthday party" is said after a tablemate snatches a crayon or takes someone's place in line. It's one way that a five-year-old knows to express displeasure.

If the "You can't come to my birthday party" insult is equally expressed, back and forth between two children, then it's probably not a step along the bullying continuum, although it does call for some social skills instruction on what to do if someone snatches your crayon or cuts in front of you in line.

On the other hand, if there's one child who consistently is told that he's not coming to anyone's birthday party, consistently told that he can play only if he'll be the dog, then there's a power imbalance that might very well grow into bullying.

Look at children's facial expressions and body language

Watch to see whether children's expressions are friendly, neutral, or grudging. Look at their bodies. Do they lean into their partner or away? Is their posture open and welcoming or closed?

Many eleven-year-old boys love to trade insults. If two boys are engaged in such a contest, and each is giving as good as he gets, the situation has met the standard of equity. If they're both laughing and smiling, they're probably engaged in verbal play rather than taking a step down the path toward bullying.

The six-year-old boys' equivalent to older boys' trading of insults is rough-and-tumble play. As the first graders burst onto the playground after a morning of concentrated academic work, they butt and roll like puppies. This may or may not be allowed in your school. But it's most likely not an expression of social aggression unless there's one boy who's getting knocked over all the time and others who are doing all the knocking. Are they all laughing and smiling or is there one who doesn't look like he's enjoying this type of play?

Pay attention to children who might be at risk of being targeted

Anyone has the potential to be targeted by bullying behavior. Nonetheless, some children are more likely to be targeted than others.

Consider Choosing Safety

It can be difficult to tell whether seemingly mean words are hurtful or not, first steps toward bullying or bonding events between equals. In the end, you may decide, for the sake of emotional and physical safety, to simply tell students, "We only use kind words in this class." Children can trade insults in fun at home.

You may also decide to simply say, "In this class we keep our bodies to ourselves." Rough-and-tumble play can be reserved for situations outside of school. You may decide to say, "In this class, everyone needs someone to play with, so we include everyone unless they want to be by themselves."

Such guidelines will clarify for children what is—and is not—acceptable behavior and will minimize the number of judgment calls you need to make in assessing children's interactions.

Children who don't conform to gender stereotypes

For example, the girl who prefers to play football or the boy who likes to play with dolls are at risk for bullying (Felix & Green, 2010). Keep your eyes open to see if such children are being excluded, surreptitiously insulted, or nudged out of the way.

Children receiving special education services

Many researchers identify children receiving special education services as being at risk for bullying because they may seem a bit different to their classmates (Freiberg, 2009; Olweus & Limber, 2007; StopBullying.gov, n.d.). It's important to make sure that children receiving special education services are included and treated respectfully.

Children from a different economic level

Income disparity is another risk factor for bullying. The child whose family income is either higher or lower than that of other families so that her clothing and other belongings aren't quite like those of classmates may be targeted for teasing and exclusion (Harachi et al., 2006; Swearer, 2010).

When I began teaching, one of my colleagues told me that I'd need to have "eyes in the back of the head." Those eyes need to be wide open to protect the at-risk child.

Pay attention to children who might be at risk of engaging in bullying behavior

Anyone has the potential to engage in meanness and bullying behavior. Nonetheless, there are some risk factors governing who may fall into that role as well.

The child in the middle

If bullying is about gaining and maintaining social power, then it's important to watch those children in the middle of the social hierarchy who

might be trying to gain power as well as those children who have gained power through sometimes subtle cruelty and are seeking to maintain it.

The “popular” child

Research done in the last ten years has shown that popular kids, as well as children in the middle striving for popularity, are often the children who bully (Menesini et al., 2003).

Often those “popular” children are liked by adults as well as by other children. It’s easy to miss the fact that someone who’s so likeable is being cruel. The popular child may be articulate, funny, physically attractive, and good at sports and have lots of friends. These qualities may be as attractive to adults as they are to children.

It’s important to observe students’ behavior objectively, paying attention to the child whom you like so much that you may be inadvertently making too many allowances for her or his unkind behavior.

Mrs. Sharpe is a school librarian in a small rural school. She sees all students in the school once a week for library class and thus knows every student well. “There’s a boy in sixth grade that everyone picks on,” she told me. “The children take off their shoes when they sit on the library carpet,” she continues. “They’re all sitting there and suddenly they start to say, ‘Eww, Jackson’s feet smell.’ Well, all of their feet smell, but they’re all blaming Jackson.”

I asked her if someone started the insults and she said that she’d watch and see. A few weeks later she told me, “I’ve been noticing. It’s always Wayne who starts it off. Once he starts in on Jackson, the others follow. They all want to be Wayne’s friend. I don’t blame them. I’d like to be Wayne’s friend, too. He’s smart, he’s funny, and he’s good at sports.”

It’s important to notice children who might be at risk. It’s also important not to make assumptions. Any child can be targeted. Any child can find himself sucked into behaving aggressively. If you watch objectively, you’ll be positioned to be most helpful to all students.

Intervening: Stop Small Behaviors Before They Become Big Problems

Once you've done some observing so that you understand students' social interactions, the next step is to use that understanding to stop behaviors that might be gateways to bullying when it's still relatively easy to do so. Sometimes teachers are unsure whether they should step in when someone says "Your pasta is ugly." Isn't he just expressing his opinion? Well, yes, but he's also possibly being unkind. What about, "Your hair is nappy and you'll never get a boyfriend"? That's certainly an unkind statement about something that's very much a part of the targeted child's body—her hair. It is also a potential opening move in a chain of escalating events and is very much worth stopping.

In the following pages I'll spell out some strategies for stopping such small mean behaviors. Classroom and school rules, teacher language, fair and respectful consequences, and teacher modeling all play a part.

Stop gateway behaviors quickly

It's important to intervene as soon as you see unkind actions or hear unkind words. Elizabeth Englander of the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center (MARC) promotes the "nine second" rule of thumb. Spend the first two seconds noticing, she says, and then the next seven seconds briefly and firmly responding (Englander, 2011).

Although it may take you more than two seconds to figure out what's going on when one student rolls his or her eyes or makes a mean joke at the expense of another, Ms. Englander's point—that a quick response is important—fits with my experience working with children. A quick response shows the child behaving meanly, the child targeted, and those nearby that mean behavior and exclusion are unacceptable in the classroom.

In research conducted by MARC, students reported that the most damaging thing that adults did in response to gateway behaviors was to ignore them (Englander, 2011).

When adults miss the opportunity to respond quickly, they often end up looking as if they're ignoring the behavior. Bystanders then think that the behavior is acceptable, and children who say or do unkind things don't have an opportunity to learn about the impact of their behavior and how to change the behavior. In some cases, even the children targeted begin to believe that they somehow deserve the treatment that they're getting. Conditions are set for mean behaviors to flourish.

Refer to classroom rules

One of the challenges is that it's not always clear what to say and how to stop these gateway behaviors. This is where classroom rules play an important role. In Chapter Three, you'll learn about a process for establishing classroom rules that children connect to and believe in. If children are invested in the rules and understand that the rules can help keep everyone safe, the rules can provide a solid framework for stopping small cruelties.

"Our rules say to be kind; that statement was not kind," is a short and simple way to refer to the rules and stop the behavior. Another approach is to give the student the responsibility for thinking about the behavior. A teacher might ask the student to reflect by saying, "Think about our rule to be kind. How can you be kind right now?"

Whichever of these approaches you use, you are avoiding a power struggle with the student by referring to the rules. It's the rules that are saying to stop the mean behavior, not the teacher.

Use brief, matter-of-fact language to remind and redirect

Short, simple statements are most effective in stopping small unkind comments or actions. "Stop; that was not a kind statement; rewind and say it kindly," is clear and succinct. It's tempting to go on and on, telling

Some Language to Try

Stop, rewind.

Use kind words.

Our rule says . . .

Think about our rule . . . ; how can you follow it?

In our class, everyone gets to play.

In our class, we keep bodies to ourselves.

children about all of the ramifications of their actions. You can be sure that as you go on and on they will tune you out.

A matter-of-fact tone will allow children to listen. In contrast, a blaming or shaming tone will lead children to feel belittled and resentful. The same words can sound calm or shrill, straightforward or sarcastic. Statements such as “That sounds unkind,” or “Keep your feet in your own personal space,” will be heard best if they’re stated calmly.

Try coming up with some potential statements that you might use when you hear unkind comments or see unkind actions. Practice them. That way, in the actual situation, you’ll have some phrases and a matter-of-fact tone of voice that will come naturally.

For more information about reminding and redirecting language, see *The Power of Our Words: Teacher Language That Helps Children Learn* by Paula Denton, EdD, 2007, www.responsiveclassroom.org.

Model respectful and assertive responses to meanness and bullying

Research on bullying shows that classmates can—and sometimes do—step in and effectively stop bullying and gateway behaviors. But why don’t they step in more often? There are many reasons, but one of them is that students aren’t sure whether or not the behavior they’re witnessing is OK. When they see adults letting it go, they learn that they should also do so. On the other hand, when you practice respectful and assertive ways to stop cruel behaviors, you set a standard of kindness and let students know that they shouldn’t let mean behaviors go either.

Furthermore, you're showing children how to take a respectful and assertive stance against meanness and bullying. The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program states, "When children see adults taking positive action against bullying behavior, it empowers them to do the same" (Olweus et al., 2007, p. 33). By their actions, teachers can give a clear message that any kind of mean behavior is unacceptable.

At the same time, it's important to model respectful behavior toward all students, including the child who is being unkind. If you stop mean behaviors with disrespect, a harsh tone, or sarcastic words, you can escalate the climate of disrespect. When you calmly and kindly redirect students who are exhibiting mean behavior, you model behaviors that promote a climate of respect.

Here are two ideas for how to do this. I'll explain each in detail in the following pages:

- "Go public" with redirections and interventions for unacceptable behaviors.
- Use logical consequences to show students that you expect them to take responsibility for their actions and change their behavior.

"Go public" with redirections and interventions for unacceptable behaviors

When Julia announced loudly "I'm not sitting near Louis; he smells," Mrs. Cohen responded firmly, in front of the whole group, "Everyone in this class is part of our community. Our rules say we will include every one. Julia, make a space for Louis in a friendly way." Mrs. Cohen's firm, respectful, and direct tone and words showed the class that exclusion was unacceptable. She did not belittle or threaten Julia. Nor did she take Julia aside to give the redirection. Research shows that such adult behaviors promote bullying (Olweus, 1993).

When Mark called Harry "Hair Ball" during a math lesson, Mrs. Larsson said firmly to Mark, "Mark, rewind and use Harry's name when you speak to him." The next day, Mrs. Larsson held a class meeting about using

people's names as they want them to be used. She didn't humiliate Mark by stating that the meeting was about his behavior. She didn't humiliate Harry by announcing to those who might not have heard that someone had called Harry "Hair Ball." She simply said, "We have an important issue that we need to discuss." Children who had heard Harry referred to as "Hair Ball" knew perfectly well why they were having the meeting. Those who had missed the name-calling just knew that Mrs. Larsson cared a lot about people's names being used in a respectful manner.

Use logical consequences to teach students to take responsibility for their actions

Bullying is a serious matter, and it is of vital importance that teachers protect children by stopping mean behaviors in their tracks. Logical consequences are one tool that will both stop mean behaviors and help students learn a different way to behave.

Keep in mind, however, that logical consequences are not a form of punishment. Unlike punishment, which can give a message of "You're bad," logical consequences give the child the message that she has the potential to stop mean behaviors and make positive changes. The goal with logical consequences is to teach children a better way to behave, not to shame them or make them feel bad.

The research on bullying shows that taking a punitive approach, all too common in today's "zero tolerance" climate, is ineffective or, in some cases, actually promotes bullying (Rigby & Bauman, 2010). When children are treated punitively, they have a model of disrespect. In addition, when children are punished, their resentment can escalate.

To use logical consequences effectively, in a nonpunitive way, pay attention to the following guidelines:

- Be sure consequences are related to the misbehavior
- Deliver consequences respectfully
- Be sure consequences are proportionate to the misbehavior

Be sure consequences are related to the misbehavior. Consequences that are related to the misbehavior help children make the connection between the action and the consequence. Gateway behaviors to bullying are, by their nature, social. They encompass spreading unkind rumors, calling children cruel names, and excluding children from play. Even when the behaviors are physical ones such as hitting, hair pulling, and pinching, they are, at root, a social assault. For that reason, many consequences will involve removing the child who has engaged in these behaviors from the social situation.

If a child is mean to others on the bus, she'll need to sit next to the bus driver for a few days. If a student throws a ball directly at another student during PE, he'll lose the privilege of throwing the ball for the day. When Martine and Lucy told the other girls not to play with Suzanne at recess, their teacher, Mr. Stegman, explained that they would both lose the privilege of playing with others at recess the next day. In addition, he separated Martine and Lucy so they lost the opportunity to socialize with each other. In all these cases, the teacher will check in with each child about the misbehavior and discuss and practice more pro-social ways to behave before the children regain the social privilege that they temporarily lost.

Exclusionary behaviors are about how children choose whom to be with and whom to leave out. For that reason, it's often a logical consequence for children to lose the privilege of choosing, whether partners, teams, or work groups. When, despite class meetings about fair teams, Malik, Andrew, and Finn, the class athletes, arranged things so that they were always on the same kickball team at recess, playing against the less athletically accomplished students, Mrs. Young told them that they'd lose the privilege of picking teams and she would assign them to teams for a few days.

Besides being social, gateway behaviors to bullying are also, by their nature, unkind. For that reason, logical consequences might involve practicing acts of kindness. If an older child bothers the kindergartners on the school bus, the consequence might be to go to the kindergarten room and, under the kindergarten teacher's close supervision, kindly help the children put on their snowsuits before dismissal.

Deliver consequences respectfully. Consequences that are calmly and respectfully delivered model a respectful way of relating to others. Some children who bully have been subject to disrespectful treatment themselves. That's the model they're familiar with. It's important to show them a better way. Furthermore, if you humiliate children, they will be resentful and possibly focus on revenge rather than how they might do better next time. Mr. Stegman was calm and matter-of-fact as he explained, "You won't be able to play together at recess tomorrow, Martine and Lucy."

Be sure consequences are proportionate to the misbehavior. When you use consequences to underscore the importance of friendly and respectful behavior, it's important that those consequences be proportionate to the misbehavior. Mr. Stegman didn't tell Martine and Lucy to take a break, as he sometimes did when students didn't follow the rules in a tag game. Telling others not to play with Suzanne was far more destructive than breaking the rules of a game. Nor did he tell them that they'd miss recess for the rest of the year, which would have been disproportionately punitive.

For more information about logical consequences, see *Rules in School: Teaching Discipline in the Responsive Classroom*, 2nd edition, by Kathryn Brady, Mary Beth Forton, and Deborah Porter, 2011, www.responsiveclassroom.org.

When children deny culpability

Perhaps you've heard the denials: "But I didn't do anything—you just like to pick on me." Studies have shown that many children who bully do not feel remorseful about their behaviors. Some believe that they have every right to insult, exclude, or otherwise harass others (Davis, 2007a; Olweus, 1993). When Mrs. Sharpe spoke with Wayne about his badgering of Jackson, Wayne's response was, "But Jackson's such a dork. He deserves it."

It's important not to engage in the "I didn't do anything" discussion. Simply stating class and school rules, employing a consequence, and then moving on gives the message: We do not treat people that way in this community.

Perhaps you've heard the complaints: "But it's not fair; other kids do that and you don't say anything." That's why it's vitally important to make sure that consequences are delivered even-handedly. When Mikal and Jerome, usually kind to all, tried out excluding others on the playground, giggling wildly, "Don't play with Sam, he's a retard," Mr. Stegman calmly explained to them that they wouldn't be able to play with others at recess tomorrow, and he'd be watching them during the next week to make sure that they were kind to everyone. When Martine and Lucy showed similar exclusionary behavior, the consequence was the same as Mikal's and Jerome's. The children could see that the rules and consequences apply to everyone.

Strategy in Action:

In the Midst of Change, a Second Grade Teacher Responds to Misbehavior

Over the summer, the school district where Mr. Harrison teaches second grade went through a redistricting. This fall many children are attending new schools. Along with changing bus routes and new faculty configurations, everyone is dealing with different student groupings. Research shows that bullying peaks in new groupings where children are establishing a new social hierarchy (Pellegrini et al., 2010). Who will be friends with whom? Who will be "in" and who will be "out"? Who will be "popular"?

It's November. Although Mr. Harrison spent time at the beginning of the year building community, he's noticing an increase in mean behaviors. For example, three boys have begun to roll their eyes whenever another boy speaks in class. Mr. Harrison knows that he needs to put a stop to this behavior. He has ►

a serious talk with the boys, making sure to stay calm and nonjudgmental. He refers to classroom rules and points out that the class has agreed to take care of each other. He listens carefully to each student's point of view. Then he says, "I expect you to follow our classroom rule to take care of each other. That means that you will be respectful listeners when anyone in the class is talking. I will be watching to make sure you do that. I know you can."

Mr. Harrison has also noticed that four of the girls in his class have begun to call themselves "The Cliquettes." He heard one girl say to another, "I'll be your friend if you don't play with Leslie."

He knows he needs to talk with the girls and decides to meet individually with each one because he doesn't want to reinforce their exclusive bonding. When he talks with them they each nod their heads and agree to do better, but the next day he sees Shavonne wandering the room to "sharpen her pencil" while whispering to various girls. He finds a note crumpled up on the floor that says, "You're ugly. You can't be one of the cute girls."

Mr. Harrison can see that he needs to do more to stop the "Cliquettes'" mean behavior immediately. He begins by separating the four students, realigning table groupings so that they sit far away from each other. He also informs other teachers who work with his class that the girls will be separated for a period of time. He tells each girl why he will be separating her and that he will be watching her and noticing incidences of kind and inclusive behavior. They'll meet in a few days to evaluate how things are going.

Mr. Harrison continues to intervene in small acts

After these incidents, Mr. Harrison realizes he needs to use firm and immediate consequences for the smallest acts of disrespect. The first time a student rolls his eyes or passes an unkind note, Mr. Harrison will stop the behavior with clear language, referring to classroom expectations followed by a consequence. "Max,

stop that. In this class we use respectful body language,” will be Mr. Harrison’s first response. If Max continues the eye rolling, Mr. Harrison will calmly and respectfully separate Max from the group.

Mr. Harrison revisits community-building activities

Mr. Harrison also decides to bolster the class’s work on community building. He’ll revisit some of the activities that he used with his students in the beginning of the year. The children will play singing and clapping games that get them moving around, relating to nearly everyone in the class. He’ll infuse academics with a community-building focus as well.

Mr. Harrison decides that this would be a good time for a whole-class poetry unit. Children will search poetry books for favorite poems to share with classmates. They’ll memorize some poems as a class and recite them chorally. They’ll write poems and share them with classmates, all under close supervision to keep things friendly and kind.

Mr. Harrison also decides that this would be a good time for the whole-class math unit on graphing. Children will interview each other about favorite hobbies, with careful emphasis on asking kind and respectful questions. They’ll create graphs and share them with the class.

Throughout these community-building activities, Mr. Harrison uses language to nurture a climate of caring among his students. “What have we learned about classmates today?” he asks after children have concluded interviews about their hobbies. He reinforces caring behaviors with such language as “I’ve noticed people listening to each other so carefully.”

Soon, Mr. Harrison’s comprehensive approach proves to be effective. By reestablishing expectations of positive behavior and responding quickly and directly to misbehavior, he is able to create a kind, caring classroom community. ■

Communicating With Parents About Misbehavior

In the following chapters, I talk about ways to keep the channels of communication open and build trust with parents. This work includes talking with parents about your efforts to create a safe and caring classroom, your approach to creating classroom rules, and how you respond to misbehavior. In addition, be sure to invite parents to ask questions and share information that could help you effectively teach their child. This is important work that needs to begin in the first days of school and continue throughout the year.

One area of communication that needs particular tending is communication about bullying and gateway behaviors. Teachers need to hear from parents when parents see or hear about mean behaviors between their child and others in the class or the school. And teachers need to keep parents informed about behaviors they see in school and about how they're responding. If you regularly give parents information and give them opportunities to share information, they'll be more likely to trust that you care and want the best for their child—and if a bullying situation that involves their child ever comes up, the communication will go more smoothly.

Over more than thirty years of teaching, I've figured out some guidelines for how to keep communication about these difficult situations open and positive.

Hearing parents' concerns

Unkind behavior, especially bullying behavior, often goes on under teachers' radar. The spitball is tossed or the hair is pulled when our backs are turned. The student is "un-invited" to the birthday party in the hall on the way to the school bus. We have no firsthand information about what children are doing to each other in the online environment. Research shows, and my experience supports, that parents are more likely to know

about bullying and other mean behavior than we are (Olweus & Limber, 2010). Parents also know about bullying situations that happen at home or in the community and that can spill over into the classroom.

If parents don't let you know about these behaviors, the meanness can spiral out of control. However, if you've established clear channels of communication, parents can give you valuable insight into students' lives both inside and outside of school and be your ally in bullying prevention work.

Listen, assess, and communicate your observations to parents

When parents contact you with information about mean behaviors they've observed at home and in the community, listen and assure them that you will carefully observe the students involved to see if the mean behaviors are occurring in the classroom. You then need to follow through with a phone call to the parents to let them know what you've observed and how you are going to respond. For more about communicating with parents about outside-the-classroom mean behaviors, see Chapter Five.

Parents will also hear about and report to you incidents that happen at school, and it's important to take these reports seriously, even if you think the child is embellishing a small incident. For example, Janine might complain to her parents that "Lori rolled her eyes at me in school today." Janine's parents are concerned and call you. You need to receive their report seriously and then observe carefully.

If, when you watch, you see no such put-down behavior and observe that Janine and Lori actually work well together, you can respectfully let Janine's parents know. Your observations might reassure Janine's parents that the eye-rolling was a small, one-time incident.

You also need to let Janine's parents know that you will continue to watch Janine's and Lori's interactions and that you want to know right away if they hear anything more about disrespectful behavior. When you communicate your appreciation of their reports and emphasize your commitment to respectful behavior in the classroom, you increase the

likelihood that parents will stay in contact and let you know about potentially harmful events.

Set the stage so parents feel it's OK to report concerns

Note that in this example about Janine and Lori, the positive outcome was possible because Janine's parents felt comfortable bringing a complaint to the teacher in the first place. It's important to set the stage so that parents feel it's safe and productive to approach you with a potential problem. In Chapters Two, Three, and Four you'll learn about establishing open, trusting communication with parents in the first days and weeks of school.

Notifying parents about student misbehavior

Just as teachers need to hear from parents about outside-the-classroom behavior, parents need to hear about the inevitable mean behaviors that occur in the classroom. How you let them know, though, makes a big difference in how supportive they are as you and your school work to solve the problem. Here are some things to remember.

Wait until you're calm

If you're angry or annoyed about a student's behavior, wait until you've calmed down before contacting the parents. I'll never forget the moment in my classroom when Jimmy pinched Christa on the bottom. I went right to the telephone and called Jimmy's mother. My frustration and annoyance crackled right through the phone line. Jimmy's mother was understandably protective of Jimmy. Although I eventually repaired my relationship with Jimmy's mother, she never did see the bottom-pinching incident quite the way I did.

Begin with the positive

No matter how negative the event, it's always possible to begin with something positive. Madelyn may be circulating around the classroom loudly whispering "You dork" to her perceived "enemies." It's still possible

to start by saying truthfully, “Madelyn’s reading skills have improved in the past month,” or “Madelyn always has a joke or a cheerful comment for me when she arrives in the morning.” More than anything else, parents want to see that you like their child. With that established, they can more easily hear about their child’s imperfections.

Avoid labeling

No one wants to hear that their child is a bully. If you use that word, you set parents up to feel defensive and stop listening to the information that you’re hoping to communicate. Better to describe the behavior as specifically and concretely as possible. “Yesterday, during Social Studies, Mike told Jamie his map looked ‘stupid’ and said he didn’t want Jamie to be part of his workgroup,” is specific and succinct. Leave out such embellishments as “with a mean smile on his face” or “in a bossy way.” Be matter-of-fact about the behavior. If you convey that Mike made a mistake that’s been made by many other children, you’re far more likely to enlist his parents’ cooperation than if you convey indignation and outrage.

Provide evidence

If parents are disbelieving, concrete evidence may help. When the third grade girls started directing, “Don’t sit next to Katie on the bus,” the bus company actually had a videotape of the bus behavior to share with the parents of the children involved. Of course, not everyone has school bus videotapes. You may, however, have the actual note that a child sent or other such evidence.

Inform parents but retain responsibility for solving the problem

Once everyone understands what happened, it’s unreasonable to put the burden of solving the problem back on the parents, just as it would be unreasonable for a parent to expect you to get their child in bed on time. It’s more realistic to hope for support or, at least, lack of resistance, as you and your school solve the problem.

It's also important to let parents know how you are going to respond. For example, "Faye cannot ride the school bus for a week because she told others not to sit with Katie" or "Mike will need to work alone during Social Studies for a few days."

Maintain confidentiality

When several children are involved in an incident, parents often want to know what consequences you're employing with the other children. It's fine to simply say that you are addressing the problem with every child. Don't violate confidentiality by going into specifics about your interventions. If you have any questions about confidentiality in your situation, check with your school or district.

K e y  I d e a s

“Focus on the small stuff”—notice and stop small acts of exclusion, mean words, and seemingly casual swipes before they become major incidences of bullying that are far more difficult to turn around.

Take time to observe students both in the classroom and in other settings so that you’re aware of the behaviors they’re engaging in.

Use respectful consequences immediately for small “gateway” misbehaviors.

Listen carefully to parents’ concerns.

Notify parents about children’s misbehavior.