

The Difference Between Bullying & Conflict

(adapted from Frisco Public Schools)

Bullying is not a new phenomenon. It's been around since the beginning of time. Most adults can usually recall incidents of bullying from their own schooldays. Either, they were bullied, they were the bully, or they were the bystander. For most of us, it's not a pleasant memory. In addition, historically, bullying was thought of as "kids being kids," "it's normal behavior," or "they probably deserved it." Fortunately, in today's world, those beliefs have changed. There's nothing "normal" about people intentionally hurting each other and no one deserves to be bullied. It's deviant, destructive, and wrong. Due to this paradigm shift, schools across the country take proactive measures in responding to bullying.

It seems today that the media, and often educators, label any type of aggression or disagreement between people as bullying (i.e., if two students fight if one football team beats the other team too badly, if one student doesn't want to play with another student, etc.). However, many times, what is called bullying, is not bullying at all. For example, bullying is not actually about conflict or anger. You do not have to be angry at someone to bully them. Bullying tends to be more about arrogance, control, and power. It's the feeling that I'm better than you and I have a right to treat you this way. **All bullying is mean, but not all mean behavior is bullying.** So, if bullying is not the same as pure peer aggression or conflict, what is it?

What is Conflict?

Conflict is a struggle between two or more people who appear to have different 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 of the same relative amount of power see the same situation from two different points of view. Here are a few examples:

- Two students are on a committee together and they don't agree on how to decorate for a banquet.
- Two boys get into a fight after a rough play in a football game.
- Students disagree over who should do clean-up after a group project.
- Two girls get into an argument when they realize they've worn the same outfit to a party.
- Two students who used to be friends bash each other online daily.
- A girl wanted to attend another girl's birthday party, but she wasn't invited.
- Two boys argue over who could win in a fight between Batman and Superman.
- Girls on a drill team disagree over what routine they will do for a pep rally.
- A student athlete believes he/she should start and the coach doesn't.
- Students begin spreading bad rumors about each other, because they disagree on which band director is the best (e.g., last years or this years).

Think of some of the ways we describe people in conflict – "they were butting heads," "she gave as good as she got," "they were going back and forth at each other," "it was he said, she said." Both people are equally "telling their side of the story." In conflict, the incident is usually "two sided" – each student is being aggressive toward the other one. In bullying, it tends to be one sided. In a conflict, people may get frustrated and angry. Chances are the amount of emotion

each person feels will be relatively equal, because both are trying to get what they want. In the heat of the moment, one or both people's emotions can escalate into a heated conflict. We've all been involved in conflicts where we lost control and said something we later regret. People engaged in a conflict genuinely want the issue to be resolved. The "back and forth" that occurs is each person trying to make the case for what she/he wants. When one or both people have the skills to resolve the dispute so that both sets of needs are met, the same conflict between the same two people most likely will not be repeated. If not, conflict might possibly continue for a long time. In bullying, there's usually not a conflict or disagreement. One person or a group of people, are targeting another individual because they can. As stated earlier, it's about arrogance, power, and control.

Defining Bullying

At first glance, it might appear it would be easy to tell the difference between bullying and conflict. But, it's often not that simple. Whether school administrators decide that aggressive behavior is bullying or they decide that it is peer conflict, it is still problematic. and they will take steps to stop it. However, in order to differentiate between the two, you'll need to have a solid definition of what bullying actually is.

Most states require their schools have a definition of bullying in their school policy. There's often an "operational definition" which students could clearly understand and a more legalistic "statutory" definition.

According to the Oklahoma State Department of Education:

There is not a specific, widely-adopted definition of bullying. Although definitions of bullying vary, most agree that bullying involves:

- **Imbalance of Power.** People who bully use their power to control or harm and the people being bullied may have a hard time defending themselves.
- **Intent to Cause Harm.** Actions done by accident are not bullying; the person bullying has a goal to cause harm.
- **Repetition.** Incidents of bullying happen to the same the person over and over by the same person or group.

The following definitions are defined in the Oklahoma School Security Act to help recognize bullying behavior:

“Harassment, intimidation, and bullying means any gesture, written or verbal expression, electronic communication, or physical act that a reasonable person should know will harm another student, damage another student's property, place another student in reasonable fear of harm to the student's person or damage to the student's property, or insult or demean any student or group of students in such a way as to disrupt or interfere with the school's educational mission or the education of any student.”

“Threatening behavior means any pattern of behavior or isolated action, whether or not it is directed at another person, that a reasonable person would believe indicates potential for future harm to students, school personnel, or school property.”

Bullying has serious and lasting effects. Research has found bullying behavior causes increased mental health problems, increased thoughts of suicide, retaliation through extremely violent measures, decreased academic achievement, higher risk of abusing alcohol and other drugs, and truancy.

When does bullying become harassment?

There are two ways bullying can become harassment:

- 1) The Office for Civil Rights and the Department of Justice have stated that bullying becomes harassment when the aggressive behavior is based on a student’s race, color, national origin, sex, religion, or disability.
- 2) When the same person is repeatedly targeted by another student (or group of students).

Harassing behaviors may include:

- Unwelcome conduct such as: verbal abuse (i.e., name-calling, epithets, slurs, etc.)
- Graphic or written statements
- Threats
- Physical assault
- Other conduct that may be physically threatening, harmful, or humiliating.

In summary, let’s go over the major differences between Bullying and Conflict/Peer Aggression:

Bullying

- Aggression is one sided.
- No disagreement
- Imbalance of power

- One side enjoys interaction and the other doesn’t
- Not angry at the person

Conflict

- Both sides are aggressive.
- There is a disagreement.
- No obvious imbalance of power
- Neither side usually enjoys the interaction
- Often angry or frustrated the person

How Do I Make a Report of Bullying?

In our district, anyone has the ability to file an incident report. Each school site has a link to the District Bullying Prevention Policy and details on reporting specific to that site. Students are informed at the beginning of school, as well as periodically during the school year, how to file a report of bullying.

For more information, please visit: <http://www.mustangps.org/BullyingPrevention.aspx>