

empowering children to cope with teasing

Amy Smith • Child Life Specialist
Medical City Children's Hospital • Dallas, TX

Teasing can happen to anyone, but some research indicates that children with disabilities are at a greater risk because teasing is usually about a visible difference. According to Ms. Joseph, social worker at Bloorview's neurodevelopmental program, "It's human nature to be curious, so from an early age children with disabilities need to be armed with the information to respond to questions, stares, and unkind comments." Parents and professionals play a critical role in preparing and empowering children with disabilities to cope with challenges of their chronic condition.

Talking with children about their facial difference can be a powerful beginning for more discussions regarding feelings and expectations for the future. It's important to use developmentally appropriate language and concepts children can understand. For example, preschool age children may learn about differences best by understanding differences around them. For example, parents can point out differences such as: some dogs have short legs and some have long legs. Whereas school age children may understand simple explanations, but have questions about the causes. Such as, "Do other children have these differences?" "Is the condition permanent?" In order to come to terms with the condition, children need the opportunity to ask questions, take an active role in self-care, and learn how other children cope with their feelings and condition.

Adolescents need to make the decision about how much or little information they want to disclose to different people. Being involved in decisions regarding possible options is also essential for this age group because this control will foster relationships, increase compliance, and improve self-esteem. Children who learn, practice, and

utilize strategies in teasing situations will cope more easily, and have less feelings of helplessness. Ms. Freedman, author of *Easing the Teasing: How Parents Can Help Their Children* says, "Teasing cannot be prevented, and children cannot control what others say; however, they can learn to control their own reactions."

The following are effective strategies developed by Ms. Freedman to be utilized in teasing situations, which can strengthen coping skills. The self-talk strategy encourages the child being teased to think of positive attributes about themselves. For example the child could say, "Whose opinion is more important, the teaser's or mine?" A teaser is seeking a reaction, so ignoring the teaser can also be very effective. Children should be encouraged to role-play walking away or pretending like they are invisible to show they are ignoring the teaser. Reframing is another way to cope with teasing. For example, if a teaser is calling a child "four eyes" that child can respond back with "thanks for noticing my glasses." Yet another coping strategy is using the "I" message in which children express how they feel and what they want changed. For example, "I feel upset when you call me brace face and I would like you to stop." Other strategies include visualization in which the child pretends to have a protective shield that makes the teasing comments bounce off. Sometimes adult intervention is necessary so children need to know it is okay to ask for help. Strategies that are effective in one teasing situation may not be in all situations. It is important for children to practice possible responses to teasing that they plan to utilize in teasing situations.

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Tips for parents to help children cope with differences

- Show your love and acceptance of your child's facial difference by smiling, being physically close, touching your child, especially his or her face and by making eye contact.
- Tell your child about their facial difference in simple, honest words they can understand, emphasizing it's nobody's fault and at the same time pointing out strengths.
- Support your child's efforts in developing friendships by encouraging sharing, giving, fairness, kindness and consideration.
- Help your child make a simple plan to respond to questions or comments. A simple, matter of fact explanation such as "I was born this way" or "This is just the way I am" is sufficient for most children.
- Brainstorm together a list of possible questions to anticipate from children: "How did it happen?" "Can I catch it?" "What is it?" "Will it go away?"
- Help your child understand they are not alone by introducing him/her to other children who share similar experiences.
- Children need the control of how much or little they want to disclose to different people depending on how they feel at that time.
- Communicate with your child's teacher throughout the school year to explain any medical limitations and ways to enhance learning.
- Discuss with your child why some children ask questions or make comments about their differences. Help your child to understand for the most part other children are just curious and do not mean to be hurtful.
- If your child is teased, help him or her to problem solve how to handle the situation with a positive response.
- Practice and role-play with your child different strategies to use in teasing situations.
- Allow older children an active role in surgical decision-making to help your child feel he or she has a say and that their opinion is valued.
- Your young child may want to present information such as a show and tell session in their classroom about their facial difference.

- It is human nature to protect your child from stressful situations; however, when children try new things they gain confidence and obtain the skills necessary to be successful in life.
- Consult with a child psychologist or social worker for additional support and resources.

Books for children and parents

- *The Berenstain Bears and Too Much Teasing* by Stan & Jan Berenstain
- *Chrysanthemum* by Kevin Henken
- *Anansi and the Talking Melon* by Eric A. Kimmel
- *Princess Penelope's Parrot* by Helen Lester
- *Snail Started It* by Katja Reider & Angela von Roehl
- *Easing the Teasing: Helping your child cope with name-calling, ridicule, and verbal bullying* by Judy S. Freedman
- *Bullies are a Pain in the Brain* by Trevor Romain
- *What to do...when kids are mean to your child, Parenting Guides, vol. 1* by Erin McCoy
- *How to Handle Bullies, Teasers and other Meanies: A book that takes the nuisance out of name calling & other nonsense* by Kate Cohen-Posey, & Betsy A. Lampe
- *Stick up for yourself. Every Kid's Guide to Personal Power and Positive Self-Esteem* by Gershen Kaufman, & Leu Raphael

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- Pope, A., 2003. *Advice for Parents: Helping Children to Tell Peers*.
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