

REPORT to PARENTS

RP 28:6

Verbal Abuse Slurs and Name-calling

It is far easier for teachers, parents, and playground supervisors to spot physical harassment than it is for them to notice something that can be just as damaging—slurs and name-calling. In reality, the phrase "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me" has little merit. Words truly can hit as hard as a fist, and unkind labels can follow children throughout their school years.

Don't allow labels in your home. Forbidding your children to use curse words is important, but it isn't enough. You also need to make sure they're not using ethnic, racial, religious, or sexual orientation slurs. Explain that using labels like these is insensitive and prevents them from seeing the person as an individual.

Talk about the cruelty some words convey. The phrase "That's so gay" has become a common slur among young children, although many don't understand the cruelty that is behind these words. Help children understand the pain that slurs and name-calling can cause.

Explain that being "different" isn't justification for being harassed. Although children have always picked on peers who didn't seem to fit in, today the abuse has become bolder and, in some cases, led to deadly beatings. Other children, long-term targets of bullies, have turned to violence—or even suicide—in a form of sick revenge. It is simply not acceptable for families or schools to allow the harassment of children for any reason at all.

Talk with them about false impressions. A girl who would rather play sports than play with dolls is not boyish or a lesbian; she's just a girl who would rather play sports. The same is true for boys who may not enjoy rough-and-tumble activities. Calling children names like "gay boy" or "queer," just because they choose to follow their own interests, is an ignorant choice and cannot be allowed.

Help them understand when words are okay, and when they're not. Some children may feel that it's okay to use a slur if they've heard it over and over from others. Help them understand the difference between a word that is being used as a put-down and a word that is simply a description.

Use non-judgmental terms. If children are curious about the terms "gay" and "straight," tell them that some people are gay, or homosexual, which means that they are attracted to people of the same sex, while most other people are straight, or heterosexual, which means that they are attracted to people of the opposite sex. Saying "my uncle is gay" (if he is) is simply a statement of fact. Calling classmates "gay" or "queer" simply to be hurtful is just as unacceptable as those old ethnic and racial slurs that have long been forbidden.

Pay close attention to how your children—and their friends—are behaving toward others and talk with them about how it would feel if they were the targets of name-calling.



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