Sticks and Stones Will Break My Bones, and Names Hurt Too

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One summer my parents suggested I take sailing lessons at a nearby boating camp. I was thrilled because I always had a great interest in boats . I arrived at the camp wearing my trusty "flip-flops" (those inexpensive foam rubber sandals you get at dime stores) since I knew my feet would be getting wet. Within about an hour, the pecking order in our group of 10 year olds was established, with the largest and most intimidating boy, Michael, taking the lead. Our fearless leader soon announced to the group that due to the fact that I was wearing "flip-flops," I must in fact be a "faggot." Despite my protests about the faulty logic that Michael seemed to be employing, the rest of the group, out of their own fears of being teased, accepted Michael's conclusions as they hid their own sandals from his sight. It was a long summer of being taunted at the hand of this young bully.

Unfortunately, most children have been teased at some point in their development. For children with Asperger Syndrome (AS) and related Pervasive Developmental Disorders, teasing often goes beyond being a temporary annoyance, but rather becomes a devastating and chronic problem wearing down a youngster's self-esteem. There are a number of reasons why children with AS may get scapegoated more than most other kids. These reasons can be divided into three categories: differences in social behavior and physical abilities, the invisible nature of the disability, and social skill deficits specific to teasing.

Differences in Social Behavior and Physical Abilities

Despite efforts to embrace diversity in the schools, children continue to discriminate against those who look and act differently than the "norm." Individuals with AS may appear different because of possible gross and fine motor problems, or articulation difficulties. However, it is their social differences that may cause the most trouble. Weaknesses in perspective taking may cause AS youngsters to violate social norms and inadvertently irritate others. Many children with AS also exhibit difficulties with emotional control, which may especially prompt teasing from those who enjoy being able to get a "rise" out of others. Moreover, if problems with emotional control cause the AS youngster to tantrum or display aggressive behavior, this may lead to further rejection, teasing, and retaliation from their classmates. In fact, research on social status demonstrates that it is aggressive behavior that is most associated with lack of popularity.

Invisible Nature of Disability

Despite some of the differences children with AS may demonstrate, many of their peers and adults are unaware that they have a real disability. Although this may be helpful if the disability is mild, it can greatly worsen the situation if the child behaves in ways that irritate others. Peers and adults who are blind to the AS child's disabilities may attribute the social awkwardness to willful misbehavior, thus prompting retaliation. Classmates may tease more and teachers may allow the teasing to continue figuring it will teach the AS child a lesson not to irritate others. Thus it is important that others understand that the AS child's social blunders are not willful acts.

Social Skill Deficits Specific to Teasing

Deficits in how to understand and handle teasing may also cause classmates to target the AS child. Because of difficulties with perspective taking, AS youngsters may have trouble distinguishing between playful and malicious teasing, as well as knowing how to tease back without hurting the others' feelings. As noted above, the problems with emotional control may lead to inappropriate reactions to teasing that fuel further rejection and teasing.

Children with AS need to learn how to understand teasing and to develop skills to respond to it without losing control. In addition, peers and adults need to increase their sensitivity to AS children in order to protect them

and to understand the unintentional nature of their social awkwardness. The following describes interventions to address teasing problems. Some strategies focus on teaching the AS child how to cope with teasing, while others are targeted to those around the AS child.

Child Focused Strategies

- Perspective-Taking

In general, it may be hard to determine with any certainty why someone is teasing, however, coming up with a theory about the teaser's motivation can help the victim not take the teasing personally and maintain self-esteem. Sometimes children are teasing to engage others' attention and mean no harm. At times teasing is an expression of affection (e.g., the use of some nicknames falls into this category). A good test to see whether the teaser has benign intent is to have the victim ask the teaser to stop because his or her feelings are hurt and then see if the teaser refuses. In such cases in which the teaser continues to be insensitive, it helps to explore the teaser's intentions further to avoid personalizing the harassment.

Take my long lost pal, Michael, as an example to explore further why children tease. Perhaps he was a troubled youngster who was projecting his own bad feelings about himself onto me. Maybe he was displacing his anger for someone else onto me. Perhaps he grew up in a threatening environment and was using teasing as a game to master his own defenses against being hurt. Whatever the reason, it helped my fragile self-esteem as a young boy to know that Michael's statements said less about me and more about his own problems.

- Emotional Control Strategies

As we all know, it is difficult to respond to any situation when feeling out of control. The perspective-taking strategies above can go a long way to maintaining self-control in the face of teasing. It is easier to think about how to respond to the teasing if one does not take it personally. Children can use self-statements like "He is the one with a problem, not me. What he is saying is not true and it just makes him look bad."

Sometimes it is necessary to engage in some kind of distraction from the teasing before one can get calm enough to respond. Examples of distractions are: getting involved in any other activity, playing a game, talking to a friend, imagining pleasant events (one of my students thinks of giant chocolate donuts rolling down the highway), or deep breathing exercises.

- Ignoring Strategies

These are best used when the teasing is mild, or when the teasing victim needs to calm down before responding. If teasing is persistent, involves humiliation in front of others, or threats of physical harm, one should employ another strategy (see below). Examples of ignoring include: not responding at all; walking away; saying "I can't hear anyone, is someone talking?" (repeated over and over until the other gets bored of teasing); or my personal favorite, gesturing to stop with your hand and saying "Talk to the hand because the ears don't hear" (but be careful not to put your hand in the others face as this could provoke a fight).

- Confrontation Strategies

I never recommend physical confrontations, although they can work. The problem is that they often create more problems (escalating conflicts, school suspensions, physical harm) rather than stopping the teasing. I must admit, however, when my old pal Michael finally left my boat camp and the other kids continued to tease me, I retaliated by whipping them with wet towels which abruptly put an end to the teasing. I would not have dared to do this with Michael because I am sure he would have beat me up and escalated his reign of threats and humiliation. With Michael and other bullies, verbal confrontations or manipulation strategies (see below) are preferred.

The simplest verbal confrontation is to tell the person to stop because it makes you angry and sad. Again this is a good place to start as it tests out whether the teaser is really just playing and can be sensitive to others.

Some kids enjoy making a game of teasing. This is often referred to as a "cracking session." The term "cracking" ultimately refers to the fact that this is a joking game of who can top the other. Examples in this category include the "Your mother is so ..... that ....." jokes. This strategy can only be used if the players are able to refrain from taking the jokes seriously and they understand each other well enough not to hurt each other's feelings. In many respects, this is one of the most common strategies, and can help a youngster gain acceptance into a peer group based on their ability to "joke around" without getting upset. The main risk of using this strategy is knowing the teaser's limits. If children with AS memorize a couple of one-liners, they need to know their audience so they do not seriously offend someone who then escalates the conflict.

Perhaps the most important confrontation strategy is to tell an adult who has the power to make the teaser stop. This is the strategy of choice when an AS child is being threatened with physical harm or is being constantly harassed. This is not a form of backing down, but a powerful confrontation strategy. To quote a favorite phrase uttered by one of my insightful politically-minded students, telling is like "bringing the power back to the people, the masses of workers slaving in the sweat shops, and away from the dictator who gained power through an unauthorized military coup!"

- Manipulation Strategies

These strategies are used to diffuse a conflict. One simple manipulation is to treat the teasing as if it was a joke, which neither gives the teaser the satisfaction that he upset his intended victim, nor does it escalate the conflict. Examples include saying "That's a good one, I give it a B+," or "Yeah, that is really very humorous, very clever" (with a sarcastic tone or with rolling one's eyes and not smiling).

A counter-intuitive, yet effective strategy that has been used with bullies is to compliment them when they tease. A number of my students have used this successfully when they were able to sound sincere in their compliments. An example might be "You are too nice and too smart to want to tease me. You could probably beat me so why try. You are strong and a good student, so there is no challenge in trying to tease me."

- Adult and Peer Focused Interventions

Even when a student becomes quite skillful at handling teasing and does all the right things, the student may continue to be harassed by peers. At this point interventions need to be targeted to others.

Classroom Presentations

Both peers and teachers can be presented with information about the nature of AS. Part of that presentation should include the concept that many socially inappropriate behaviors are not purposeful, but based on a brain disability that makes it hard to know what to do in social situations and/or to control emotions. For example, difficulties with compromising, interrupting, laughing at the wrong time, acting indifferent to others feelings, or becoming angry in response to changes or challenging situations can all be explained as a result of a disability and not willful behavior.

I will often explain the concept of a "brain disability" by sharing one that I have myself, red/green color blindness. Once the concept of a disability has been explained, one can point out how it would be unfair to take advantage of or retaliate against a child with AS. It is equally important to describe the strengths of the youngster with AS, as well as the great strengths and talents of others who have had disabilities (e.g., Albert Einstein, Thomas Edison, Bill Cosby, etc.). Having a disability does not have to prevent one from becoming very successful, and sometimes it is associated with great talents.

In addition to presenting information specific to the youngster with AS, a number of schools have or can develop programs to address the problem of teasing in general. Such programs involve empathy training, conflict resolution, and how to respond to teasing. The programs can be implemented by a classroom teacher and/or through older students who model the skills to the younger children through role plays.

School Supports

One of the best ways to intervene when a youngster is being teased constantly in school is to provide adult protection to monitor what are otherwise unstructured situations. For example, an assigned aide could monitor the youngster before school begins (or on the school bus if necessary), between classes in the hallways, at lunch time, and after school until the youngster is picked up (or on the bus ride home if necessary).

An aide not only can provide a protective role in stopping peers from teasing the child with AS, but can also prompt the child to employ a variety of social skills. These might include skills for dealing with teasing, yet would also include more general skills needed to get along with others thus reducing the likelihood of being teased. For example, the aide can prompt the child to greet others, to take turns in conversation and in activities, to compromise or accommodate others, to join in without intruding on others, to show understanding for others' feelings, and to manage his or her own feelings through self-talk and/or distraction techniques.

Teachers and aides can also create incentive programs for the AS child to use the skills described above. After a child has been taught those skills in a social skills group, through one-on-one instruction, or through a social story, the child can be rewarded for enacting those skills. The rewards can be given out in school or at home through a school/home note system. The success of any reward program depends on a number of factors including the desirability of the rewards, how the program is explained to the child (i.e., it must be seen as an opportunity rather than an effort to control the child), how consistent the program is (i.e., the child consistently gets rewarded when and only when he or she has earned it), and the user-friendliness of the program (if it is too complicated, no one will follow through).

Summary

Sometimes I look back at the summer when I was 10 and think, it could have been different. Maybe I should have told someone and they could have intervened with the camp, or helped me develop some strategies to deal with the teasing myself. In retrospect, I know the reason I initially did nothing about the problem was because I felt ashamed. I took the teasing personally and felt that to ask for help would be like announcing to everyone how much of a "wuss" I was. Perhaps had I realized that Michael had the problem rather me, I might have let someone else know and I could have "brought the power back to the people, the masses of workers slaving in the sweat shops, and away from the dictator who gained power through an unauthorized military coup." Perhaps also I could have learned to wear sandals with greater confidence. If anyone is interested, I am starting a support group for those with phobias of open toe shoes.