

The Ring of Valor: From teasing to bullying

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Fact Sheet #2

Recognizing peer group control

Forging a relationship with peers is not accomplished without the heat of conflict, especially during the late elementary school years. During the first two-thirds of elementary school, children developed close friendships within groups that had permeable boundaries for belonging. In late elementary and middle school, the structure of the peer group becomes much more complicated. The need to belong to a group can be intense. The boundaries of membership become more rigid. Inclusion can be more difficult to achieve and exclusion can be more painful than during middle elementary school.

Members of the peer group will become more emphatic as to what is expected for inclusion. As much as we may want all children to just get along, control becomes an integral part of peer group development. This control becomes apparent in two ways. First, there is *the test*. Friends will tease and challenge each other, prod each other to test weaknesses. Overcoming these little confrontations is part of that test. Second, there is *the dispute*. The dispute is a form of group discipline. A member who deviates from behavior that is expected will face playful criticism that could escalate to isolation and rejection. This is a complicated dynamic that could evolve differently between boy's and girl's peer groups. Both *the test* and *the dispute* are peer challenges.



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Teasing vs. bullying

Readers are encouraged to review a previous article where I first described the difference between bullying and "peer challenges."

<http://www.ksu.edu/wwparent/programs/courage/Bullying-vs-challenge.pdf>

Peer challenges are *constructive confrontations by one person intended to test the strength of the other*. They can reinforce relationships by demonstrating its strength in the face of good-natured teasing. "Endearment teasing" tests with the goal of strengthening the relationship.

"Come on slowpoke." "Ok Michael Jordan, let's see you stop this shot!"

"Influence teasing" intends to change a valued person's behavior by showing disapproval. This is conflict with dispute at its center. While an adult might say, "Jason, your crying like this does not help," a peer might say, "Ok crybaby, stop your bawling and whining."

The goal of influence teasing is behavior change.

In both forms of peer challenges, a child might retreat to an adult and complain that he or she is being "bullied."

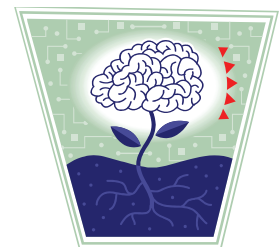
Bullying, however, is predatory. The focus of bullying is not to strengthen the relationship or change the other person's behavior to make him or her more acceptable. The goal of bullying is humiliation and subjugation. The focus is not on friendship but on the self-gratification of the person doing the bullying.

Understanding the difference between these two forms of conflict is critical. With peer challenges we might want a child to develop a thicker skin. Bullying, however, should NEVER be ignored. Cruelty should be recognized for the misery it causes and should never be dismissed as teasing.



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If you have any questions or comments, you can contact the author at casmith@ksu.edu.



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