

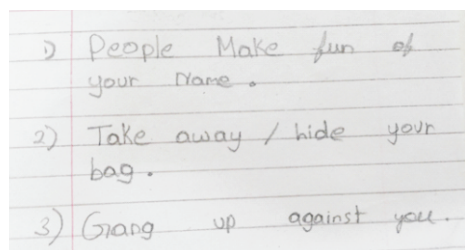


Culture that Matters

Karpagam S

As a class teacher in the middle school [Grades V, VI & VII] I have heard children rebuke one another during the class sessions, in the common school areas where they sit and chat while waiting for their bus, while they go pass staff rooms. Initially I thought children coming of age have this awkwardness in expressing themselves and so tease each other gently as a way and means to start and strike a conversation with their peers. But as a teacher I was always 'ears' to what language they are using to address each other, are they being very aggressive in their remarks and so on. At the same time equally I was on guard as to not to interfere too much at every single comment or mock as I felt that this is an important part of their growing up process and they need to go through it and stand up to it in their own way.

Feeling this way, I had also indicated to my children in different ways and during different sessions that I would be available if they needed me when they were unable to tackle any teasing they faced. As teachers we decided that we would speak to a few children who we felt needed this support separately when they are

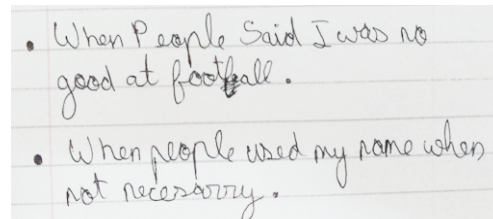


something went wrong. This was done so discreetly that they did not feel vulnerable by getting exposed in front of the whole class. We

also spoke to the children who are slightly dominant by nature and tended to take these talks or warnings lightly.

Once as I walked into my class I heard a part of a conversation between two children ending with, "Hey, today we have upma for snacks, yuck!" I just entered the class asking, "You don't like upma?" and turned around to the class. Everyone looked at one another and said, "Nothing like that, aunty"

[that's the way teachers were address



ed in the school I worked]. I told myself not to waste time on it and I continued my class. But I told myself that eating habits need to be addressed with children.

After a month or so, the dining hall manager complained to us teachers in the meeting that children flocked the dining hall for some snacks like pavbaaji, bhelupuri, sweet buns, fried items but did not enter for some snacks, like steamed food and other termed 'good-for-health' by adults.

One day I was told that by a child in my class that his father might be coming on that day to meet me. This child was known to be a kind, ever-loving and soft-spoken boy, as one of his classmates put it. In fact, I was planning to meet his parents to let

them know of these remarks passed by his peers. After lunch break, his father came as said and we met in the staff room. What he shared for the next couple of minutes was so shocking that I hardly

- you start making fun of people then you say "Kho-Kho is for girls -your- a girl -your- a girl"
- You start saying mean stuff
- You draw a picture and say it's you.

believed my ears.

He said that his son was becoming very violent

and throwing tantrums if he did not get what he wanted. Earlier he would choose his things but when his parents suggested he would immediately comply. Initially, the parents thought that he just wanted his own way. But within few months he seemed to want only expensive, branded T-shirts, stationery, shoes and socks and other sports equipment. He asked me whether I could talk to him confidentially about this new behaviour. Although I promised this parent that I would do the needful, wasn't sure what was happening.

Something of similar nature was brought to my colleagues' attention from their class students' parents. We did start noticing that children were wearing a particular brand and playing only a particular sport which they felt was superior. When we suggested some indoor games and other few sports they brushed it aside saying that it's a 'babies game'. We just put it down to growing up and copying their seniors.

Although we left it there, after a few more parents called, we had this nagging sense that we were missing something. We shared our experiences in a teachers' meeting and decided to find a solution after a discussion.

An opportunity was another parent asking us to speak to a child for a similar incident. Since it had come from a parent, I called the child and started by asking

- When they tease me about many things
- When they tease me about football
- Some people were teasing & hitting my friends

about his new shoes and whether he was

enjoying playing with them. The child told me he had not had a chance to play and he could not tell the teacher as he would be ostracised. Then it came out that all the children were copying each other, both about their things and the food. So a subtle bullying had started! This could lead to other things: it is widely accepted that ongoing bullying has harmful effects for all parties and if their behavior goes unchecked, children who act as bullies are likely to behave in anti-social ways when they leave school (Rigby, 2003). So we reviewed our initial idea of not interfering in the children's interaction with their peers and others and decided that intervention and guidance were necessary to let the children know the seriousness of the issue. We used the assembly to bring the matter up, with presentations on bullying. We needed to go slow, but at the same

People don't enjoy the joke. Or when the joke is about yourself or another person you like. Sometimes it becomes hurtful when a lot of people are joking about you, and the joke is something personal. When they joke about or tease you about something you can't help. An example is when somebody said something about my teeth, I mean I can't help that. What hurts even more is when somebody jokes about things that are untrue about you.

time let the children know of the seriousness of

the issue. We used our assembly and open house for opening up the issue. This also let the children bring up their viewpoints. Children wrote about the hold peer influence had on them. Research findings confirm that when students are given opportunities to discuss values explicitly, student well-being is enhanced, bullying is reduced and conditions for learning are improved (Lovat, Toomey, Clement, Crotty & Nielsen, 2009). We also discovered that the bullies themselves needed more help and support than their victims. They had been bullied and were doing the same in their turn. It began as light fun, but after a point they did not know how to stop. When they found they were not going to

be reprimanded, they came to us with their problems.

After one term of handholding, we knew it was time to empower them. We reflected on our own learning in one of the teachers' meetings and realised that the experience had enriched us. An enabling environment became more important than academics. Related research about the brain and emotions asserts that when students experience psychological safety, they are in a better learning state (Bernard, 1996; Goleman, 2006): creating a caring, collaborative and student-centred classroom provides the scaffolding needed for psychological safety and social and emotional understanding at school (Hart, 1992; Johnson and Johnson, 2003; Walberg, Zins and Weissberg, 2004). Providing the space for physical, psychological safety was our biggest task. Despite the numerous resources

available, we knew that this was a very sensitive topic for the child. This article merely gives a picture of our experiences. Here are some of the very valuable things I personally learnt from this experience:

1. Don't condemn – spend time in trying to understand a child's actions.
2. Talk to the parents, peers and teachers of the child in order to gain understanding. This is not gossip – it is valuable information about the child which is of relevance.
3. Take the parents into your confidence. They have a right to know and they have to take responsibility. They can help the process of socialisation, as well as learning to resist peer pressure and influences.
4. Keep a diary as a record of notes made on a day-to-day basis. The entries will help get objective advice and suggestions. It also helps in creating greater enablement.

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Karpagam is currently working in the Educational Leadership and Management team at Azim Premji University. She has worked for 12 years as Science, Social science and Environment Education teacher with KFI schools in various parts of India. She worked as a special educator working with children who have difficulty in spelling, reading comprehension and writing, involved in planning and creating alternative curriculum and materials to supplement their current levels of learning. She has a Master's degree in Psychology and Education and has post graduate diplomas in Managing Children with Learning Difficulties, in Guidance and Counseling. She loves doing origami and spending time with children. She can be contacted at karpagam.s@azimpremjifoundation.org

