

## Stopping Small Classroom Cruelties Before They Escalate to Bullying

“Bullying typically does not emerge from thin air,” says author Caltha Crowe in this *Responsive Classroom Newsletter* article. “It starts with small, mean social behaviors, such as Missy’s whisper to Laticia as the children trickle into their third-grade classroom: ‘Your hair’s nappy. You’ll never get a boyfriend.’” These are “gateway behaviors,” says Crowe, and if they aren’t stopped, they can become accepted in a classroom. “Once that happens, children may quickly move from poking fun or smirking to openly calling classmates mean names and then to pinching, shoving, and excluding the targeted classmate from recess games or classroom conversations.”

The key is for the teacher to spot the gateway behaviors, nip them in the bud, and actively teach kindness. Crowe suggests the following:

- *Take time to notice.* Teachers should be on the lookout as students arrive in the morning, at lunch time (getting to the cafeteria a few minutes early is helpful), and during choice time, indoor recess, and independent work time.
- *Assess what you’re seeing.* “Are interactions between students good-natured joshing between social equals or true gateway behaviors?” asks Crowe. Watch for tone, mean jokes, rolled eyes, exclusion (who’s “in” and who’s “out”), and students who are often isolated.
- *Respond immediately.* “A quick response shows the child behaving meanly, the child targeted, and those nearby that mean behavior is unacceptable,” says Crowe. “When adults don’t respond quickly, conditions are set for mean behaviors to flourish.”
- *Be assertive but respectful.* “It’s important to model respectful behavior toward *all* students, including children who are being unkind,” says Crowe. “Disrespect, a harsh tone, or sarcastic words can escalate the mean behaviors you’re trying to stop.” She suggests short-and-sweet *remind and redirect* statements such as, “Our rules say to be kind; that statement was not kind. Try again.” Logical consequences are also appropriate if they’re delivered in a matter-of-fact, non-punitive way. They should always relate to the misbehavior – for example, having a child sit by the bus driver rather than with her friends for a few days, or asking a child who was bothering kindergarten students to help them put on their snowsuits before dismissal.

“Close the Gateway to Bullying” by Caltha Crowe in *Responsive Classroom Newsletter*, Fall 2012, [www.responsiveclassroom.org](http://www.responsiveclassroom.org)