

On Bullying

As a culture, we have become much more aware of bullying among our children in recent years, and many efforts have been made to help mitigate the effects of this behavior. Schools, churches, recreation programs, and sports programs have all worked to make their environments safe for all kids. Consequently, students and their parents feel empowered to call out this behavior when it occurs, and to make teachers and other adults aware when it occurs. These are all hugely positive developments in the lives of our kids.

However, the increased awareness and use of the term bullying has led many to believe that bullying is more common than research shows it is, and that many types of behaviors can be categorized as bullying. This is not true.

Bullying is characterized as repeated, intentionally aggressive behavior that involves an imbalance of power. It's that final characteristic that I think we lose sight of when we call some behaviors bullying. The imbalance of power is what makes bullying so effective as a means of control. The child that is being bullied feels that he or she has no recourse against the bully because of the bully's position of power within the social group. The bully, of course, exploits this to his or her advantage. When the victim tries to bring in adults to help, the adults can address the aggressive behaviors but can be ineffective in changing the bully's position of power in the group. This is what makes bullying so difficult to address.

At Sudbury Extended Day, we follow the same policy as the Sudbury Public Schools with respect to bullying. Repeated, intentionally aggressive behavior that targets another child within an imbalance of power will be addressed one on one with each student involved. Consequences for bullying behavior include but are not limited to separation from the activity, being sent home early, meetings with parents and the Site Coordinator and/or Director, and suspension or expulsion from the program. We also have a child psychologist who consults with us, giving us strategies to use with our children. With parental permission, he can observe a child interacting with others to help advise SED teachers, or meet with parents to help them understand behaviors. SED strives to maintain a safe, open and welcoming environment for all, students and adults alike. (Please note that physically putting one's hands on another child, hitting, kicking or biting, are causes for an immediate phone call home and dismissal for the day.)

Occasionally, an SED student will report to our teachers or to his parents that he's being bullied. After ensuring that the student is safe, it's always tough to analyze these incidents to determine exactly what happened, and we all feel a certain level of urgency around the term "bullying." To help clarify behaviors, the SED teachers have been using a vocabulary for talking about incidents. I think this vocabulary is useful and worth sharing with our parents.

There are three "levels" of negative behavior that children tend to report as bullying. The first is the true bullying incident(s) as defined above. The other negative behaviors are "rude" and "mean." Rude in this context is defined as behavior that is hurtful, usually spontaneous and thoughtless, but not meant to harm another person. Examples are cutting in line or burping in someone's face. SED teachers deal with these incidences on a daily basis and, while disruptive, they usually are not cause for stiff consequences or conversations with parents.

Mean behavior is purposefully trying to hurt another person. Mean behavior, unless it is repeated and part of an imbalance of power, is not bullying. Make no mistake, it is still unacceptable behavior, but it is not bullying. Frequently two children will accuse each other of bullying, when actually they are both being mean to each other within a similar level of power in the relationship. One day, one child is the mean one and the next day it's the other child, and the third day they are playing easily together as

friends. At SED, consequences for mean behavior typically include both one on one discussions with the teacher or Site Coordinator, and discussions with both children to use feelings words with each other and solve the problem together. Sometimes the solution is apologies and back to playing the game, and sometimes it's taking a break from playing together. Parents are informed as appropriate and can be an integral partner in helping end the mean behavior.

I encourage you to use these terms when trying to analyze incidents that your children describe from their day. The term "bullying" gets a reaction from adults, and children might use it for the dramatic effect. During your discussions with your child, you may find if you ask about whether an action was rude, mean, or bullying, the child will describe something that doesn't necessarily fit the bullying mold. Once you and your child have talked, please contact your Site Coordinator to let her know about the behavior in question, so we can take the appropriate action. Seeking solutions, using appropriate words, being tolerant of other's differences, and getting along even when you disagree are the social/emotional skills that SED teaches on a daily basis. In our play-based model, the teachable moments for these skills happen frequently! Thank you for being our partners in this important work.

**Credit for the Rude, Mean, or Bullying phrasing to Signe Whitson, LSW, in her online article "Is it Rude, Is it Mean, or Is It Bullying", November 25, 2012, in Psychology Today*
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/passive-aggressive-diaries/201211/is-it-rude-is-it-mean-or-is-it-bullying>