



Not every act of meanness is bullying

By Michael Hawton, Psychologist (MAPS) and [Parentshop](#) founder.

One of our jobs is to help children and young people to interpret events proportionally. However, in recent times, I have seen a shift involving the wrong application of words like *trauma*, *depression* and *bullying*. When these very meaningful words are misused, their misuse can result in unwanted consequences. What might be the 'unkind' behaviour of another may, in fact, not be 'bullying'. In this article, I discuss the differences between unkindness and bullying – and how defining the two correctly - can teach kids resilience and to cope with conflict.

Anyone who spends a great deal of time with teenagers or simply remembers their own teenage years, would know that young people can be downright mean to one another.

An experiment by Debra Pepler at York University brought together children from years 1 to 6 who were identified by their teachers as particularly aggressive or particularly non-aggressive. What the study found was that, on average, mean behaviour from the aggressive children was displayed every two minutes and, most revealingly, from the non-aggressive children every three minutes.

Conflict is unfortunately a part of life that we all deal with, no matter what age.

Bullying is, however, way more than that and can have serious and sometimes tragic consequences. Yet the term 'bullying' seems to be readily bandied around these days for all forms of 'mean behaviour'. According to 'Bullying No Way', the National Australian definition of bullying is:

"an ongoing misuse of power in relationships through repeated verbal, physical and/or social behaviour that causes physical and/or psychological harm. It can involve an individual or a group misusing their power over one or more persons. Bullying can happen in person or online, and it can be obvious (overt) or hidden (covert)... Single incidents and conflict or fights between equals, whether in person or online, are not defined as bullying." (Safe and Supportive School Communities (SSSC), 2019)

The key terms in the definition of bullying is 'misuse of power' and 'repeated'. The key terms in the definition of what is not bullying is 'between equals' and while conflicts or mean and hurtful behaviour may upset a young person tremendously, by labelling the mean behaviour 'bullying' we may be disempowering children.

... calling every act of meanness bullying sends an unhealthy message: It says to kids, 'You're fragile. You can't handle it if anyone is even slightly unkind to you.'

Eileen Kennedy-Moore PhD, 2014

It is important for teenagers to understand the difference between someone being insensitive or mean and what constitutes bullying behaviour, because being able to successfully resolve and navigate these situations is a huge step in their emotional growth and maturity. If the situation is deemed to be simply mean or hurtful behaviour, it is important not to over-play this through misleading terminology (i.e., bullying) and offer ways for the child to address and resolve this

themselves.

Teacher and writer Braden Bell spoke in his article for *The Washington Post* (Bell, 2018) about his own personal experience when hearing about one of his teenager experiencing negative and disparaging remarks from a co-worker. His initial fury led him to a biased judgement, defining the perpetrator as a bully. But, when he eventually calmed down, he realised it did not fit the definition (it was offensive behaviour but not bullying) and so he talked with his wife and then teenager to find a viable coping solution, which worked out in the end. A way parents can assist with this is by first acknowledging the mean behaviour, e.g., 'that was mean/rude/unkind of her/him' and then, as Bell suggests, prompting his teenage daughter to seek some form of resolution or solution by asking "What are your choices?" And, as a follow-up, "What are the likely outcomes of those choices?". This may not be easy because of heightened emotions and the initial responses may not be great. He took the right steps.

Parents who react too defensively for their teenager at every negative encounter with their peers may be doing more harm than good. In later years, the teenager may not have the necessary tools to independently handle conflict and may feel 'victimsed' in situations that don't go their way, potentially causing social engagement and relationship difficulties in later life.

Further in her article in *Psychology Today*, Eileen Kennedy-Moore, wrote:

"... calling every act of meanness bullying sends an unhealthy message: It says to kids, 'You're fragile. You can't handle it if anyone is even slightly unkind to you.' As these children grow older, they demonstrate less resilience, sometimes publicly. The kids got more easily and deeply upset about perceived offenses, including situations that were unpleasant, but weren't really bullying. Beyond stunting their emotional maturity, their heightened reactions had negative social consequences, as peers responded by disengaging from them." (Kennedy-Moore, 2014)

By defining the behaviour correctly, we are encouraging our kids to assess and respond in a way that creates resiliency and emotional maturity.

Michael Hawton is founder of Parentshop, providing education and resources for parents and industry professionals working with children. He has authored two books on child behaviour management: *Talk Less Listen More* and *Engaging Adolescents*. You can find more information, including his books and self-paced online parenting courses at <https://www.parentshop.com.au/parent-courses/>

References:

Further reading: Eileen Kennedy-Moore Phd, *Psychology Today: Is it Bullying...Or Ordinary Meanness?* 1st October 2014, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/growing-friendships/201410/is-it-bullying-or-ordinary-meanness>

Braden Bell, *The Washington Post: Not all unkindness is bullying: Here's why we need to teach kids to differentiate*, 16th August 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/parenting/wp/2018/08/16/not-all-unkindness-is-bullying-heres-why-we-need-to-teach-kids-to-differentiate/>

Bullying No Way! Australian website for schools bullyingnoway.gov.au/, Safe and Supportive School Communities (SSSC) 2019, viewed 2018, www.bullyingnoway.gov.au/DefinitionOfBullying

Kids Help Line: [How to tell if it's bullying.](#)