



Acting like
a jerk is
one thing,
being cruel
is another.
Knowing the
difference
matters.

BULLYING IS...

a repeated pattern of harmful or rejecting behavior that occurs over a period of time, leaving you feeling excluded, isolated, or humiliated on a large scale. Your life feels seriously interrupted, and you can't see an end in sight.

DRAMA IS...

the everyday difficulties that all teenagers experience, including relationship **riffs** with friends or people you're dating, onetime instances of classmates being jerks, and conflicts that eventually blow over. People involved aren't victims or perpetrators—they're just part of the social world where mean things sometimes happen.



IS IT BULLYING OR DRAMA?

BY MELISSA WALKER

You missed a key shot in the basketball game last night, and this morning at school, there's a Post-it on your locker that says "Choker!" Then in math class, two teammates say you'd better step it up at practice, and kids whisper as you walk by in the hall. You feel kicked around and can't wait for the day to be over—but are you a victim of bullying?

"If bullying is every single mean thing that

happens, then there's nothing we can do to stop it," says Emily Bazelon, author of *Sticks and Stones: Defeating the Culture of Bullying and Rediscovering the Power of Character and Empathy*. But recognizing the difference between true bullying and everyday drama can help you brush off the little things, keep situations from **escalating**, and help you realize when something serious is going on—so you can step in and get help for yourself or a fellow student.

Turn the page and find out what the experts have to say about three cases where the truth isn't always black-and-white. 



CASE 1

GYM INTIMIDATION

Paul dreads going to phys ed. He's always been small and skinny, but now that he's in high school, the difference between him and other guys his age seems huge. A few of his classmates have started calling him "bird legs," saying that his chest is "concave" as he changes in the locker room. They also take every opportunity to knock into him or push him down during class. It's so brutal that Paul would rather serve detention than go to gym.

BULLYING OR DRAMA? If this happened once, says Jill Weber, a clinical psychologist in McLean, Virginia, it would just be drama. But since Paul is facing ongoing rejection and humiliation, it's definitely *bullying*.

WHAT TO DO: Paul could try being more **assertive**—kids who stand up for themselves don't get bullied as much. "Direct confrontation is the bully's kryptonite, because deep down they're scared and vulnerable too," says Weber. But this is physical intimidation, and if it gets bad enough, Paul should tell an adult. Since the gym teacher doesn't seem to be stepping in, finding another teacher Paul trusts is key.

CASE 2

OUT OF LINE ... ONLINE

Jess didn't think anything of it when she texted David, her friend Laura's crush, about the math homework. But when Jess went on Facebook later, her heart dropped. Laura and their friend Allie had created a "We Hate Jess" page, where they accused Jess of moving in on David. Jess's eyes filled with tears. How could her friends post such hateful comments?

BULLYING OR DRAMA? It's *both*. Laura and Allie feel they've been wronged, so they're not just targeting Jess for no reason. That's drama. But "the Internet has changed bullying," says Bazelon. When the drama between Jess and her friends goes public, anyone can join in—and that makes it a bullying situation.

WHAT TO DO: Bazelon notes that even friends sometimes act meanly. But as tempting as it is, Jess shouldn't respond online. Talking in person, on the other hand, is much more effective, because it takes the drama down a notch. Jess should contact Laura and Allie, or have a neutral friend do so, and then hear them out. Although it'll be hard, asking her friends why they did this and telling them how it has hurt her is important. "They will all probably be friends again," says Bazelon, "so Jess should try and talk it out."



IMAGE SOURCE/GETTY IMAGES (TOP); ISTOCKPHOTO.COM (BOTTOM)



**CASE
3**

IS MEAN ON THE MENU?

It's lunch period on Zach's first day at a new school, and he faces the cafeteria with absolute dread. His heart pounds in his chest as he walks slowly around the room, hoping that someone will look up at him and smile. Finally, he sees an open seat at a table with a group of girls and guys, so he asks if he can sit down. One girl stares at him and pushes the chair into the table. "No," she says. "There's no room." *Ouch.*

BULLYING OR DRAMA? Although that girl at the table is definitely a jerk, she'd probably do this to *anyone* who isn't part of her inner circle. So unless she continues to harass Zach in some way, it's a onetime brush with *drama*, says Weber.

WHAT TO DO: The cafeteria is a classic setting for this type of popularity-war drama, says Danah Boyd, author of the upcoming book *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens*—it's like a big stage where new kids are in the spotlight, and where mean kids can get the attention they crave. The best thing to do is to bite your lip, turn around and find a seat on the other side of the room. Sure, this drama stings, but remember: It's probably not personal—and it's temporary. ●

HOW TO STAND UP TO DRAMA AND BULLYING

If you see someone caught in a cycle of drama or bullying, there are lots of ways to help. Here's how to step up and step in.

1. LEND AN EAR

Often it's hard to intervene in the moment, but letting people who are struggling with bullying or drama know that they're not alone—that you get it—can have an enormous positive impact. If you don't know them well, even just asking "Are you OK?" can make them feel less distressed.

2. FIND HELP

If the problem is more than you can handle, be a friend—even if you don't know the victim well—and suggest that they talk to an adult. Ask if they have someone they trust, or steer them toward someone you know. Boyd notes that just "telling a trusted adult" is kind of random—you want to choose someone who you think can really help deal with what's going on.

3. CONFRONT THE TROUBLEMAKER

If you have a lot of confidence, be a role model and an upstander by defending the victim when an incident occurs. Make it clear that you don't agree with what's going on. Try saying something like, "You're being cruel, and it needs to stop." Then walk away with the victim and get out your superhero cape, because that's an awesome move!