



5-1-5 Information Sheet: Defining Bullying and Social Conflict A Take-Home Resource for Staff, Parents, and Kids

Bullying has three conditions, and all three must exist simultaneously for a situation to be defined as bullying:

- **Repetitive:** If another student repeatedly threatens, intimidates, taunts or otherwise harms you, this is one of the conditions of bullying.
- **Unwanted Aggression:** If another student teases you, and you do not think it is funny, then you are experiencing unwanted aggression. The most common defense that the other students use is “I was just kidding,” when you call them out on their taunting. The best way to respond is to say, “Kidding means both people are having fun. Now that you know I’m not having fun, don’t do that again.”
- **Power Imbalance:** Bullying always occurs in the context of a power imbalance: an older kid against a smaller kid; multiple kids against a single kid; a more popular kid against a less popular kid; a privileged kid against a non-privileged kid.

When all the conditions of bullying have been met (repetitive, unwanted, power imbalance), a fourth condition usually develops – **fear**. The target fears the place where the bullying occurs.

Social conflict does NOT include a power imbalance. This is the major way in which it differs from bullying. In a social conflict, neither person is afraid to confront the other; neither person has the power to get bystanders to mistreat the other.

Conflict is a struggle between two or more people who believe they have incompatible goals or desires. Conflict occurs naturally as we interact with one another. It is a normal part of life that we will not always agree with other people about the things we want, what we think, or what we want to do. Most conflicts arise in the moment because people with the same relative amount of power see the same situation from two different points of view.

If a student confuses actual bullying with normal social conflict, they may not know when to ask for the right type of help. In normal social conflict -- where each student involved has relatively equal power -- it is best for students to work directly with each other to come up with their own solutions, and the adults should only provide advice as needed.

In actual bullying, however, adults need to actively intervene, because a power imbalance exists that limits the target’s ability to make the mean behaviors stop. Telling a traumatized student to make the bullying stop on their own is often asking the impossible.

Finally, it’s important to recognize that sometimes normal social conflict deteriorates into bullying when kids do not know how to resolve conflict by talking with each other respectfully about what is really the problem. For instance, instead of talking about her feelings of jealousy over a friend’s new crush feeling the same way, a student might start cruel rumors about the friend.