

Is It Rude, Is It Mean, Is It Bullying?

As they say, kids will be kids. And yes, children and teens can be unkind to their peers and feelings get hurt. The problem is when these behaviors become common and target the same person repeatedly. This is when kids being kids begins to cross the line to bullying. And while bullying is a very terrible thing for anyone to endure, it is important to look at the actual behavior and determine if it really is bullying or if it is children being rude or mean.

Bullying is a term that has become more prevalent in recent years even though the actual act of bullying has been around for a very long time. Although studies have shown that the rates of bullying incidents have actually decreased, this topic has been at the forefront of everyone's minds and in the media more often. This is largely due to increased amounts of children and teens harming themselves as a response to their experiences.

According to Stopbullying.gov "In order to be considered bullying, the behavior must be aggressive and include an imbalance of power" while being repetitive in nature. When children use their power to bully someone it could include "physical strength, access to embarrassing information, or popularity." If this behavior is done more than once or twice, it is considered bullying and should be addressed as so.

There are different types of bullying: verbal, social, physical, and cyber. While physical bullying happens often, verbal and social bullying are the most prevalent. These types generally happen during school hours or at school events. Cyber bullying is on the rise due to the increased use of technology by children and teens. Whereas children can go home and escape the other types of bullying, cyber bullying reaches far beyond the school yard.

Bullying is a very emotional subject, so it is important to take all accusations seriously and never minimize someone's experience. It is vital, though, to determine if the behavior was bullying or was just a child being rude or mean. For example, a child says to another child

"You're so stupid" and this happens once, maybe twice. By definition, it is not considered bullying but yes, it is mean and can hurt the child, on the receiving end of it, emotionally.

Trudy Ludwig, author of "My Secret Bully" describes the difference in a child being rude or mean and showing bullying behaviors with easy to understand definitions. Rude is a child inadvertently saying or doing something that hurts someone else. Mean is when a child purposefully says or does something to hurt someone once (maybe twice). Bullying involves intentionally aggressive behavior, repeated over time, that involves an imbalance of power. Being familiar with these helps to give some guidance when addressing harmful behaviors and giving appropriate interventions.

Bullying can happen anywhere and to anyone. It is important to know the warning signs that a child may exhibit when they are being bullied. Also knowing that children and teens don't always ask for help is essential to know. According to the National Bullying Prevention Center, less than half of bullying incidents were not reported because children and teens felt that they could handle it on their own, they didn't want more problems from the bully, they were embarrassed, or they felt rejected.

It is vital for anyone working with children to be educated on the warning signs of bullying behaviors while maintaining an objective look at the actual behaviors that are exhibited in order to determine appropriate consequences. Educating parents and the community about the differences in children being rude or mean and actual bullying behaviors is essential to addressing the behaviors in the most effective way.