

Hecht: What a tease!

WNC Parent columnist Published 9:52 a.m. ET Sept. 28, 2017



(Photo: Courtesy photo)

I got in trouble the other day for teasing. After countless discussions with my young charges about how it's not nice to tease, I called a fifth-grade boy "brace face." Now I was in the hot seat, and if you think kids will go easy on the consequences for a perp like me, you are wrong.

An excited group of kids put their heads together to write a "behavior contract" for me to sign, requiring daily candy dispersal and no more homework time, that as I pointed out, would get me fired. (Luckily, this inspired them to hammer out a revised contract that would enable me to keep my job.) Later, a 10-year-old officiated as kangaroo court judge to decide on the matter. I lost the case, despite all efforts by my fourth-grade lawyer.

In the end, my consequence was to bring in special snacks starting with each letter of the word "braces." I spoke with the injured party to be sure he wasn't bothered by my calling him a "brace face" (he wasn't), but I apologized anyway.

The incident led to yet another discussion about friendly teasing versus hurtful teasing. We talked about how to know the difference and what to do when such teasing crosses the line. It's a topic that comes up often.

Kids can tease without realizing they are hurting others. It's important to teach them to recognize signs that someone doesn't feel good about what they are saying, like negative facial expressions and body language.

But kids will be kids, so learning how to deal with teasing early on can help, especially since as kids get older, "tattling" and adult intervention are less effective and can even make matters worse.

As a parent, I have been tempted to haul off and give a kid a piece of my mind on my child's behalf. Self-control is a good skill to have at those times.

To help kids deal with being teased, role-play possible responses and decide what will work for them, such as calmly ignoring the teasing or walking away, sternly telling the teaser to stop while looking him/her in the eye, acting disinterested, or responding back with a joke or clever comeback like, "thanks for sharing," "so?," "you're right," or "that's interesting."

Tell your child he/she "can handle it," and encourage positive self-talk like, "who cares what that teaser thinks anyway" or visualizations such as mean words "bouncing off" them, to instill confidence, which can stop teasers in their tracks.

And if your kid's the teaser, try not to jump to conclusions like, "my child's a monster" or "I have failed as a parent." Most kids tease others at one point or another. Instead, try to get to the root of the matter, whether it be jealousy, stress, insecurity, the need for more attention, someone teasing him/her, or just plain immaturity. Explain why the teasing is hurtful and ask what it feels like when the shoe's on the other foot.

When I was young, my mother would tell me, "If they tease you, it's because they like you." If that's true, these kids like me a lot; I am constantly being teased. Most of the time, it's all in good fun and I enjoy laughing with them about it. But occasionally, I have to demonstrate a serious, "I don't like that" type of response. Unfortunately, such occurrences don't typically end in my receiving tasty snacks.

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