

Developmental Characteristics Related to Teasing

Some Child Development Characteristics Related to Teasing		
Grade	Characteristic	Influence on teasing
Kindergarten (ages 4-6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Often think out loud • Struggle to see issues from others' point of view 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't understand the difference between spoken words and internal thoughts • Can't yet fully understand the impact of words
1st (ages 5-7)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sometimes critical of others • Can be very competitive or "poor sports" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May not yet fully understand impact of criticism • May get caught up in the moment and put others down during the course of a game or activity
4th (ages 8-10)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be very critical of themselves and others • Can be very competitive • Often experimenting with humor (exaggeration, inside jokes, etc.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May temporarily feel better about themselves by putting others down • May not realize when a joke has crossed the line
6th (ages 10-12)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Often moody and sensitive • Sometimes cruel and even physically aggressive • Often impulsive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May want to boost flagging feelings of significance by putting others down • May speak quickly and not think about effects on others

Proactive Strategies to Address Teasing

Preventing teasing, name-calling, and put-downs requires teaching children how to be kind and respectful to one another while still having fun. Establish clear expectations about appropriate language and then teach students how to meet those expectations.

Make sure class rules require respectful language

When you establish rules with students, make sure at least one rule supports respectful language. For example: “Be kind to each other.” “Respect one another.” “Take care of each other.”

Teach what respectful language looks and sounds like

Of course, it’s not enough to have a rule. For children to follow a rule about respecting others, you’ll need to explicitly teach what it looks, sounds, and feels like in action.

Effective ways to do that are through morning meetings, Interactive Modeling, role-plays, and class discussions. At morning meetings, students can learn how to greet each other, have respectful conversations, and play games that are joyful for all. You can do Interactive Modeling lessons or role-plays (see pages 24–25) on how to have an enjoyable, polite conversation at lunch; how to show appreciation for friends; and how to joke and have fun in nonhurtful ways.

Children’s literature can also provide great opportunities to discuss situations in which characters engage in humor that’s fun for all and those in which their joking is hurtful.

TEACHING TIP

Words Can't Be Taken Back

Young children often think they can take back hurtful words by saying a quick “I’m sorry.” They need to learn that once words leave their mouths, they can’t be taken back. To teach this lesson, try the Toothpaste Squeeze activity:

Tell students that when they say a hurtful word, it’s like squeezing out toothpaste.

Go around the circle and let each student squirt a little toothpaste into a plastic bowl.

Go back around and challenge students to put the toothpaste back. They’ll try but find that it’s impossible.

Tell students that words work the same way: once out, we can’t put them back.

If you have older students who need the same teaching, consider using children’s books to discuss how characters felt in hurtful situations or talk about the effects of bullying incidents in the news.

Revisit the rule as necessary

Often, as students get more comfortable with one another, teasing increases. When this occurs, have a class discussion in which you revisit the rule that governs respectful language. For these discussions to be effective, follow these guidelines:

- ▶ **Tell children not to name others** or describe an incident in a way that lets everyone know whom they're discussing.
- ▶ **Hold these discussions only for issues that are continuous** and involve many children. Don't have a whole-class discussion in response to one particular incident. Instead, address it privately with the children involved.
- ▶ **Make sure all voices are heard** and that children work together toward a solution.
- ▶ **If you suspect bullying** or unequal power between the children involved, don't hold a class discussion. Instead, work individually with the child doing the bullying, following school protocols. Be sure to protect the child who was targeted from further meanness. Meanwhile, teach the whole class general lessons on mean behaviors so that everyone feels safe and can do their best learning. For more about bullying prevention, see *How to Bullyproof Your Classroom* by Caltha Crowe (Center for Responsive Schools, 2012).

Continue to build community

Throughout the year, keep fostering children's sense of togetherness by providing many opportunities for them to interact positively with every classmate. For example:

- ▶ **Frequently play games that build community spirit** and help children get to know each other.
- ▶ **Build in structures for students to share news** and receive questions and comments from classmates.
- ▶ **Teach children how to give meaningful compliments.** Periodically have "compliment circles" during which each student offers and receives a compliment (assign names ahead of time).

Teach students about teasing's impact

As Stephen Wessler argues eloquently in his book *The Respectful School*, it's important for children to learn the difference between the impact of their words and their intent. To help children understand that their words can hurt even if that's not what they intended, use concrete examples such as incidents from children's books. Then, have students reflect on whether simply knowing the person "didn't mean to" would make their hurt go away. Students also need to learn that words can hurt not just the person

teased, but anyone standing nearby. For example, when children use epithets such as “retarded,” someone with a sibling who has developmental challenges may overhear. That bystander may then feel deeply hurt. Children need our help to learn about the damage words can cause and how to use words to care for, not harm, others.

Teach the difference between school speech and out-of-school speech

Outside of school, children often tease and call each other names in ways friendly and not so friendly. In one sixth grade classroom I visited, the teacher told me that outside of school, some of her female students regularly called each other the “b-word” as a sign of affection. Students can and should understand, however, that school expectations may differ from those outside the school.

Teach children what to do if they notice teasing

It’s impossible for teachers to observe everything that occurs, but we can teach children what to do and empower them to act if they see or hear teasing. Teach and model how to:

- ▶ **Be friendly.** Talk about the difference a single act of kindness—such as a warm smile or asking, “Want to play with me?”—can make to someone being teased. Use Interactive Modeling, role-play, class discussions, and children’s books to explore and bring this idea to life.
- ▶ **Use physical proximity.** Explain how moving closer to someone who is being teased often stops the teasing and helps him feel better (because he has an ally). Again, make this point visible for children through Interactive Modeling or role-play.
- ▶ **Be assertive.** Teach how to tell a classmate to stop teasing or remind her respectfully of class rules. Use Interactive Modeling or role-play to have students focus on the words and tone to use to be firm and respectful. For example,

TEACHING TIP

Being Respectful of Students' Names

Properly pronouncing and using children’s names is another way we can model respect. If we regularly mispronounce a student’s name or say it in a way that shows we find it strange, we send a message that it’s OK for students to do the same.

If, instead, we take the time to learn how to say each child’s name and then stick to that correct pronunciation, we reinforce the notion that everyone is valued. In addition:

- **Avoid nicknames** or making rhymes with students’ names.
- **Use morning meetings**, group activities, and other times of day to help students learn each other’s names and use them respectfully.
- **Teach students how to respond respectfully** if someone mispronounces their names. For example: “My name is actually pronounced _____. It’s Filipino.”

they might remind the classmate with “Classroom rules” or “School words” or prompt her with “Erase!” or “Do over!”

A note of caution: It can be unhelpful if not dangerous for bystanders to confront a classmate whose teasing has crossed into bullying. Teach children that if a situation feels unsafe in any way, they should report the behavior to you or another adult.

- **Report problems to adults.** Teach when and how to report a problem. Let students know that if in doubt about whether words are hurtful, they should always tell an adult.

Model what respect looks and sounds like

Just like most students, most teachers would never intentionally hurt a student’s feelings. However, in our attempts to build relationships with students, we might use nicknames (calling a tall red-headed child “Big Red”) or use sarcasm (“Did you wake up on the wrong side of the bed?”). Or we might laugh when we shouldn’t.

One year my assistant teacher proudly came in with a new haircut. A student looked up and said sympathetically, “Bad hair day, Ms. F?” I laughed and in so doing sent everyone the wrong message. Although neither the student nor I meant to hurt Ms. F’s feelings, we did—and my students learned that making fun of someone was OK. It took a lot of effort to undo this unfortunate lesson!

So always be mindful of whether your actions match the expectations you have laid out for students. Avoid doing even a “little” teasing or name-calling, or laughing or smiling at teasing. Instead, show students what it looks like to have fun without hurting someone else’s feelings.

Reinforce kindness and respect when you see them

Pay attention to students’ efforts to be kind and respectful, and point these out when you notice them. The more you reinforce kind words and deeds, the more students will use them.

Reinforcing Language in Action

For a situation like this	Try this
At lunch, you sit with a group of students who get along well but often tease in ways that can be hurtful. At this particular lunch, they're joking in ways that feel comfortable to all.	To the group: "That was a fun lunch! You made each other laugh and took care of each other at the same time."
A student self-corrects when he's about to call a buddy by a derogatory name they use outside of school.	Privately: "Jim, you stopped yourself from using a hurtful word. Self-correcting is a strategy we talked about and one way to follow our rule of speaking kindly to others."
A student tells you about how she witnessed her classmate making fun of a new classmate's backpack.	Privately: "Coming to tell me about this really takes care of our new classmate. I will take it from here."
A child has been working on not calling others names. Although he still sometimes makes mistakes, you have seen definite improvement.	Privately: "Todd, when you worked with Roberto, I noticed you encouraging him even when he made mistakes. I see the effort you're putting into using kinder language with your classmates."

Reactive Strategies to Address Teasing

Proactive measures will help prevent a lot of teasing but won't eliminate it. As students try to figure out how to meet their needs in acceptable ways, they'll inevitably make mistakes. When they do, we need to respond respectfully and matter-of-factly, reinforcing our proactive teaching while giving the unequivocal message that teasing is not acceptable. Here are some tips:

Respond immediately

When we respond right away to students' mean words, we help those students and all those around them understand what respect requires. If we ignore mean words, thinking they'll go away, we instead communicate that this type of language is OK. Children may interpret our nonresponse as a go-ahead to continue or even escalate the teasing, name-calling, or put-downs. Children need to hear us say or indicate "Stop" when their words are hurtful.

Guide students to take responsibility for their words

It's understandable that children (or adults) may try to deflect blame for their words. Students often say, "I was just joking" or "I didn't mean anything by it." You can accept these explanations while still requiring students to take responsibility for the impact of their words. You might say, "I know you were joking, but as we've been discussing in class, sometimes jokes hurt. This is one of those times."

Be clear that hurtful language is not acceptable

When a child publicly teases or puts down a classmate, respond so that all children hear the clear message that such language is not OK. Of course, do so in a way that is direct and respectful to the child. For example, in a calm, even voice you might say, "Brandon, that was unkind" or "Monique, that word is hurtful." This lets all children learn what's acceptable and what's not. If you only respond privately, the child who was hurt and the onlookers may not know you've addressed the issue and might think you found the initial behavior acceptable.

Use logical consequences when appropriate

Sometimes a logical consequence is the appropriate first response to name-calling or teasing because you sense it will be most effective in stopping the behavior and sending a message that the behavior is not acceptable. At other times, you may need to use a consequence because other strategies you tried, such as redirecting a student, failed to stop the unkindness.

Logical Consequences in Action

If a situation like this happens	Try this
During a class discussion, a student shares a family tradition. Another student laughs and says, "That's stupid!"	Time-out: "Andre, that was disrespectful. Time-out."
While working at a table with other students, one student says to another, "Is that all you've done? This is so easy. I'm almost finished."	Loss of privilege: "Lily, that does not follow our classroom rule of taking care of each other. Work on your own at a private desk for a while. We'll talk later."
A student is thumping his pencil over and over. Finally, a student near him gets angry and says, "Stop it, you idiot! You're driving me bananas!"	Break it, fix it (reparation): "John, do over. Ask Anton to stop without calling him a name." Stand close by and wait to make sure John follows through.
During a basketball game at recess, a child says to a teammate who missed a key shot, "You're such a spaz! You just lost the game for us."	A combination of strategies: Begin with time-out. "Anna, I know you're upset, but those words were hurtful. Take a break in our cool-down spot. We'll talk later." Later follow up with break it, fix it. "Your words really hurt Zach. You can't take them back, but you can try to make amends. Would you like some ideas for how to do that?"

Encourage apologies; don't force them

When children hurt others' feelings, we teachers often want to order children to apologize. After all, apologizing is the expected response. But we need to resist this urge, because insincere apologies can be as hurtful as the initial unkind words. They won't make an injured child, who can easily see right through them, feel better, and they usually don't help the child who did the teasing become more caring.

Instead of ordering apologies, have the child reflect on the incident. Time-out or loss of privilege can provide that time and space. When you and the child have a private moment, invite him to think about how to apologize or make reparations. However, if the child doesn't want to apologize or make amends, don't force him. Instead, reiterate the expectations for how he should treat others. Then, continue to work with him on empathy, perspective taking, and the power of reparations.

Often, children will apologize or make amends all on their own. These acts are much more meaningful than anything you could force out of a child.

Keep doing proactive work

It's critical to respond to unkind words in the moment, but remember to supplement these in-the-moment responses with proactive strategies. After a particular incident, also think about what further support an individual child might need. For example, does she need more opportunities to practice a specific skill, such as knowing the difference between school speech and out-of-school speech? If so, plan ways to build these into her daily schedule. Even a few minutes of extra practice can help.

If a Child Continues to Tease

Despite all your efforts, some students may still engage in teasing, name-calling, or put-downs. If so, here are some things to try.

Check in with the student

Some students may need more than a redirection or consequence to understand the impact of their words and change their behavior. If you think this may be the situation with a particular student, give her some time to reflect and then check in with her privately. Help her understand which class rule she broke, how her words affected classmates, what she thinks she can do to fix the situation, and what she needs to work on for the future.

Form a plan with the student

Sometimes, a student needs more intense and formal support than a check-in meeting. In that case, have a problem-solving conference to invite his ideas about why the problem is happening and to agree on a strategy for changing his behavior. To prepare for the conference, think about:

- ▶ **What to say to begin** the conference on a positive note.
- ▶ **How to state the problem** and its impact in concrete terms. For example:
“You’ve been saying unkind things to Eli and Zack. When you make fun of the way they play soccer, it makes them and everyone around them feel unsafe. It also makes people wonder if they can trust you as a friend.”
- ▶ **Possible causes of the problem.** If the child is at a loss as to what’s causing his struggles with teasing, name some possible reasons and see if he thinks any ring true. Also, be open to his ideas.

- ▶ **Strategies that may help**, such as making different choices at recess for a while if that's where the problem is occurring, checking in before and after recess with a teacher, or having a buddy who will try to help. Also, encourage the child to think of some strategies of his own to offer.

Collaborate with colleagues

Ask a colleague to observe the times of day when teasing seems most problematic and then offer insights. Remember also to talk with other teachers who work with the same students you do to ensure you're all consistent in your approach. Discuss how to present a clear message about teasing, promote the use of respectful language, and respond to any unkind words promptly and effectively.

Application

1. What are the possible reasons for the teasing?

- The desire to belong
- The need to feel powerful
- Looking for fun
- A lack of social skills
- Developmental characteristics related to teasing

2. What are some proactive strategies I can try to teach kind and respectful language and establish expectations?

3. What are some reactive strategies I can use to respond to the teasing?