**Train teachers where to draw line**

**Between bullying, teasing**

By Steve Breakstone and Michael Dreiblatt

Bullying experts say a strict zero-toler­ance approach to bullying can stifle nor­mal, playful teasing among students. School leaders should maintain balance in their anti-bullying strategies by train­ing staff to recognize the difference be­tween playful, appropriate teasing and hurtful taunting.

Trained teachers can then help students make better decisions as they learn appropri­ate behavior toward classmates. Simply punishing students for all teasing can create misunderstandings that end up irritating students and annoy­ing their parents, said Mike Dreiblatt, a former Vermont elementary school teacher.

Dreiblatt cofounded Balance Educational Services LLC and coauthored the book *How to Stop Bullying and Social Aggression* with Steve Breakstone.

They developed staff training principles after el­ementary teachers “begged us to help them change aggressive behavior in their younger students, so they could efficiently teach instead of spending a lot of time breaking up bullying dynamics,” Breakstone said.

They shared the following tips:

**1. Train teachers not to intervene in playful teasing when:**

• Teasing goes back and forth among students and isn’t directed at anyone in particular.

• Everyone is allowed to exchange comments, not just one individual.

• All students are laughing.

• Exchanges are funny and lighthearted in a clever, gentle way.

• A comment was intended to lighten everyone’s mood.

• A student’s tone of voice is affectionate.

• No one is singled out for humiliation.

• The jesting is intended to bring people together.

• Teasing is a small part of, and doesn’t define, the entire exchange.

• No one acts like he’s upset or trying to get revenge.

• A student asks a classmate to stop teasing and he does.

**2. Train teachers to intervene in harmful taunting when:**

• Talking is one-sided and one or more students is an aggressor while one is defensive.

• Bystanders laugh at a comment, but the target doesn’t.

• One student is repeatedly silenced with put-downs while another talks freely.

• A student’s tone of voice is snide, sarcastic, demeaning, sharp or mean.

• Comments are intended to undermine a class­mate’s self-worth.

• Exchanges intimidate a student to fear further taunting.

• Comments are calculated to upset a classmate.

• Aggressive body language is directed at a student, such as eye rolling, a raised hip, or a wagging head.

• The exchange continues after a targeted student becomes upset or objects to comments

**3. Trained teachers should teach students the differences listed above.**

**4. Tell students to ask themselves the follow­ing questions before they tease a classmate:**

• Do I know this person well enough to know he wouldn’t be offended?

• Has this classmate appreciated this type of teasing in the past?

• Do I know what subjects this person might be sensitive about?

• Has something been going on lately that would make this student sensitive to this type of teasing?

• Have I had a problem with this classmate in the past?

• Am I older, bigger, or is my social status different so I have some sort of power over this student?

If the answer is yes to any of these questions, it’s better not to tease that classmate. If you do say or do something with good intentions, but it hurts someone’s feelings, apologize and don’t repeat the comments or behavior

**5. Teach students teasing taboos.** Tell students not to tease a classmate, even with good intentions, about religion, weight, body shape, race, test grades and athletic ability.

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| Steve Breakstone and Michael Dreiblatt are the co-founders of Balance Educational Services, a company that promotes pro-social behavior and bullying solutions through interactive presentations for students, educators and parents. They are also the authors of How to Stop Bullying & Social Aggression: Elementary Grade Lessons and Activities That Teach Empathy, Friendship, and Respect. |

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