

Bullying or Normal Conflict? Helping Parents Tell the Difference

A painful peer problem is not automatically bullying, and using the right description helps adults choose the right response. StopBullying.gov defines bullying as unwanted aggressive behavior among school-aged children that involves a real or perceived power imbalance and is repeated, or has the potential to be repeated, over time.¹ Power can come from physical strength, popularity, access to embarrassing information, or other advantages that make it harder for the targeted child to respond on equal footing.¹ By contrast, CDC guidance notes that an argument or fight between students of about the same strength or power is not bullying.² That does not mean ordinary conflict should be ignored. It means the parent should first identify what actually happened. Ask about the history between the children, whether one child had more power, whether the behavior has happened before, and whether the child expects it to happen again. StopBullying.gov specifically recommends those questions when adults are determining whether a situation is bullying or something else.³ Avoid deciding only from a single word such as “mean,” “fight,” or “bully.” Write down concrete behaviors: threats, repeated teasing, deliberate exclusion, rumor-spreading, pushing, damaged property, or an argument in which both children participated. Then match the response to the pattern. Repeated aggression with a power imbalance calls for a bullying response and school involvement. A peer conflict may call for problem solving, boundaries, repair, or adult coaching. The goal is not to minimize either situation. It is to identify the pattern accurately so the child receives the right kind of help.

Did You Know?

- ✓ StopBullying.gov identifies three core features of bullying: unwanted aggressive behavior, a power imbalance, and repetition or the likelihood of repetition.¹
- ✓ CDC guidance distinguishes bullying from an argument or fight between students who are of about the same strength or power.²
- ✓ StopBullying.gov recommends checking the history, power balance, repetition, and the child’s concern that the behavior will happen again.³

Research Sources

1. StopBullying.gov. “What Is Bullying.”
2. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. “School Health Index: Glossary.”
3. StopBullying.gov. “Respond to Bullying.”

Bullying or Conflict? Five-Question Situation Check

Use this page to describe the behavior first, then decide whether the pattern fits bullying, peer conflict, or another concern.

Child's name: _____ Date: _____

People involved: _____ School setting: _____

1. Describe the Behavior - About 2 Minutes

Write what was said or done without using labels such as bully, victim, or drama.

What happened: _____

2. Check the Power Balance - About 2 Minutes

Ask whether one child had an advantage in strength, popularity, information, status, or group support.

Power difference: _____

3. Check Repetition - About 2 Minutes

Record whether this has happened before or whether your child reasonably expects it to happen again.

Pattern/frequency: _____

4. Look at Participation - About 3 Minutes

Note whether this was one-sided aggression or a disagreement in which both children had relatively equal power.

What I noticed: _____

5. Choose the Adult Response - About 1 Minute

Decide whether to coach conflict skills, document a pattern, or contact an appropriate school adult.

Next step: _____

What Parents Can Say: "Let's describe what happened, check the pattern and power balance, then choose the right next step."