

WHEN IS IT BULLYING?

Conflict is a part of everyday life. As adults, we experience conflict situations on a regular basis. It goes without saying, then, that some conflict is normal in our children's lives as well. It is only because of our experience in dealing with conflict that we, as adults, know how to deal with conflict ourselves. In fact, many adults attribute the difficulties that they have faced in conflict with others, as areas of growth that have built their resilience and helped them to confront and manage life's adversities¹.

When talking about bullying, it is very important for parents, teachers and children themselves to understand what bullying is not. Many times, a single act or behaviour is hurtful and/or out of proportion, but it is not considered bullying. Children, especially young children, are still learning how emotions work and how people get along with others. They need parents, teachers and other adults to show them how to be kind, how to resolve conflicts, how to be inclusive and how to grow into responsible adults².

Immediately labelling unkind or inappropriate behaviour as bullying hinders children's ability to learn and grow, as the way in which children overcome bullying is different to the way in which they learn to overcome other forms of conflict. There will be times when children do or say hurtful things to one another. Although unkind actions should never be ignored, it is important to teach children how to distinguish between hurtful or unkind behaviour and bullying behaviour³.

Bullying experts often consider the following four characteristics when distinguishing bullying from other forms of developmentally-appropriate conflict:

1. **Intentional:** Children can hurt other children by accident. Bullying, however, is always intentional and meant to cause some sort of harm, whether it is physical or verbal. This behaviour may persist even after the victim has asked the bully to stop.
2. **Repetitive:** In most cases, bullying happens repeatedly. Bullies often target children who they know will not do anything about the behaviour, so that they can continue bullying as long as they like.
3. **Hurtful:** Bullying is a negative behaviour that may include physical or verbal harm. The types of hurtful behaviour that qualify as bullying are varied, but they all cause long-lasting harm of some sort to the victim.
4. **Imbalance of Power:** If two children hold an equal amount of power, one cannot bully the other. This imbalance of power can come from different sources, including age, size, strength and social status.

In other words, in order for an incident to be considered bullying, the behaviour has to be intentional, occur repeatedly, be hurtful and involve an imbalance in power¹. For a list of references and links to more information on this topic please visit <http://www.christinedarney.co.za/Psych-Ed/psych-ed.html>.

Christine Darney (Clinical Psychologist)