



Dear Parents:

When your children leave their tease-free-zone of the Summer in the Park Program, they will take with them many important lessons and techniques for the Don't Laugh at Me project. The primary goal is for them to understand that they can create no put-down zones in their own environments, whether, school or home. They have gained an awareness and taught the language to reject teasing and bullying, and they have had some opportunities to practice with assorted tools. We would like to share some of these with you, in the hopes that you can help them continue this grassroots campaign to uproot uncaring behaviours and plant the seeds of cooperation and compassion. It is not an overnight change - it is a process that takes hard work and determination. Together, we can help generate a more caring culture.

The roots of bullying, taunting, teasing, and other uncaring behaviours in children are complex. According to Laura Parker Roerden, author of the Don't Laugh at Me guide, many children simply are reflecting a society where these behaviours have been modeled for them and even encouraged - on television, by their peers, perhaps even their families and by other important adults in their lives. "For these children, teaching a repertoire of alternative, more skilful behaviours is important. Other children are passing on the hurt they have experienced – bottled up now into unresolved feeling of grieving, fear, anger or sadness. These children need help releasing these feelings in a caring setting. All children, as well as their targets, can get stuck in patterns of passing on their own hurt to others for many years. They need caring adults to help them break out of these roles."

I encourage you to ask your school district to obtain the school curriculum for Don't Laugh at Me which can be obtained on the Operation Respect website or by contacting me. In the meantime, you can help construct a ridicule-free zone in your own home. Here are some tips from the guide book for preventing name-calling and bullying: Establish a range of consequences for bullying behaviour. This may include needing to do something kind for the person they hurt. Encourage and affirm your child when he/she demonstrates kind, helpful behaviour.

If you suspect that your child is being bullied, tell him/her what you have noticed. Make sure you explain that it is not his/her fault if other children are picking on or excluding him/her. Encourage your child to tell you how he/she is feeling and then help the child to role-play ways to respond to bullies. Make sure your child knows to tell you if the bullying happens again. If you think your child is bullying others, describe what you have seen. Let him/her know that you care and want to help him/her learn how to treat other children in a kind and caring manner. Explain and enforce the consequences.

In order to set your child up for success, it is important that children learn about the healthy expression of feelings. Help them build a feeling vocabulary by defining words that describe feelings, and make sure to give words for positive emotions at least twice as often as negative ones.

Talk about feelings throughout the day, and reflect children's moods. You can help your child make the connection between feelings and behaviour by noticing and giving words to their moods and feelings

("You look like you're feeling happy today. Did anything special happen" or "Your tone of voice sounds angry, I wonder why?")

Model—show children how to label and express feelings by naming your own feelings. Provide outlets and strategies for children when they are frustrated, overexcited, angry or sad. Allow them to choose (with your guidance) cooling-off activities or set aside quiet places for them to be alone.

In order to encourage caring, compassion, and cooperation, you need to provide examples. Children often hear adults use words like "helpful, responsible or cooperative", but they do not always understand how these concepts translate into practice. You can demonstrate these concepts through role-plays with puppets (for young children) or create and post charts that list what each of these values look and sound like (for older children).

Give positive feedback by looking for opportunities to comment positively on examples of cooperation as you see and hear them. Name the problem, discuss the behaviours that make cooperation difficult - whining, quitting, interrupting, or arguing. Role-play behaviours that make cooperation easier.

Do make sure that your correct misbehaviour. Be directive when necessary, but offer your child a way to get back in. (I'll know you're ready to work again when you tell me you can be quiet".)

Creative conflict resolution is essential. Here are a few techniques:

*Give starters: try giving neutral and non-blaming starters to help children talk about conflicts as they arise ("I saw that you were fighting with Susie over the puzzle.")*

*Paraphrase: help focus the conversation towards resolution ("So you were trying to tell Marvin to stop taking all the toys, and he wouldn't stop. That must have been very hard. What happened next?")*

*Validate Feelings: children need some validation of their feelings before they can solve a problem in a safe and structured way. ("So you were feeling angry and frightened...")*

*Give time to cool off: don't try to solve problems with children when emotions are still running high. Give them a chance to cool off first.*

*Promote creative solutions: Help children find creative solutions. ("What would you do if this happens again?" or "What could you do now to make this situation better?")*

The key is to empower children. Help the offended child stand up for her/himself. Support the hurt feelings and give suggestions of words to say ("I'm proud that I'm a girl and I can play whatever game I want to.") At the same time, it is equally important to empower children to respect differences in others and refrain from thumbs-down behaviours. Together we are building a more caring children who will grow up to be ethical and compassionate citizens. The Don't Laugh at Me program provides that point of inspiration.

Here's to thumbs-up behaviours!!!!

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