

Is there a Pro-Social side to Teasing?

My daughter came home from school when she was in fourth grade and said that a boy in her class was teasing her about the space between her two front teeth. Now the fact of the matter is, she had a huge space there so it would have done no good to say, “Oh honey, you have beautiful teeth! Don’t worry about it!”

We needed to come up with something that would address this boy’s *keen* observation skills, so Maddy decided to say, “Thank you for pointing that out to me because I never noticed that space before!”

She was no longer the victim; she now had a plan and a means to using joking in a pro-social way. (By the way... Maddy is now in sixth grade and we are finally getting around to putting on braces in January!!)

Kids tend to tease each other and for the most part it is done as a means of forging new friendships and deeper relationships with others. When kids make fun of their friends without aggression and do not intend to hurt the other person’s feelings, it’s called positive or productive teasing. According to Carol Mills, a communications professor at the University of Alabama, productive teasing is the use of humor to address taboo topics or handle sticky situations. Certain types of teasing have been seen as a way to handle social conflicts in less aggressive ways.

Of course, there is a fine line between teasing and bullying. The biggest difference between the two is that bullying has a strictly negative impact. The way to distinguish between the two is by the intent. The goal of bullying is to harm. Teasing turns into bullying when kids use it to gain greater social status. To determine whether the teasing is positive or not, it is essential to look at the context. If it is being done out of sight in the bathroom for example, that is much more threatening than teasing in front of a large group of friends at the lunch table. And teasing about something like a haircut or a pair of shoes is very different than teasing someone about being overweight which is much more difficult to control. I’ve also seen children have difficulty discerning when a peer is teasing or bullying them because they don’t know how to handle it. Each child has a different sensitivity to being teased but when the child overreacts or withdraws in response to teasing; he or she may lose out on important social experiences.

Helping kids understand, manage and even gain social skills from teasing, we need to do a few things. First, it is very important to teach our children the context cues associated with positive teasing (i.e. body language, laughter and sarcasm) so they can see the difference between a conversation that is serious and threatening and one that is joking and funny. They should also be taught to use those tools to joke back.

Second, discuss the terms that define teasing vs. bullying. Mills uses the teeter-totter analogy: When both people are equal in size, intelligence, and age and are having fun, it is teasing. But when the two aren’t equal – one’s more popular, bigger or more powerful and the exchange is out of balance, it’s bullying.

Lastly, listen to your child without disagreeing. In the example I gave about my daughter, there was no way I could disagree with what had been said about her teeth. But when we do disagree with the comments made during teasing, like telling our child they are beautiful when someone has called them ugly, we let our child be victimized. Instead, listen to what she says, help identify the context and then help her come up with a plan to address it the next time it happens. This is empowering as opposed to pitying and it allows kids to feel more confident in their social encounters.

Reference: Cleaver, Samatha, Just Teasing, Scholastic Parent and Child Magazine, Oct. 2009