

# A Leader's Guide to



Little  
Laugh  
& Learn™

# Ease the Tease



free spirit  
PUBLISHING®

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Illustrated by Steve Mark



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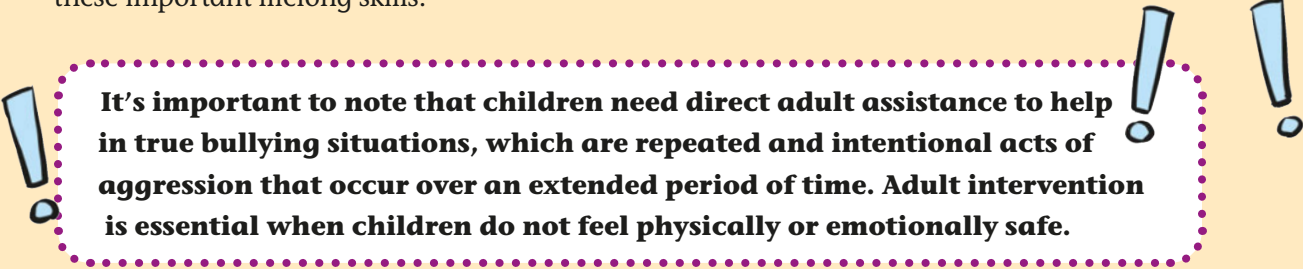
# A Note to Teachers and Caregivers

By the time young children begin school, they've likely been taught about "stranger danger" and learned safety strategies such as how to cross the street, how to get on the bus, and how to stand out of a swing's path on the playground. These strategies help alert kids to potential hazards and teach them simple "ounce of prevention" ways to keep from getting hurt. But all too often young learners are blindsided when they encounter hurtful words from their peers.

Kids are teased about anything and everything. No trait, characteristic, or situation is spared. Children are teased about how they look, what they can do or can't do, what their heritage is, who their family is, how they act, what they own, what they think, how they feel, and who their friends are. Individual differences or unique qualities or traits may invite comments and teasing from peers.

Teasing cannot be prevented. But while children cannot control what others say or do, they *can* learn to control their own reactions. When a child responds to teasing with an upset reaction, the teasing is likely to increase in persistence and intensity, and may escalate to bullying. Learning to **Ease the Tease** is a critical step in bullying prevention.

Most kids are able to successfully handle teasing, name-calling, and ridicule without adult help when they are equipped with practical skills and strategies. The strategies serve as coping skills because they focus on changing the reactions and feelings of helplessness of the child who is teased. When children are able to respond to teasing with tools and words that empower them to react quickly and confidently, they are not likely to become targets of bullying. Parents and educators can be instrumental in empowering young students with these important lifelong skills.



**It's important to note that children need direct adult assistance to help in true bullying situations, which are repeated and intentional acts of aggression that occur over an extended period of time. Adult intervention is essential when children do not feel physically or emotionally safe.**

The effectiveness and success of the strategies in *Ease the Tease* generally depend on children's comfort with and confidence in using them. Comfort and confidence develop from "the other 3 Rs": rehearsal, repetition, and review. Just as children benefit from reviewing math facts and spelling words, they will benefit from practicing these techniques. Frequent discussions and role playing foster and enhance children's successful use of the strategies.

The *Ease the Tease* strategies empower kids and reduce feelings of helplessness in teasing situations. Children will often try different strategies until they find the one that is the most effective to stop the teasing for them. If use of the strategies doesn't enable a child to stave off hurt from the teasing, it's important that caregivers seek advice and guidance from the school social worker or psychologist and/or the child's pediatrician or counselor.

# Helpful Hints for Teaching and Using Each Strategy in *Ease the Tease*

## #1: Use Self-Talk

When discussing the **Self-Talk** strategy with children, it can be helpful to explain that self-talk is what you say to yourself in your mind. To help children grasp the idea, ask them what they say to themselves in their mind when they prepare to cross the street, or when they're told to pack up at the end of the school day. Then give examples of tease-easing self-talk, such as "That's just their opinion, not mine," "I like myself because I'm a great friend and am good at art," and "I don't like teasing, but I can handle it."

Sometimes a quick self-talk sentence of "Is the tease even true?" can do the trick. Young children can be caught so off guard by hurtful teasing that they're distracted from the tease itself. In role play, ask the children what would happen if you meanly called them a washing machine. The humorous absurdity of the situation will help reinforce the message.

In particular, the self-talk "I'm not going to get mad or cry" has the power to prevent the "automatic" feelings of hurt that most young children feel. For all forms of self-talk, practice and repetition are important so that the child's first instinctive response to teasing is self-talk rather than anger and hurt.

## #2: Use Imagination Power

This strategy capitalizes on young children's abundant **Imagination**. It provides children with personalized "mental pictures" to help protect them from teases.

One mental picture that kids respond to very well is the idea that teases and put-downs bounce off them harmlessly. Another powerful image is a shield around their body that reflects the teases and bad words. Here are some other imaginative ideas, as created and described by elementary-age students:

*"I will hit the teases away with a baseball bat."*

*"I will sing the teases away."*

*"I am going to throw the bad words down the field for a touchdown."*

*"I love basketball and I will dribble the teases away."*

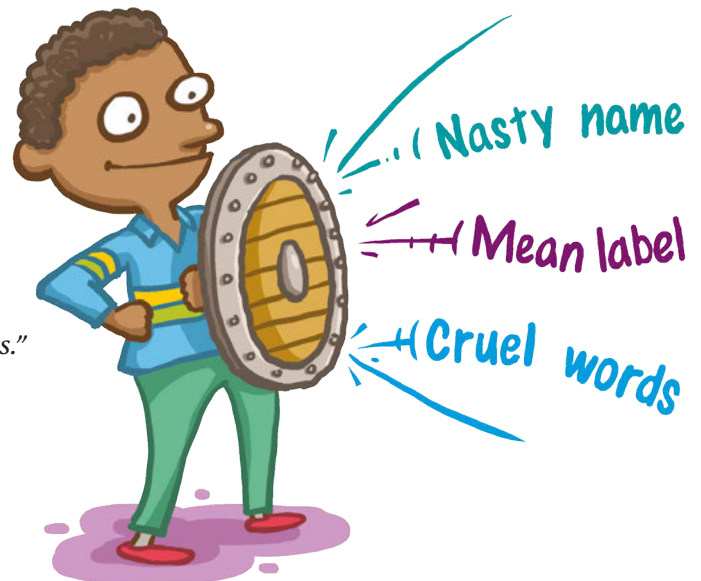
*"I will hit the teases away with my tennis racket."*

*"I will flip the teases away when I practice gymnastics."*

*"I will pretend that I am a magician and make the teases disappear."*

*"I will vacuum the teases away with my mom's vacuum cleaner."*

*"I can always flush the teases away down the toilet."*



It is important to emphasize that the mental pictures should not include any actions (especially violence) toward the *person* doing the teasing. Instead, keep the focus on children's imagined actions to deflect or defuse the teases themselves.

### #3: Ignore the Teasing

It's not surprising that many young children are caught off guard when they are subject to sudden, unprovoked attacks. They often don't know what to say or do, and staying in the situation may mean the teasing will continue or escalate. Kids are empowered when they learn they can walk away from a situation in which they feel afraid or unsafe—physically or emotionally.

**Ignoring** involves children removing themselves from the teasing situation. Whenever possible, kids should walk away and join other children. A teaser is less likely to continue the teasing in a crowd. If children are not able to physically leave the situation, they can still protect and remove themselves emotionally. Ignoring can involve not responding to or looking at the person doing the teasing and pretending the teaser is invisible. Some kids may pretend that they are interested in something elsewhere.

Young children benefit greatly from repeated practice with ignoring. In role playing with students, ask them to show you (without using words) how they look when they feel happy, sad, and mad. Point out the differences in body posture and facial expressions, including eyes and mouth. Ask students to demonstrate what ignoring looks like. (It can be helpful if the facilitator models this.) Remind children that it's important not to show how sad, hurt, or angry they might feel. Children should walk away from the teasing with their head held high and an upright posture. Sometimes young children will laugh or giggle during the role playing until they get the hang of it.

**Ignoring** is generally a useful strategy when kids encounter sporadic name-calling or the occasional needling by a classmate. However, ignoring may not deter teasers who are persistent in their efforts to upset their targets. In these situations, ignoring may in fact result in harsher or more intense teasing, at least at first. Students have reported that it is harder to ignore teasing that occurs on the school bus because they cannot remove themselves from the situation. Children should be prepared for the possibility that ignoring might not discourage or deter teasing immediately, especially if they have reacted emotionally in prior teasing situations.

Additionally, some children may do a great job of ignoring on several occasions and then all of a sudden blow up when they can't take it anymore. It may be helpful for kids to use self-talk as a reminder to stay cool, such as "I can outlast the teasing. I will not lose my cool."



#### #4: Say “So”?

“So?” communicates that a tease or put-down really does not matter. It’s like shrugging your shoulders. When children say “so?” it’s best to use an indifferent tone, not a sarcastic one. Some other effective responses are “oh, really?” “meh,” and “who cares?” Children often find this strategy to be simple, very effective, and even fun. This is one of the easiest strategies for young children because it is so simple to remember.



#### #5: Use an I-Message

An **I-message** conveys how the speaker feels, why they have these feelings, and what they would like the teaser to do. “I feel sad when you say bad things about my brother. I would like you to stop talking about him.” Using the word “feel” keeps children focused on reporting their emotional response to being teased. Giving kids a relatively strict prescription for the wording of their I-messages keeps them from drifting into “you” messages or acting out their hurt and anger, which rarely defuse teasing situations. While the prescriptive language can feel a bit awkward at first, young children will develop their own more natural wording as they get older.

It is important to encourage children to speak clearly and politely and to maintain eye contact with the teaser. Just as body language is a crucial part of ignoring, kids should be aware of how they look when they deliver an I-message. Do they look worried or self-assured? Remind them that erect posture conveys confidence. After kids are aware of how they look, they can focus on how they sound. What is their tone of voice? Are they speaking clearly and politely or are they mumbling, shouting, or whining? As with all the *Ease the Tease* strategies, practicing and role playing are the keys to success.

For I-messages to be most effective, they require the teaser to stop and listen. However, someone who is teasing is often so wrapped up in their script that they are not inclined to be good listeners. Therefore, I-messages tend to work best in structured settings where an adult is present, such as the classroom. In unstructured or less supervised settings, such as the playground or the school bus, the teaser may simply respond to an I-message with more teasing. When the teaser’s goal is to upset their target, hearing that the target is feeling hurt may lead to further taunting.

Caregivers and teachers can model the use of the I-message. Don’t forget that I-messages can also be used to praise or reinforce positive behavior.

*“I feel so happy that you came over to the table so quickly. Let’s do this again at dinnertime.”*

*“I’m very proud of this terrific class—everyone brought their assignments to me on time. Keep up the good work.”*

## #6: Agree with the Facts

One of the swiftest ways kids can handle some teasing situations is to **Agree with the Facts**. If a child is teased with “You have so many freckles,” the child can reply “Yes, I have a lot of freckles.” If a child is called a cry-baby, the child can respond with “I know I cry easily.” Many children find this to be a revelation. They are so used to immediately feeling defensive that they often don’t realize they can simply reply “Yes, you are right,” or “I know.” Many children are relieved when they realize how easy it is to agree with the facts. Other replies can be “You’ve got that right,” and “Yes, I do.”

This strategy works best in situations where the tease is about some physical or other innate characteristic. “That’s true, I can’t see anything without my glasses,” or “I know, math can be hard for me.” On the other hand, we do not advocate the use of this strategy if the tease is not true or if the child is not comfortable agreeing with the tease.

## #7: Take the Tease as a Compliment

**Taking the Tease as a Compliment** involves responding as if a tease is positive, rather than an intended insult or put-down. To take a tease as positive or compliment, a child simply responds with a statement such as “Hey, wow, thanks for noticing,” “I love getting all this attention,” or “I know, isn’t it great?” These types of responses usually surprise and discourage the teaser, who is often motivated by the desire for an upset reaction. This strategy aims to stop the teasing by catching the teaser off guard. It is not intended to humiliate the child doing the teasing. First and foremost, this strategy—like all others in *Ease the Tease*—is aimed at empowering the teased child.

Practice and advance role playing are beneficial to using this strategy spontaneously and confidently. Most children need a little clarification that this is accepting the tease *as if* it’s a compliment, which is a different tool than complimenting the teaser. Demonstrating examples of each strategy can illustrate their differences.



## #8: Use Humor

**Humor** is a great stress-reducer, and it can completely defuse a teasing situation. Children who are being teased can either respond by saying something funny, or they can simply laugh or smile. They can also respond with “That’s so funny. You make me laugh.” The person teasing, who is expecting an angry or upset response, is usually surprised when the reaction is humorous.

While humor can often be an effective way to ease the tease, we make an exception for truly demeaning, belittling teasing incidents. Bigotry, mocking of physical and mental disabilities, and similar cruelties are never laughing matters, and kids should not be encouraged to smile or in any other way make light of them.

## #9: Give a Compliment

**Giving a Compliment** catches the teaser off guard in the same way that Agreeing with the Facts does, but it takes agreeing one step further. The teased child is not only implicitly agreeing with the teaser but shifting the attention onto the teaser. What really takes the teaser by surprise, however, is that the attention from the child being teased is positive!

Most kids need a little clarification that this is responding to the tease *with* a compliment, which is different from taking the tease *as if* it's a compliment (strategy #7). Demonstrating examples of each clarifies the difference. Here are two examples of *giving* a compliment:

- A second grader who was being teased about her slow reading said to her classmate, "I *am* a slow reader. You are a great reader." This girl used the same strategy when someone commented about her soccer skills. She quickly said, "You are a great soccer player."
- A young boy who was teased about striking out in a baseball game told the teaser, "I felt bad that I struck out. I wish I could hit the ball as much as you do. You are a great player."

A child who is teased does not often feel like saying something nice to the person who just offended or insulted them. So practicing complimenting a teaser in advance will help kids understand how to pull this off and how this will catch the teaser off guard. Repeated practice and rehearsal will lead to familiarity, comfort, and confidence.

## #10: Ask for Help

It's important that children seek assistance or intervention when teasing is prolonged, when it occurs frequently, or if they do not feel emotionally or physically safe. **Asking for Help** or "reporting" in these situations is not "tattling." Reporting is when a child tells an adult that someone is doing something that is repeatedly upsetting or harmful. Tattling usually occurs when one child is trying to get another's attention or is attempting to get another child in trouble for a behavior that is not that significant.

Discuss with your students who they might approach if they need help to ease the tease. The list can include parents or guardians, teachers, playground supervisors, the principal, school social workers or counselors, grandparents, babysitters, and siblings. It is also important for children to remember that they can ask friends or classmates for help.





## Discussing the Book in the Classroom

Most young children are eager to talk about their teasing experiences. When classroom discussions begin, it is important to create a safe and positive climate. Rules should be established to ensure that students will demonstrate good listening skills, will not interrupt each other, and will show respect for classmates' ideas, opinions, and feelings. If a student laughs or is disrespectful toward a classmate, a teachable moment or on-the-spot intervention can be meaningful and valuable.

The atmosphere in the classroom changes when students are taught what to do when they encounter name-calling, ridicule, or put-downs. Many kids become less sensitive to being teased after a lot of practice and dialogue about it. Teasing is no longer a big deal for them. Theoretically, discussing teasing in the classroom on a routine basis will also create a norm that teasing is not acceptable or respectful behavior.

However, it's also important to remember that most teasing happens off a teacher's radar screen. These behaviors usually occur in areas of the school where there is little or no supervision, such as the cafeteria, the playground, locker areas, restrooms, and hallways. Many young children complain about teasing that occurs on the bus or in after school extended care programs. These are fertile grounds for teasing because they are generally unstructured and bring together kids of varying ages. That said, teasing also occurs in the classroom, especially during unstructured activities or free time. It may happen when the teacher is helping other students or talking to school personnel.

Kids who enjoy teasing know that is generally safest to engage in these behaviors when there is no adult authority around. It is similar to people who speed on the expressway when there is no sign of a state trooper or a photo-enforced speed camera. The ultimate solution is to equip children with a toolbox of ready responses so they can confidently ease the tease anytime, anywhere.



# Activities

Use the following activities to teach, practice, and reinforce *Ease the Tease* strategies.

## Activity #1: Right or Wrong?

This activity reinforces for children that hurtful teasing is wrong.

Teasing can take many forms, from playful and jovial to demeaning and hurtful, and all the way to hateful and abusive. It is helpful to explain to children that playful, friendly teasing involves having fun with someone. Friendly teasing causes everyone to laugh and smile. It is kidding and joking around. Many children are surprised to learn that joking around can be friendly teasing, because they generally perceive teasing as something that is inherently negative and hurtful.

Cruel and hurtful teasing includes ridicule, name-calling, put-downs, verbal insults, and gesturing, as well as annoying actions. This type of teasing occurs when a teaser successfully identifies a sore spot for the intended victim. Hurtful teasing sparks sad, angry, upset, afraid, embarrassed, or helpless feelings. It becomes harmful when it causes distress and pain for the child being targeted.

Unfortunately, there is no general rule for determining when teasing is likely to become harmful, because not all kids will take the same words, gestures, or other behavior the same way. If we view teasing on a continuum, there is affectionate and friendly teasing on one end and hostile and abusive teasing on the other. In the middle might be teasing that can be taken as either friendly or unfriendly, depending in part on how the teased child reacts. If the child reacts with self-assurance and humor and refuses to be intimidated, the teasing might either quickly end or turn into joking banter. If the teased child cries or reacts with anger, the teaser may accelerate the cruel behavior. Or if the victim reacts aggressively, the teaser might feel challenged and push the teasing toward the meaner end of the continuum. If the continuum is stretched further on the hurtful end, you have reached bullying.

Some experts view the difference between teasing and bullying as only a matter of degree. A key difference typically emphasized by experts is that bullying is characterized by its ongoing and persistent nature.

Students can respond to the following statements verbally or in writing, depending on their age and whether you want this to be an individual or class activity. In either case, it can be helpful to discuss children's answers and their thoughts about each statement. Which statements do they think are right? Which do they think are wrong?

### Right or Wrong?

- 1) \_\_\_\_\_ Teasing can be fun and friendly.
- 2) \_\_\_\_\_ Hurting someone's feelings is okay, especially if I don't like them.



- 3) \_\_\_\_\_ Over-and-over, on-purpose teasing is bullying.
- 4) \_\_\_\_\_ Teasers feel good when they make other kids feel bad.
- 5) \_\_\_\_\_ What hurts one person’s feelings might not hurt another person’s feelings.
- 6) \_\_\_\_\_ It’s okay to laugh at someone who makes a mistake.
- 7) \_\_\_\_\_ If someone teases me, it is okay to tease back.
- 8) \_\_\_\_\_ If you can’t say something nice, don’t say anything at all.

## Activity #2: Freeze the Tease

This group-practice activity invites children to use *Ease the Tease* strategies to resolve simulated teasing situations. It can be particularly helpful for practicing the more advanced “Ease the Tease with Surprise” strategies.

**Note:** This is a two-part activity, and therefore can be split over two sessions if you like.

In the first part, ask children for suggestions of realistic scenes in which a child might get teased. Offer an example such as “Three kids are sitting together at lunch. When one kid pulls out an egg salad sandwich, another kid says, “Ew, how can you eat that? It’s gross!” Write down the ideas on the board and/or on paper, especially if you plan to do this in two different sessions.

In the second part of this activity, select a scene and ask who’d like to be an actor in an *Ease the Tease* scene for the class. Solicit the required number of volunteers, describe the scene, and assign roles. For the above lunchroom example, instructions to the actors might be: “You’ll be playing three children sitting at lunch. Alison, you’re going to pull a peanut butter sandwich out of your lunch bag. Amanda, you’ll pull out a bag of chips. And Scarlet, you’ll open up an egg salad sandwich. Trouble is, Amanda’s going to give you a hard time about your sandwich.” The child who’s playing the teased one can demonstrate one of the *Ease the Tease* strategies when it’s their turn to respond to the tease, or they can call out “FREEZE!” and the other actor(s)



must freeze in place. Then the teased one can call on another child volunteer to take their place. The volunteer can then call out “UNFREEZE!” and demonstrate one of the ten strategies. The actors react to the chosen strategy and end the scene by resolving the tension.

## Activity #3: I Can Self-Talk to Ease the Tease

This activity spotlights the Self-Talk strategy.

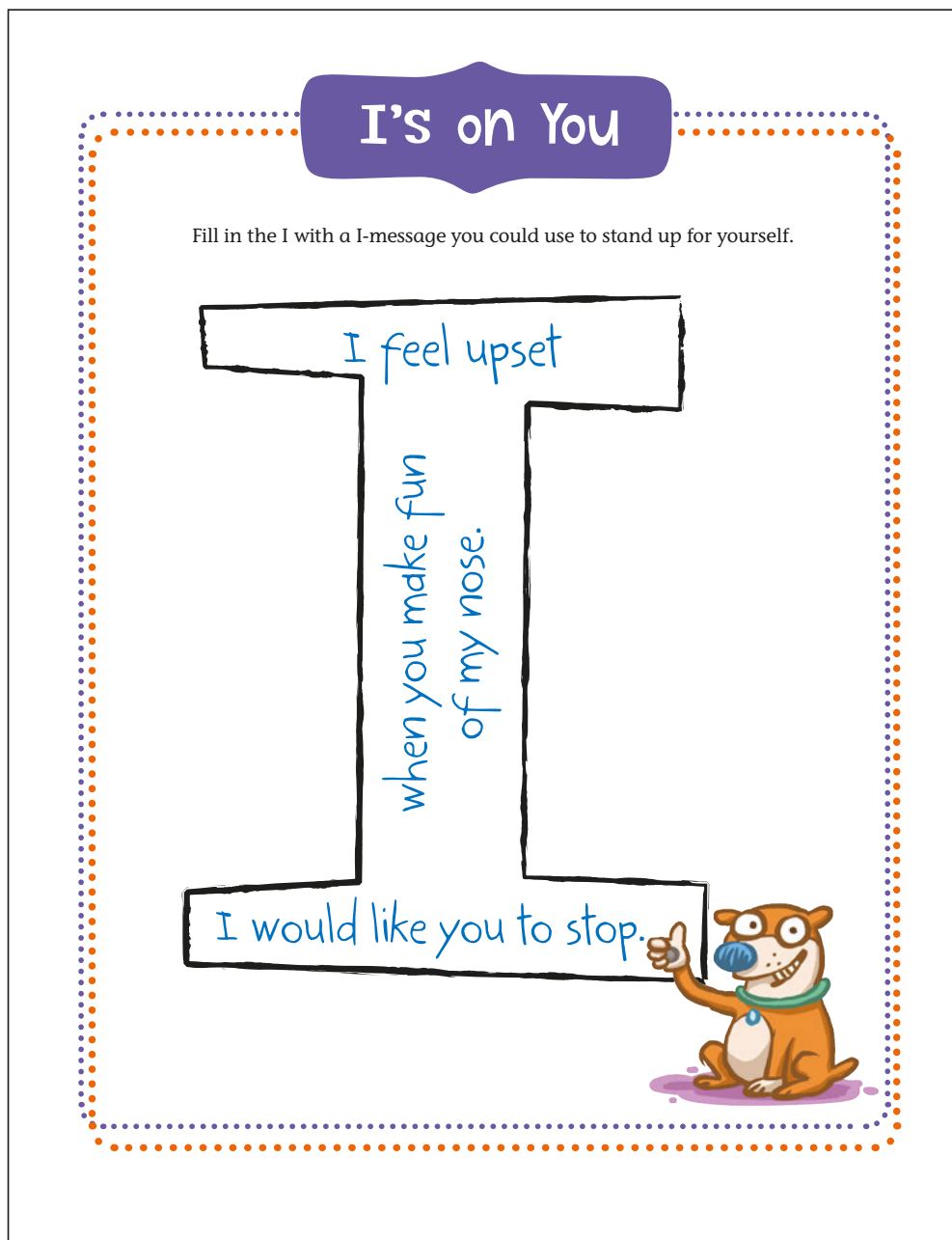
Ask children to draw a picture of something they can say to themselves in their mind when they’re teased. Invite volunteers to describe their pictures if they wish.

## Activity #4: I's on You

This activity spotlights the I-Message strategy.

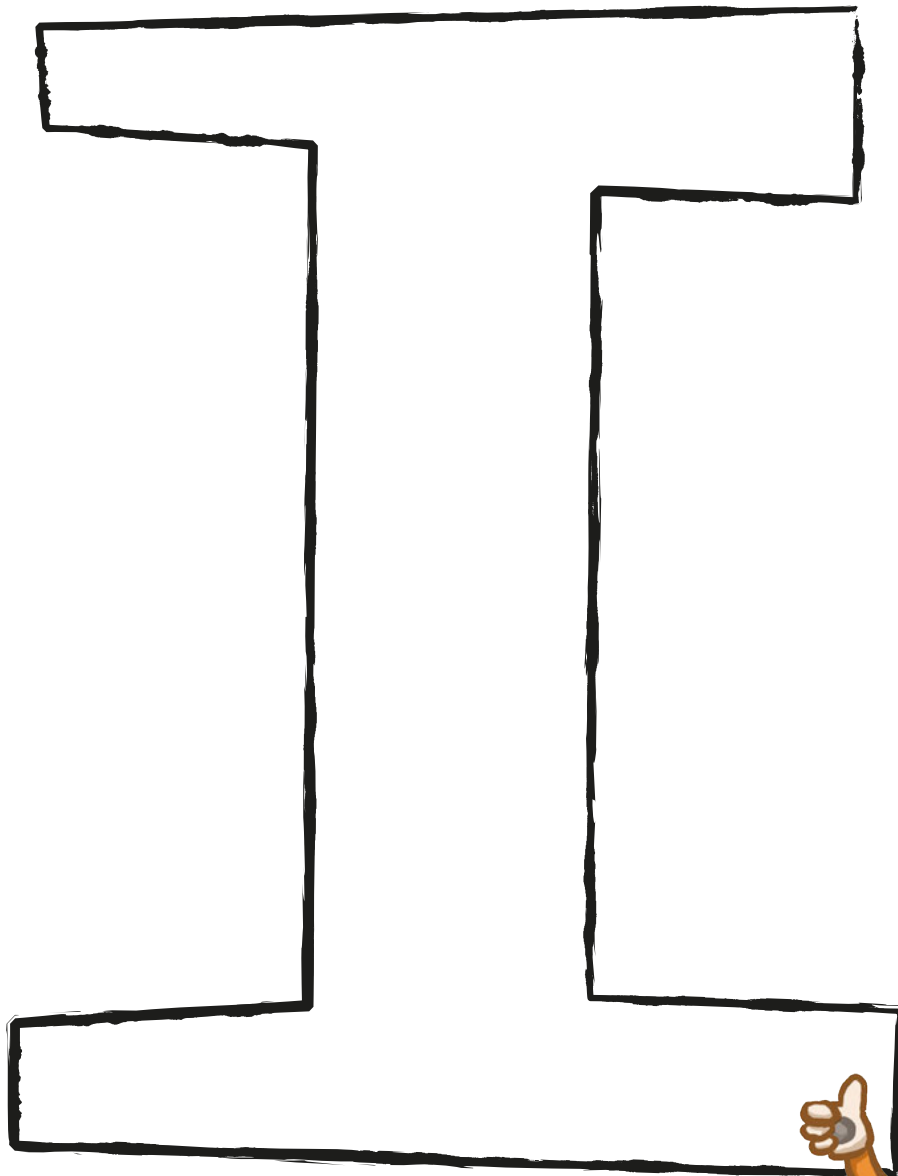
Ahead of time, make a copy of the I's on You form for each child. Children can cut out and decorate their capital I with I-messages they could use to stand up for themselves in teasing situations. (See the sample form below.) You may need to help some children with the cutting or offer guidance as they compose and write their I-messages.

Next, divide the class into pairs and instruct children to practice using their I-messages. Suggest scenarios to the pairs such as "Pretend someone in class keeps taking your pencil. What might you say to them?"



# I's on You

Fill in the I with a I-message you could use to stand up for yourself.



## Activity #5: What Would You Do?

This activity spotlights the “We-Message.”

There is power in numbers, and bystanders have the numerical advantage in most teasing situations. Even just one or two children taking a stand against teasing can make a huge difference. The “silent majority” (the bystanders who don’t like what is going on, but are reluctant or afraid to do anything) frequently follow suit.

Rehearsing and reviewing bystanders’ options and choices in a proactive manner empowers students and gives them confidence to effectively use them in real-life situations. We routinely prepare our children for fire and weather safety in schools; let’s prepare them for teasing safety as well!

A few examples of bystanders’ reactions include: “What you are doing is not respectful or cool.” “That’s so wrong!” “What you are saying is so mean.” or “Stop it!” If a bystander fears it may be risky to intervene, reporting the situation immediately to a trusted adult is the next step.

If kids can truly understand what it is like to be a target or victim of hurtful teasing, taunting, or bullying, they will more likely make a choice to intervene, offer support, or seek help.

Invite children to think about and offer answers to the questions below. If they need help getting the conversation going, you can prompt them with some of the ideas that follow.

*If you were being teased, what would you want others to do?*

*What choice would you make if you saw or heard someone else being teased?*

- Laugh with the teaser and think it is funny.
- Go along the teaser.
- Watch, but not say anything.
- Want to say or do something, but be afraid the teaser will say or do means things to me if I do.
- Think, “I am so glad that it’s not me being teased.”
- Ignore it, hoping it will stop.
- Stand up and speak out about what is happening.
- Use powerful words to stop the mean words. For example:
  - Why did you call her those mean names?
  - That’s mean to say.
  - Cut it out.
  - That is so not funny.
  - Making fun of someone is not the right thing to do.
  - It is not a joke unless everyone is laughing.
  - We don’t like it when you say those mean things. Please stop.



- Offer support to the person who is teased. For instance:
  - Stick up for them.
  - Say something to help them feel better.
  - Ask them to play a game with you at recess.
  - Give them a compliment.
- Do or say something kind, like:
  - Ask to sit with them at lunch.
  - Include them in an activity.
  - *I think you are cool. Don't listen to those mean things.*
- Report the situation to a grown-up.

## Activity #6: “WELCOME!” Class Poster

The classroom is an ideal place to discuss and implement rules related to teasing, bullying, and acceptance. It’s also an ideal place to proudly display a friendly, class-created visual reminder of the rules. In a nod to the “We-Message,” this activity plays on the fact that the word “welcome” begins with the word “we” as children create a “**WELCOME** to Our Classroom!” poster.

Ahead of time, write the word “**WELCOME**” at the top of a large piece of posterboard. Make sure the **WE** is larger than the rest of the letters. Under “welcome,” write “to Our Classroom!” And below that, write a few classroom rules such as the following:

*We respect each other.*

*We do not tease, exclude, make fun of, or bully others.*

*We include all students in games and activities in class and at recess.*

*We stand up for others who are teased, bullied, or excluded.*

**Note:** It is often beneficial for students to participate in the creation of these classroom rules.

Explain to students that the word “we” is the first part of the word “welcome,” and let them know that the poster is to remind both students and visitors that your classroom is a safe, no-teasing zone. Ask children to sign their names, put their handprint on the poster, or draw a picture of a happy face. Share a photo of the completed poster with parents in a newsletter or on a website.



## About the Authors and Illustrator

**Judy S. Freedman, M.S.W., L.C.S.W.**, a licensed clinical social worker, created the Easing the Teasing program, which empowers elementary-age kids with essential skills to handle teasing incidents. This was the basis for her parenting book *Easing the Teasing: Helping Your Child Cope with Name-Calling, Ridicule, and Verbal Bullying* (Contemporary Books/McGraw Hill). Judy received the Illinois School Social Worker of the Year Award in 2011. She lives in suburban Chicago with her husband.



**Mimi P. Black, Ph.D.**, is a psychologist, bullying prevention specialist, and actor. She has published articles on developmental psychology topics and given invited addresses on bullying prevention to school administrators, faculty, parents, and students. An on-camera and voice actor for many years, Mimi has also worked on both sides of the camera in the development of children's educational television programs. She lives in Chicagoland with her family.

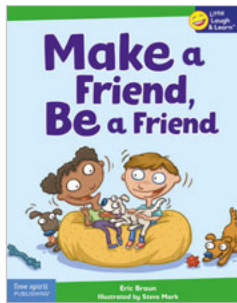


**Steve Mark** is a freelance illustrator and a part-time puppeteer. He lives in Minnesota and is the father of three and the husband of one. Steve has illustrated many books for children, including *Ease the Tease!* from the Little Laugh & Learn™ series and all the books in the Laugh & Learn® series for older kids.

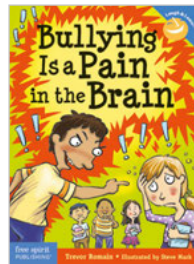




# Other Great Resources from Free Spirit



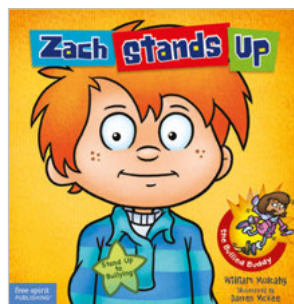
**Make a Friend,  
Be a Friend**  
By Eric Braun,  
illustrated by  
Steve Mark  
For ages 6–9. 88 pp.;  
PB; full-color; 6¼" x 8".



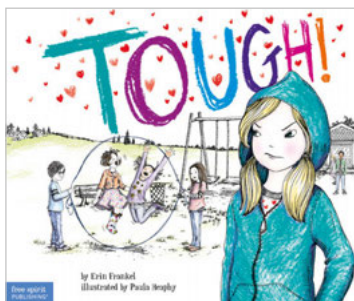
**Bullying Is a Pain  
in the Brain**  
(Revised & Updated  
Edition)  
by Trevor Romain,  
illustrated by Steve Mark  
For ages 8–13. 112 pp.;  
PB; full-color; 5½" x 7".



**Turn Away  
from Teasing**  
Kids Can Cope Series  
by Gill Hasson,  
illustrated by  
Sarah Jennings  
For ages 6–9. 32 pp.;  
HC; full-color; 10½" x 8¼".

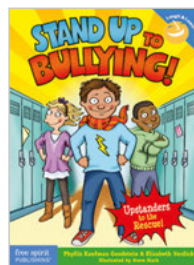


**Zach Stands Up**  
by William Mulcahy,  
illustrated by  
Darren McKee  
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