Imagine your children playing during center time, when you hear some of them saying, “I don’t like the way you look” or “I don’t like your outfit—it looks dumb.” Statements like these may be related to the acts of bullying.

Bullying is defined as an act of aggression directed toward others (Ledley, Storch, Coles, Heimberg, Moser, and Bravata 2006). It is significant to consider the prevalence of bullying within preschool and the primary school years because this is a time when children’s social competence begins to soar, affecting their abilities to experience an array of emotions (Belacchi and Farina 2010).

The preschool years are critical in shaping children’s future development, especially their social and emotional maturation. As early childhood educators, we may find it beneficial to consider bullying further by specifically identifying types of aggression, which are related to the origin of bullying itself (Ireland and Power 2004).

It also may be important to gain a greater understanding of why children engage in bullying behaviors by identifying common characteristics of their personalities or home environments.

A list of recommendations appears below for teachers who may experience bullying within their classrooms or who want to prevent bullying before it begins.

**Types of aggression**

Two common types of aggression are related to the act of bullying: physical and relational (Ireland and Power 2004; Powell and Ladd 2010). Relational aggression is generally direct in younger children and tends to correspond to language development—a child needs sophisticated language skills to tell another, “If you don’t give me the truck, you can’t come to my birthday party.”

Indirect relational development, which primarily occurs during later childhood, is most often associated with girls (Powell and Ladd 2010). It’s relational aggression includes gossip, spreading rumors, or teasing without intentions of physically harming others (Ledley et al. 2006). Children may tease others for wearing a particular outfit, for instance, or gossip about their peers’ selection of playmates for a game.

**Characteristics of children who exhibit bullying behaviors**

Why do children engage in bullying behaviors? The reasons may include the following:

- **Children’s living environments.** More than half of all children who are aggressive or bully their peers are likely to come from homes where stability and nurturing are absent (Bowes, et al. 2009). In addition, approximately half of all children who engage in bullying come from abusive homes. These environments, in turn, may promote children’s display of aggression toward their peers.
Attachment. Attachment is defined as an emotional bond established between children and their parents (Bowlby 1988). Attachment is of two types: secure and insecure. Secure attachment is the child-parent emotional bond in which children’s needs are attended to and genuine care is established (Ainsworth and Bowlby 1991). Children raised by caring and concerned parents are less likely to exhibit aggression because they obtain a point of reference about how to show care or concern for other people (NICKerson et al. 2008).

Conversely, insecure attachment is defined as a lack of emotional bond established between children and their parents (Ainsworth 1985). Specifically, children whose parents are not active participants in their lives and do not exhibit care or concern for them are more likely to feel insecurely attached (Marini et al. 2006). As a result, these children are more likely to exhibit bullying behaviors because they don’t have a framework or point of reference for the ways to show care and concern for others (Marini et al. 2006; Monks et al. 2005; Smith, Twemlow, and Hoover 1999).

Traits of children. Children who bully others are more likely to externalize, or express their feelings in an outward manner, rather than internalizing, or holding their feelings inside (Powell and Ladd 2010). When angry, for instance, a child who externalizes feelings is more likely to scream and kick, while a child who internalizes feelings is more likely to be reserved. Research has also indicated that children who exhibit bullying behaviors are less likely to have optimal relationships with their siblings, which in turn may provoke or lead to a continuation of aggression toward others (Smith and Myron-Wilson 1998).

Tips for curbing bullying in the classroom
The tips below may help reduce bullying within the early childhood and primary grade classroom. Some of these tips may work, but others may not be appropriate for the group of children you’re with every day. Always try to maintain clear, consistent expectations and consequences to inappropriate behaviors.

- Help children regulate their emotions (Belacchi and Farina 2010). Help children learn to label their emotions. “Do you feel happy?” you may ask. “Do you feel sad?” Reading books that identify emotions might be helpful for providing children with an insight into what emotions are and how to label them. Examples of books include the following:
  - *I Love You Through and Through* by Bernadette Rossetti-Shustak
  - *The Invisible String* by Patrice Karst
  - *Mean Soup* by Betsy Everitt

Children who understand how to regulate their emotions may develop better social competence than children who don’t.

I DON’T LIKE YOUR OUTFIT, IT LOOKS DUMB.

- Assist children with understanding their emotions and how they may change through time (Belacchi and Farina 2010). Provide children with opportunities to engage in pretend or dramatic play activities that allow them to act out stories that involve changes in emotions due to the occurrence of life events. For instance, when considering the story of Cinderella, compare emotions at the beginning of the story when Cinderella feels sad, ostracized, and left out and the end when she feels joyful, celebratory, and vindicated. Another example of changing emotions is *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* by Judith Viorst. Invite tales of cranky commiseration and redemptive resolution from the children with the reassurance that we all have days like Alexander’s.

- Provide opportunities for children to learn that others may have different emotions than they do (Belacchi and Farina 2010). As you read a story to your class, for example, ask children how they feel about the events that happen. During this time, children should notice that others may have different feelings about the storyline.

- Design lesson plans that foster children’s participation in prosocial activities, while embracing various cultures and diversity within the classroom (Belacchi and Farina 2010). Prosocial activities can be anything intended to help others. You might ask children, for instance, to help another child clean up the area in which they were playing...
during free-play time.
To embrace diversity, you might ask children’s parents to bring a food dish to class that represents their culture. You might also invite children to act out roles of individuals that assist others, such as doctors or nurses or develop the practice of sending cards (by mail or electronically) to celebrate special family events.

Helping children develop social competence
Many factors may contribute to bullying behaviors and may begin to be apparent during the preschool years (Belacchi and Farina 2010). As early childhood teachers, we need to consider the factors related to bullying, while integrating activities that may reduce it within the classroom. These activities may greatly influence children’s social and emotional development as they mature.

References

About the author
Hannah Mills is a doctoral student at Texas Woman’s University in Denton, Texas, where she is pursuing a Ph.D. in early child development and education. Mills teaches child development courses at TWU and is involved with research projects about children’s resilience and adult’s perceptions about their roles as parents of hospitalized children. Before beginning her doctoral work, Mills was a preschool teacher.