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Helping Children Deal with Teasing

Teasing cannot be prevented, and children cannot control what others say; however, they can learn to control their own reactions. Parents can teach their children the simple strategies listed below that will empower them and reduce feelings of helplessness. When children realize that there are effective strategies that they can use in teasing situations, their coping skills are strengthened.

Self talk

Encourage children to think about what they can say to themselves when they are in a teasing situation. A child could say to himself/herself, "Even though I don't like this teasing, I can handle it." A child should ask himself/herself, "Is the tease true?" Often it is not. Another important question is, "Whose opinion is more important...the teaser's or mine?" It is also helpful for the teased child to think about their positive qualities to counteract the negative remarks.

Ignore

Displays of anger or tears often invite more teasing; therefore, it is often effective for children to ignore the teaser. The child, who is being teased, should not look at or respond to the teaser. Children should try to pretend that the teaser is invisible and act as if nothing has happened. If possible, walking away from the teaser is encouraged. Parents can role play "ignoring" with their children and praise children for their excellent "acting". It should be noted that ignoring might not be effective in prolonged teasing situations.

The "I" message

The "I" message is an assertive way for children to effectively express their feelings. The child expresses how they feel, what has caused him/her to feel that way, and what he would like others to do differently. For example, a child could say, "I feel upset when you make fun of my glasses. I would like you to stop." This strategy generally works better when expressed in a more structured or supervised situation, such as a classroom. When used in other situations, such as recess or on the school bus, it may lead to more teasing when the teaser perceives the child being teased is upset. Nevertheless, it is an easy skill to teach children to help them deal with many situations. The child should learn to make eye contact, speak clearly, and use a polite tone of voice.

Visualization

Many young children respond well to visualizing words "bouncing off" of them. It provides them with the image of not having to accept or believe what is said. Showing how a ball bounces off a person can create this image. Another effective visualization is for a child to pretend they have a shield around them that helps the teased and bad words bounce off. Again, this technique gives children the message that they can refuse these put-downs.

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Reframing

Reframing is changing one's perception about the negative comment; it is turning the teasing into a compliment. For example, a child teases another about his/her glasses, "Four eyes, four eyes, you have four eyes." The child being teased could politely respond, "Thanks for noticing my glasses!" The teaser is usually confused, especially when there is not a reaction of anger or frustration. Another child might respond to a tease by saying, "That is a great put-down!"

Agree with the facts

Agreeing with the facts can be one of the easiest ways to handle an insult or tease. The teaser says, "You have so many freckles!" The teased child responds, "Yes, I have a lot of freckles." The teaser taunts, "You are such a cry baby." The teased child can answer, "I do cry easily." Agreeing with facts usually eliminates the feeling of wanting to hide the freckles or the tears.

Respond to the tease with a compliment

When a child is teased, it is often effective to respond with a compliment. For example, if a child is teased about the way he/she runs, they can answer, "You are a fast runner."

Use humor

Humor shows that little importance is placed on the put-downs or mean remarks. Laughing can often turn a hurtful situation into a funny one.

Ask for help

At times, it is necessary for a child to seek adult assistance or intervention if the teaser is persistent. This strategy generally works better when expressed in a more structured or supervised situation, such as a classroom. When used in other situations, such as recess or on the school bus, it may lead to more teasing.