

Is it Rude, Is it Mean, or is it Bullying?

Why we all must learn to distinguish between rude, mean, and bullying behaviors

(Taken from Publication written by Signe Whitson, L.S.W. in *Passive Aggressive Diaries*, 11/2012)

Rude = Inadvertently saying or doing something that hurts someone else.

From kids, rudeness might look more like burping in someone's face, jumping ahead in line, bragging about achieving the highest grade, or even throwing a crushed up pile of leaves in someone's face. On their own, any of these behaviors could appear as elements of bullying, but when looked at in context, incidents of rudeness are usually spontaneous, unplanned inconsideration, based on thoughtlessness, poor manners, or narcissism, but not meant to actually hurt someone.

Mean = Purposefully saying or doing something to hurt someone once (or maybe twice.)

The main distinction between "rude" and "mean" behavior has to do with intention; while rudeness is often unintentional, mean behavior very much aims to hurt or depreciate someone. Kids are mean to each other when they criticize clothing, appearance, intelligence, coolness, or just about anything else they can find to denigrate. Meanness also sounds like words spoken in anger—impulsive cruelty that is often regretted in short order. Very often, mean behavior in kids is motivated by angry feelings and/or the mis-guided goal of propping themselves up in comparison to the person they are putting down.

Bullying = Intentionally aggressive behavior, repeated over time, that involves an imbalance of power.

Experts agree that bullying entails three key elements: an intent to harm, a power imbalance, and repeated acts or threats of aggressive behavior. Kids who bully say or do something intentionally hurtful to others and they keep doing it, with no sense of regret or remorse—even when targets of bullying show or express their hurt or tell the aggressors to stop.

Bullying may be physical, verbal, relational, or carried out via technology:

- ***Physical aggression*** was once the gold standard of bullying—the "sticks and stones" that made adults in charge stand up and take notice. This kind of bullying includes hitting, punching, kicking, spitting, tripping, hair-pulling, slamming a child into a locker, and a range of other behaviors that involve physical aggression.
- ***Verbal aggression*** is what our parents used to advise us to "just ignore." We now know that despite the old adage, words and threats can, indeed, hurt and can even cause profound, lasting harm.
- ***Relational aggression*** is a form of bullying in which kids use their friendship—or the threat of taking their friendship away—to hurt someone. Social exclusion, shunning, hazing, and rumor spreading are all forms of this pervasive type of bullying that can be especially beguiling and crushing to kids.
- ***Cyberbullying*** is a specific form of bullying that involves technology. According to Hinduja and Patchin of the Cyberbullying Research Center, it is the "willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices." Notably, the likelihood of repeated harm is especially high with cyberbullying because electronic messages can be accessed by multiple parties, resulting in repeated exposure and repeated harm.

So, why is it so important to make the distinction between rude, mean, and bullying?

It is important to distinguish between rude, mean, and bullying so that teachers, school administrators, police, youth workers, parents, and kids all know what to pay attention to and when to intervene.