

COMMENTARY: New rules needed to detect bullying

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COMMENTARY BY ELIZABETH ENGLANDER — You're probably reading and hearing the word "bullying" every time you turn around. Two boys fight, and a third boy posts the video of the fight online. A girl is threatened at school by another girl; it turns out the two were in a longstanding argument. A second-grader throws crayons at her classmates.

Is it always bullying?

Of course not. Kids use the word "bullying" to describe all kinds of behaviors, because they know that adults sit up and take notice. It raises our blood pressure and results in lots of phone calls to schools, but what is bullying, precisely?

The term bullying is really a euphemism for abuse – it describes repeated, cruel, intentional victimization of a target by a more powerful person.

To be bullying, a mean behavior can't be an accident, can't be unintentional, can't be a mistaken communication and can't be a one-time incident (even a cruel one).

Bullies used to be primarily physically powerful kids, but today, bullying is most often perpetrated by socially powerful (i.e., popular) kids upon less popular and self-confident peers.

A few generations ago, bullying was usually a physical attack, and you had to hide it from grownups, because hitting was easy to spot.

Bullies today don't have to hide; they're typically using psychological cruelty that isn't against any rule. Hitting still gets you in trouble, but rolling your eyes and giggling cruelly with your friends while pointedly excluding another girl isn't, strictly speaking, a violation of any school rule. Staring fixedly at someone you're intimidating isn't a physical attack.

So if bullying isn't obvious anymore, and a bully isn't breaking the rules, how do we identify it and how as parents do we address it? We can't tell our kids, "What do you care if they laugh?" because of course it hurts.

Luckily, we can help kids cope with bullying problems with a few concrete messages.

Rule No. 1: It's not always bullying. If it's an accident, a miscommunication or just being mean one time, it's probably not bullying. Understanding what we're dealing with will help us be more effective in resolving it.

Rule No. 2: If you decide that it really might be bullying, ask the school to explain how they decided what it was. Remember they may not have all the information you have.

Other rules are good for ensuring that your kids don't engage in bullying behaviors. Today, when any child might try out bullying to enhance their popularity, every child needs to discuss these rules with their parents.

Rule No. 3: "Rude, insolent and mocking behaviors are never OK. We don't care if all the other kids do them."

Rule No. 4: "Being a good person is what we prize most highly." In your own life, show your children how you admire people who are kind and giving.

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