

What's Right for Me?

Making good Choices in relationships



What every teen should know about

Teasing • Prejudice • Date Violence • Teen Sex
Bullies • Sexual Con Artists • Jealousy and Envy

And what you can do!

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Teasing

Has anyone ever made fun of you or something you've done? Have you ever been ridiculed in front of others? It stings like crazy, doesn't it? It probably made you mad or self-conscious. You may have wanted to cry. Other people can be cruel and what they say about us can cut like a knife.

Teasing and bullying (more on bullying later) are aggressive and hurtful behaviors. Both teasing and bullying can be torture to people who are the victims.

Lisa's Story

Lisa was overweight. She had always been the biggest one in her class, even in grade school. Her parents told her that she was just "big-boned," but that explanation didn't provide much consolation. Lisa wasn't athletic or coordinated,

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and she hated going to gym class. She felt like an outsider most of the time.

Lisa wasn't very attractive and boys rarely paid attention to her – except when they needed a target. Of all the students in her school, she got singled out the most as the butt of cruel jokes and name-calling. It became a sadistic game to everyone – seeing who could say the rudest and crudest things about Lisa. And they called her those names to her face.

These taunts upset Lisa terribly. It's no wonder she didn't feel good about herself. And it's easy to understand why going to school each day was a living hell for her. She didn't understand why everyone was so cruel to her; she had never done anything bad to them.

When kids made fun of her, tears would well up in her eyes and she would shake her head as if she could make the words go away. She would clutch her books tightly to her chest and try to get away as quickly as possible. Several times she had her eyes closed to keep in the tears and bumped into something. This only served as more ammunition for the other kids.

Sometimes guys would make kissing sounds and pucker up their lips. They would say sexual things to her, and then everyone would laugh like crazy. She thought they were all sick and disgust-

ing and wished they would just disappear. It hurt her badly.

Lisa often cried herself to sleep at night, thinking about what the kids had said. She remembered their sadistic faces and heard their sarcastic laughing and taunting. And she frequently woke up with red, puffy eyes, a trait that certainly didn't go unnoticed by her classmates the next day.

In geography class one Monday, the teacher was talking about the damage a recent earthquake had done in Peru. He showed pictures of smashed houses, crushed cars, and tons of rubble. One of the kids shouted out, "Hey, I know why. Lisa was just there on vacation! And she flew on a jumbo jet! Alone!" The class thought that was hysterically funny. Their laughter was still thundering in her ears as she ran out of the classroom and went home.

Lisa finished high school by taking a correspondence course at home. She didn't ever want to be around those kids again.

Why Do People Tease Others?

There are two things that seem to make teasing fun. First, some people like to "push someone's buttons." They find cruel enjoyment in saying and doing things that irritate, upset, or hurt

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other people. There's some kind of satisfaction in watching another person squirm or lose control. The more a person reacts, the more the teasing continues.

Second, whoever is doing the teasing gets an "audience reaction." Other kids laugh at the antics, and the teaser gets a form of peer approval and acceptance. It's a way to get a reputation within a group.

▼ *Words are like arrows. Once they're let loose,
● they do not return.*

Remember the old saying, "Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never hurt me"? But words do hurt when they are purposely used to make someone feel bad.

Teasing is only fun for the one doing the teasing. For the victim, teasing can hurt terribly, especially when it "strikes a nerve" – when the teasing zeroes in on something you are sensitive about. It's like the whole world is pointing a finger at you, laughing and mocking your shortcomings. You feel as if all of your flaws are being examined under a magnifying glass. When other kids see your embarrassment or discomfort, you become an obvious target for more teasing.

People who tease sometimes try to soften the blow. They may say, "I was just kidding," or "I

didn't mean anything by it," or "What's the matter? Can't you take a joke?" Don't you hate that? You know it's an excuse and a cop-out. The teasing words can't be taken back. In some cases, the teasing really may have started out as a joke, but if it hurts, it's no joke. If you've ever been a victim, you know how painful it can be.

Is there ever a time when teasing is okay? Maybe. Teasing between friends can be fun if each person knows that it's not done out of meanness or disrespect. Teasing can be a sparring match of words between you and your friends. You can have a few laughs and no one gets upset. Good friends should know how to "take it" as well as how to "dish it out." But not everyone has a relationship like that, and no one should be expected to put up with cruel teasing. Teasing kids you don't know very well goes beyond the boundaries of harmless fun.

Teasing can take various forms: calling names, gossiping, making jokes that exaggerate a part of a person's body or personality, laughing or pointing at another person, making faces, or whistling. Teasing can be direct, such as a face-to-face insult or put-down, or it can be much subtler. But when someone is singled out and made fun of, it's wrong.

The victim is usually someone who doesn't fit the "norm" for the group – someone who is

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bigger or smaller, less popular, weaker, less attractive, physically or mentally disabled, or who is of a different race or religion. The victim could be someone another person envies.

Sometimes a person can make changes to stop the teasing. For example, if someone is made fun of for poor hygiene, he or she can learn to shower every day and wear clean clothes. At other times, the things people are teased about can't be altered. You cannot change your race or a physical disability, for example.

Regardless of who the victim is or what the reason for the teasing is, when a person belittles another person, it's wrong. It's cruel and childish.

How to Respond to Teasing

There are several ways to respond to teasing; you'll have to find a way that fits your personality and situation. First, you have to have a serious talk with yourself. Convince yourself that you can keep your cool, no matter what someone says to you. Tell yourself that teasing is not going to get the best of you. You can develop a "tough skin" that makes the words bounce off you and fall harmlessly aside.

Given the notion that teasing continues because it gets you upset, your first goal should

be to take the sting out of the comments. Don't give the teaser the satisfaction of seeing you react. This isn't easy, but it often works. If the teaser doesn't get the desired reaction – meaning if you don't get upset or mad – it's likely that the fun of teasing will be taken away. Think of it this way: If there's no air inflating a hot air balloon, it isn't going to fly. The same is true when you don't allow the teasers to get a rise out of you.

▼ *One thing about silence – it can't be repeated.*

Find a way that doesn't feed into what the teasing is all about. If the teasing isn't too personal or doesn't last too long, maybe you can just ignore it. Smile and "play it off." You could say, "I don't like it when you put me down," and then just walk away. You could respond with humor by saying, "Thanks, I needed that." For example, if someone calls you "stupid." You can say, "No kidding. I don't have the brains God gave a crowbar." Sometimes a quick comeback can work.

If you can develop the art of handling the teasing without appearing upset, it takes a lot of the fun away from the teaser. You may have to try a different plan for different people. You will have to be patient; the teasing isn't going to stop right away. And it's absolutely vital that you stay calm so that your response will work. It's a good idea to practice what you're going to say or do if someone teases you again.

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You also have to convince yourself that, regardless of what the teaser says, you're a better person than he is. You don't have to lower yourself to that level. Don't tease the person in return. That's just asking for things to get worse. Feel good about yourself and the fact that you're sensitive and mature enough not to make fun of others' shortcomings. Any person who takes pleasure in teasing others is bound to make a lot of enemies. People can't step on other people's feelings for long and expect to be well-liked. Take some comfort in knowing that you're too good a person to sink to the teaser's level.

▼ *Big people talk about ideas; little people talk about other people.*

Even if you find a way to stop or reduce the teasing, it's quite likely that the words that were said will continue to bother you. If that happens, talk to someone you can trust. Talk to your close friends. If the teasing verges on cruelty and harassment, talk to a teacher, counselor, or your parents. Ask them for advice. Maybe there is a way to change whatever it is you always get teased about. Maybe there is an option that you haven't tried. If you feel bad about the teasing, remember that the people close to you can help ease the hurt. At times like those, it's nice to have comfort and support from people who care.