

SOCIAL SKILLS



Bullies to Buddies: A Revolutionary Approach to Teasing

Adapted from the work of Izzy Kalman, MS, NCSP

Child: Johnny called me a x@z#\$%*!
Adult: Do you believe it?
Child: No!
Adult: Good!
End of incident!

School psychologist Izzy Kalman has conceived this and other creative solutions to teasing and bullying. He teaches kids how to handle bullies without anyone's help, and without getting anyone in trouble. Impossible? Read on.

The Importance of Freedom of Speech

Americans take Freedom of Speech for granted; but today, it is little more than a slogan. Despite two centuries of this historic right, our society is making it increasingly difficult to publicly or privately say what we want. Why? Because someone might be offended.

Virtually all fights begin with words. Mean words start a genetically programmed biological survival response to being threatened: anger. The attitude, "You have no right to say that," is the source of anger and aggression. The problem is the anger, not the mean words.

Kalman teaches people how to communicate without getting angry. The attitude, "You have the right to say whatever you want, and that's okay," fosters peace, not violence.

Name Calling and Hitting

Students in special education are easy targets for bullies. Parents naturally want to protect them. Kalman thinks this is a mistake. He recommends regarding bullies as social sparring partners. Bullies give children the opportunity to learn to deal with aggression, an essential life skill. We should be grateful to them.

Teachers and parents encounter four basic types of aggression between children:

- Kids complain about being called names. (above)
- Kids complain about being hit.
- You witness kids calling names.
- You witness kids hitting.

Hitting incidents rarely cause real harm. Typically kids bring us incidents we didn't see, in which no one was hurt. As with name-calling, the victim wants the other child to be reprimanded or punished. The best response goes like this:

Child: Johnny hit me!
Adult: Are you hurt?
Child: No.
Adult: Good.

The child has nothing more to say and scurries off. The incident is over in seconds with the child feeling your genuine concern, knowing you are glad he is not hurt. The bully also has no complaint, so there is less chance of escalation or retaliation. Both children observe that you do not view harmless hitting as a problem, so they don't either.

Child: Johnny hit me!
Adult: Are you hurt?
Child: Yes!
Adult: Show me.

Injury requires a different response. Take care of it quickly and appropriately. You cannot permit serious injury just to teach a lesson. If a child is about to use a weapon, or throw a sibling down the stairs, you must stop him. But you should neither care who started it nor be mad at anyone. Just take away the weapon, or move them away from the stairs, and tell them you won't let anyone get hurt. Then walk away. Kids don't really want to hurt each other, no matter how hard they fight. Relax.

Even when our guiding principle is: "Don't hurt anyone," Kalman says it is never appropriate to discipline the bully when a victim tells on him for name-calling. When a victim feels hurt by names, it is not really the bully who hurt him; it is the victim who hurt himself. Don't punish or lecture the bully; don't give him a dirty look or make him apologize. Most importantly: don't get mad! If you are mad at him, he will be mad at you. The victim will find this gratifying, so he will provoke his perpetrator into hurting him again, thus repeating the cycle.

Empowering Victims

Kalman believes that an adult's job is to empower victims, not protect them. Getting involved in kid's conflicts is the worst thing adults can do. By trying to stop the fights, adults really make them escalate! In school, every minute teachers spend handling bullying is a minute taken away from education.

In all-day workshops, Kalman, a Jew, role-plays bullying incidents with participants, urging them to sling anti-Semitic epithets at him. He demonstrates his techniques with gay-bashing, sibling rivalry, and parent-child clashes. Disbelievers gradually catch on, even though their moral upbringing makes it hard for them to accept that the bully shouldn't be punished.

Kalman teaches kids of all ages how to disarm their attackers with humor and to ignore the name-calling. Most importantly they learn, "Don't get upset!" When victims neutralize bullying and the bully gets no reward, he eventually gets frustrated and stops. More importantly, the victim learns reliance and independence.

Want to read more? Go to <www.bullies2buddies.com> to download Kalman's manual for kids and adults. Better yet, join him for a day at one of his seminars. (See schedule on website.)