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### **Expert offers tips for when teasing goes too far**

**A child psychologist helps parents separate the tolerable from the traumatic**

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**By CECELIA GOODNOW**

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Normal children are not wonderful every minute, says psychologist Michael Thompson, a former seventh-grade teacher and now a best-selling parenting author.

Even the best kids say mean things, exclude kids from games and otherwise assert their power.

It hurts. And for kids who face constant teasing and bullying, the outcome can be traumatic.

The Columbine High School shootings four Aprils ago spurred states to take action. Here in Washington, schools have until August to develop anti-bullying guidelines. Five schools, including John Stanford International School, will get special training and support from the Seattle-based Committee for Children, a nationally known anti-bullying and violence-prevention organization.

Meanwhile, parents wonder how to respond when their own child is the target of meanness -- or the one dishing it out. What's normal? When should parents be concerned?

Here's some advice from Thompson, co-author of "Mom, They're Teasing Me" (Ballantine Books, 288 pages, \$22.95). His answers are a combination of paraphrases and direct quotes.

#### **You approach children's social lives with a very reassuring tone. Why?**

This is the area of kids' lives where parents feel most helpless. I've seen parents get very upset by what I call normal social pain. But I want to make the point that probably 85 percent of children are going to bounce back and be OK. ... The other side of the coin is 15 percent of kids are at risk.

#### **Who are the kids at risk?**

A certain amount of risk falls on neglected kids -- the shy and overlooked -- and on controversial kids who both attract and repel, such as popular but "stuck-up" girls or hyperactive boys who are both disruptive and charismatic.

But those at greatest risk are the "rejected-submissive" kids who come across as easy targets and the "rejected-aggressive" kids who are baited and harassed until they explode in fury. These aggressive victims run a "serious risk" of becoming bullies, delinquents and criminals -- or school shooters.

### **How can parents tell if their child is experiencing childhood's normal rough-and-tumble or more serious teasing?**

Figure out if the teasing is an isolated occurrence, which is painful but passing, or a chronic problem. If your child pours out a tale of woe and then runs out to play, you can see your own child's resilience at work and it calms you down.

But if you have a child who is reporting teasing and bullying day after day, who dreads going to school and he or she is not getting phone calls (from friends), or invitations to birthday parties, then you know you have a chronic situation and your child's resilience is overwhelmed.

Those situations aren't just painful, they're traumatizing, and can lead to withdrawal, depression, anorexia or other mental-health problems.

### **If it's a chronic situation, what should parents do?**

It often helps to forge an alliance with a friendly teacher who can intercede. Then you have to find out *why* your child is being neglected.

There are many possibilities. Some kids have differences that grate on kids and even on teachers. They may be socially immature or have a real social learning disability that prevents them from reading social cues.

Teachers are good at sizing up kids' social abilities, but they don't always know how to coach the clueless.

### **What helps children prevail over life's inevitable social bruises?**

For me, the singularly important thing is: Does the child have a friend? You can survive almost anything if you have a friend.

### **A lot of policymakers see anti-teasing and anti-bullying programs as a way to prevent another Columbine. Do you agree?**

Yes -- but that's not the whole story. Columbine wasn't caused just by teasing, or by teen depression or by a lack of gun control.

There were lots of risk factors. There are kids in high school all over the United States who are rejected kids, who are at the bottom of the social heap and are teased every day, and they aren't shooting kids. Everyone is trying to make hay out of Columbine.

That said, attempts to wipe out bullying will succeed only if they are systemwide and if everyone agrees on broad definitions of what's acceptable or unacceptable behavior.

There has to be a common vocabulary. That's what's helpful about these anti-bullying laws. The problem with these laws is legislatures pass them but they don't fund them.

**Some people fear the pendulum is swinging too far and that some adults are micromanaging kids' social lives. Do you agree?**

I think we're monitoring kids *less*. Look, we used to live in neighborhoods where parents used to know the kids and they would be monitoring them. We're an increasingly atomized society. That makes school an intense social crucible.

**But isn't there a tendency for well-meaning adults to overreact to real concerns such as school violence and sexual harassment? To start busting kindergartners who kiss a classmate, for instance?**

The sexual harassment stuff in kindergarten is ridiculous (because it ignores normal child development). At the same time, I think middle school is a safer place for girls than it was 20 years ago. Boys don't snap girls' bra straps and talk about their breast development openly the way they used to. They have a vocabulary now. They know that's sexual harassment.

**How can parents help kids weather the pain of "normal" social mishaps?**

Listen and offer suggestions, but don't try to pressure kids into acting on your ideas. Kids hate that.

It helps to let kids know that everyone goes through painful experiences such as losing a friend, especially in middle school. Seventh grade is just a rough age.

You can take the curse off the kid in feeling uniquely defective.

**Any parting words of reassurance for parents?**

There's a positive side to normal social pain that gets overlooked if we focus only on "trauma theory." Only through the social rough and tumble do kids learn to become socially savvy and politically skilled.

You wouldn't want a child to graduate from high school without knowing the difference between a fair-weather friend and a true friend.

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