

## IS IT RUDE, IS IT MEAN, OR IS IT BULLYING?

*Because Everything Isn't Bullying*



### **Rude vs. Mean vs. Bullying: Defining the Differences**

(Adapted from Signe Whitson, Author; Child and adolescent therapist)

Kids need to know how to get along with one another. We know that social skills are one of the leading indicators of future success. Kids need good role models, rules to follow, and kudos for kindness. But they are going to make mistakes. They are going to have mean moments. No parents want to admit that... but c'mon, admit it; you've said mean things too. Please understand, this is not a justification for being mean. There is no excuse for meanness, but there is a difference between a mean comment and ongoing harassment of an individual student. Both need to be dealt with, but perhaps differently. 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 belittle others. 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 misguided goal of propping themselves up in comparison to the person they are putting down.

**Rude = inadvertently saying or doing something that hurts someone else.**

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

Make no mistake; mean behaviors can wound deeply. Adults can make a huge difference in the lives of young people when they hold kids accountable for being mean. Yet, meanness is different from bullying in important ways that should be understood and differentiated when it comes to intervention.

Experts agree that bullying entails three key elements: 1) an intent to harm, 2) an imbalance of power, and 3) 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 = intentionally aggressive behavior, repeated over time, that involves an imbalance of power.** Bullying may be physical, verbal, relational (threat of taking friendship away) or carried out via technology:

***All three issues need to be addressed. However, when we use a term repeatedly as a catch-all for behaviors, the actual issues are not addressed properly. 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, how and when to intervene.***

\*excerpt from the 2015 Brown City Hand Book/Michigan Department of Education