

## **JACK'S CORNER**

**QUESTION:** How can I talk to my 7-year-old son about the difference between bullying and regular conflict with his classmates?

**ANSWER:** Regular conflict, although not fun for a 7-year-old, is an integral part of socialization and maturing. In a sinful and fallen world, kids have to learn to be flexible, give and take, compromise, take turns, shake it off and reconcile. Conflict provides much of the opportunity to learn and internalize these social skills. Kids learn different skills at different times in their lives as they emotionally and spiritually mature. Keep in mind that both bullying and regular conflict look somewhat different at different ages; both become more sophisticated with age.

True bullying normally has three components: (1) Bullying is repetitive and consistently targets a specific victim. (2) Bullying involves a power differential where one person lacks the ability to defend himself. The power imbalance might be because of sheer size and strength, or because of emotional and cognitive skill or capacity. (3) Bullying is usually characterized by very unequal levels of emotional display. The victim is quite distressed and upset, whereas the bully demonstrates little emotion or empathy. Also, be aware of the differences between how girls and boys bully.

When talking to a child, it is best to use many specific examples and have the child determine which is bullying (Where the child requires help from an adult.), and which is a conflict opportunity to grow in social development. Role-playing is a great way to help children remember the differences and create ways to handle the different situations. Your conversations with your son will have to be on-going. There is no one-time vaccination to fix struggles in the day-to-day relationships of a kid's life.

Conflicts also give children opportunities to live and demonstrate their Christian faith. Sharing, taking turns, compromise, sacrifice, talking it out, "turning the other cheek", forgiving, prayer and reconciliation should be part of regular conflicts.

Bullies and bullying situations are handled differently within the context of Christianity. The question to be asked is: “What is the best way to really love a bully?” A bully requires the “strong” side of love. The goal should be to stop a bully from continuing in sin. A bully needs accountability, monitoring, limits, boundaries and a chance to learn empathy and new ways of interrelating. Christian love shows itself in these ways with bullies (e.g. “turning the other cheek” doesn’t work well with bullies).

You will need to work and pray with your son so he can discern which situation he is experiencing, so he knows how to handle it. If it is regular conflict, he can learn to reason, compromise, share, take turns, walk away, work it out, or “go the extra mile”. If it is bullying, he can learn to ask for help right away, get out of the situation if possible, assert himself, think ahead to avoid, use humor at times, develop a greater self-confidence and become less of a target. Make certain you keep in regular contact with his teacher.

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