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A STUDY GUIDE FOR PARENT GROUPS:  
THE FIVE CRITICAL STEPS FOR ADDRESSING PEER AGGRESSION

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# S.T.E.P.S.



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# Introduction

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*The single most important strategy for dealing more effectively with aggression is the day-to-day conversations we have with our children about their behavior and the options they have when things go wrong. There are no magic bullets to make our kids safe from aggression – no single strategy that will work every time. Every situation, every child, every family has to figure out what works best for them. So we talk. And we talk some more. We start as early as possible letting our kids know that our home is a safe place for these discussions. We use the everyday incidents of sibling rivalry, family conflict, lost tempers, misunderstandings, and peer episodes to talk and problem solve so kids learn over time new ways to address the things that hurt them.*

*-- Susan Wellman  
Founder, The Ophelia Project*

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Parents intuitively know when something is just not right with their children. They describe “off days” when “something is in the air,” and a child cannot focus or attend to anything. Many times this “something” is peer aggression. Parents often find themselves dealing with it without having all the information or strategies that they need. Very few parents have received specific instruction regarding what to do when their child is bullied, witnesses bullying, or is a bully. The primary goal of The Ophelia Project is to create safe social cultures, particularly in schools. However, schools need the support of passionate parents who are dedicated to expanding the safe social culture to their homes and promoting positive and healthy relationships.

As a parent, you may have already had the unfortunate situation of having a child involved in peer aggression. Your initial thoughts may have been:

- Who hurt my child and how will they be punished for it?
- My child would never hurt anyone!

These reactive statements reflect the responses of many parents when they learn their child has been bullied or accused of bullying. While it is necessary to appropriately address incidents after they occur, becoming pro-active is critical. Rather than reacting to incidents of peer aggression after they occur, you will learn strategies to create a culture that values cooperation, friendship, and true appreciation of diversity.

*The Five Critical Steps* in the following pages for parents describes a comprehensive approach to identifying peer aggression, naming the behaviors, and developing practical intervention strategies. Research tells us that you **CAN** change the social culture in your home. You **CAN** influence and change your children’s beliefs about moral conduct and how they treat others. As participants in this parent study group, we are acknowledging and responding to peer aggression, we are modeling pro-social behaviors to our children, and we are dedicated to creating safe social cultures.

# Step One: See Aggressive Behaviors

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*Being an observant, reflective parent is the key to creating a safe social climate in your home. Once you begin to observe your children's interactions and behaviors among their peers, you see with more clarity what was always present - overt and covert peer aggression. This step will help you become a more effective observer of aggression.*

## What is aggression?

**Aggression** is best defined as, "Behaviors that are intended to hurt or harm others," (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). What is important to note within this definition is that the behavior is *intended*. Aggression is a deliberate choice by an individual or group of individuals where the purpose of the action is to cause harm.

**Overt aggression** refers to the types of aggression that you can see or hear out in the open. This includes **physical aggression** (hurt or harm through bodily damage) and **verbal aggression** (communication intended to cause pain). Examples of overt aggression include:

- Hitting, punching, kicking
- Threatening physical harm
- Name-calling based on race, religion, gender or sexual orientation
- Verbal abuse including put-downs and sexual harassment
- Taunting

**Covert aggression** often occurs within a social circle. It is more subtle, 'under the radar screen', and requires careful observation. Almost all covert aggression falls under the title "relational aggression."

**Relational aggression** is hurt or harm towards others through the purposeful manipulation of and damage to peer relationships. Covert relational aggression can include:

- Excluding
- Building alliances
- Spreading rumors and gossip
- Covert physical aggression
- Cyberbullying

## STEP ONE

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WHILE THE FIRST STEP MAY SEEM TO BE THE EASIEST, IT IS THE MOST CRITICAL. WE ARE OFTEN TEMPTED TO JUMP AHEAD AND TRY TO SOLVE PROBLEMS ONCE WE RECOGNIZE THEM, BUT CAREFUL OBSERVATION AND REFLECTION ARE OFTEN THE KEYS TO LASTING CHANGES.

## What you will learn:

- Aggression can take many forms.
- There are levels of aggression and bullying.

## What you will do:

- Observe your children carefully to identify peer aggression.

## **Aggression is either overt, covert, or a combination of the two.**

All types of peer aggression are hurtful and harmful. Too often, peer aggression is written off as “boys will be boys” or “that’s how girls act sometimes”. Research shows, however, that peer aggression has a negative impact on self-esteem, one’s ability to form and create friendships, and one’s sense of belonging. All of these, in turn, have an impact on a child’s academic life.

The tool at the end of this chapter, *Examples of Peer Aggression Behaviors* (p. 7-8), is a checklist that includes specific examples of peer aggression. It can be used to bring to light the specific behaviors that often go unnoticed or are ignored, and, as a checklist, to help a group of educators or parents identify those behaviors that are most problematic in a school, a classroom, a neighborhood group of friends, or even family relationships.

## **Levels of aggression**

One of the most confusing things for parents is deciphering what is bullying or what is aggression. What is serious or what is not. When should I intervene, or when do I let kids work these things out among themselves. Sometimes, what appears to be a crisis is simply youth figuring out their boundaries and days (or minutes) later the incident is forgotten. It is helpful for everyone in your family to be able to discern the different levels of aggression.

There are four levels of aggression to look for as you complete your observations. The very lowest level, in fact, is not aggression but is often considered hurtful from the perspective of a target. The Ophelia Project uses the term **bummer** to describe a situation that is not particularly desirable, but is not aggressive in its nature. A person may feel like a target, but the perceived aggressor did not intentionally hurt anyone. In children, this often takes the form of jealousy. A sibling may be invited to a party and the other child is angry because he is not invited too. This does not mean the sibling is being aggressive. This also comes into play when students are perceiving fairness. Another student may get a sticker for a perfect homework assignment and a child who performed poorly may feel that the teacher is being mean to her for not giving her a sticker too. In these situations, the “aggressor” here has no intent of hurting someone.

Aggression, as stated earlier, is an intentional act to do harm. This is the second level. The third level is bullying. **Bullying** is often an over-applied word in relation to peer aggression.

According to Olweus (2008), bullying has three specific components:

1. Bullying is aggressive behavior that involves unwanted, negative actions.
2. Bullying involves a pattern of behavior repeated over time.
3. Bullying involves an imbalance of power or strength.

Many students, parents, and even school personnel have a tendency to call any act of peer aggression “bullying.” This, however, is only the first component of bullying. It is important to note that the aggression is not wanted or solicited by the target, and that this aggression is repeated. Tripping a student as he walks down the hall is not bullying. Tripping a student every day as he walks down the hall as a means of intimidation, on the other hand, is bullying. The difference is in the repetition and the implication that the bully has power or strength exceeding that of the person who is being bullied.

The final level of aggression includes **violence, abuse**, or extreme cases of bullying. This level includes when the situation:

- Is a threat to the immediate safety (physical or emotional) of the target and / or others
- Involves weapons
- Leads the target to contemplate hurting himself or others to end unwanted behaviors
- Is severe enough that legal consequences can be enforced upon aggressor

These behaviors are all of a high intensity and seriousness. They require immediate action, often in conjunction with other parents, school personnel, or law enforcement. As the levels of aggression increase, so does the need for **making it right**. The severity of **consequences** will increase as well. Making it right will be discussed in Step Four. See the graphics on pages 9-10 for clear examples of these levels.

### **What might be happening with peers?**

In order to zoom in on what is actually happening in the interactions between children, it is important to make the time to look. Here are some ways to begin the observation process: Observe your child's interactions with their peers: in the car, in your home, at school functions, and even online. Do not become overly invasive of their privacy, but at the same time be watchful of whom they interact with and what they do together. Listen intently without appearing to listen intently. Resist the urge to intervene. At this point, your role is to see and learn. We will work on intervention skills later, but for now, you need to learn simply to see and if you interrupt that process, you will never truly see everything you need to.

If you sense that your child is involved in an aggressive situation, observe his behavior carefully. What is really going on? Are his grades slipping? Is he avoiding school or other social areas? Is your normally talkative daughter becoming withdrawn and silent? When you begin to look for these behaviors, some of the more overt examples will be evident. Train yourself to look for the *covert* behavior. Carefully watch what your children do and what they say.

- Whom do they greet when they arrive at school?
- Whom are they talking about when they come home?
- Has a friend "dropped off the radar" and is no longer mentioned or played with?
- Has a new friend come into your child's life at the same time as a behavior change?
- Does your child want to stay online or on the phone more or less than usual?

### **What might be happening within the family?**

Aggression can be a natural reaction to a number of factors: stress, not getting enough sleep, not getting what you want, or feeling slighted in some way. Try watching these times of stress when they occur and see how your children handle their conflicts. Next try watching yourself and see how you handle stress and what you do. What behaviors are you and other adults in your child's lives modeling? How do you talk about people who are not present? What types of aggressive have you overlooked in the past?

**At this point, your job is to observe and not to intervene. The rest of this step lists specific types of aggression and examples of what behaviors you will see as you become more observant. When you are confident that you can see aggression, you are ready for Step Two.**

# Examples of Peer Aggression Behaviors

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## Exclusion (Relational Aggression)

- ❑ NOT inviting someone and letting everyone know
- ❑ Talking about an event/party someone wasn't invited to in front of them
- ❑ Forming cliques
- ❑ Walking away from a conversation like you lost interest
- ❑ Turning your back on someone just as they approach
- ❑ Physically "boxing" someone out of the conversation
- ❑ Suddenly not acknowledging a friend without telling them why
- ❑ Saving seats so peers have to leave
- ❑ Using clothes to distinguish one group and exclude others.
- ❑ Preventing someone from sitting at the lunchroom table

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## Building Alliances (Relational Aggression)

- ❑ Making friends choose sides in a fight
- ❑ Requiring friends to drop other friends in order to be included in your group
- ❑ Spreading gossip as a means for being accepted into another alliance
- ❑ Getting others to agree with you and act against someone else behind their back
- ❑ Using lies and confidential information to get others mad at someone or to stop liking someone

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## Rumors and Gossip (Relational and Verbal Aggression)

- ❑ Spreading rumors, gossip or sharing confidential information, especially sexual information
- ❑ Spreading lies to get even with someone you are mad at
- ❑ Getting someone to tell you their secrets so you can pass them on
- ❑ Saying "Don't tell" as an invitation to tell everyone
- ❑ Using gossip used to elevate your own status
- ❑ Organizing three way phone calls as a way of gossiping, or tricking someone into divulging personal information

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## Physical Aggression

- ❑ Shoving and pushing to show dominance or disdain
- ❑ Knocking into someone, "by accident"
- ❑ Knocking books out of someone's hands or off someone's desk
- ❑ Tripping someone "by accident" as they walk down the aisle in the classroom or in the hall
- ❑ Jabbing someone in the arm
- ❑ Putting your arm around someone like you are friends, while issuing a put down
- ❑ Tapping someone on the arm or back to annoy them



## Verbal Aggression

- ❑ Pretending to compliment someone you don't like
  - ❑ Calling attention to differences in size, clothes, accomplishments etc.
  - ❑ Being "nice" as a joke
  - ❑ Teasing someone about clothes or looks or athletic ability
  - ❑ Sharing secrets suddenly in class
  - ❑ Gay bashing in any form
  - ❑ Sarcasm
  - ❑ Telling all your friends something negative about a friend and still pretending to be friends to her face
  - ❑ Using "insider" information to make someone look like a loser
  - ❑ Making innuendos
  - ❑ Pretending to tease someone when you are not. Saying, "just kidding" like the other person cannot take a joke.
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## Cyberbullying

- ❑ Using the Internet, e-mail, or IM to spread rumors or say hurtful things
  - ❑ Sending anonymous e mails as a way to spread rumors
  - ❑ Cutting and pasting parts of emails and sending them to other people
  - ❑ Flaming (writing insults in a public area of the Internet)
  - ❑ Cyber-stalking
  - ❑ Upsetting a friend by telling him/her that someone has posted a hurtful message on line
  - ❑ Forwarding a confidential e mail to someone else
  - ❑ Posting pictures on the internet to embarrass someone
  - ❑ Creating a web site and posting rumors, photos or information in order to hurt someone
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## Levels of Aggression and Bullying

### Violence, Abuse, or Extreme Bullying:

*May include one or more of the following:*

- 1. Is a threat to the immediate safety (physical or emotional) of the target and / or others*
- 2. Involves weapons*
- 3. Target contemplates hurting self or others to end unwanted behaviors*
- 4. Legal consequences can be enforced upon aggressor*

These examples represent very intense and serious behaviors. They may be aggression or bullying, but all require immediate action.

### Bullying:

*Includes ALL of the following:*

- 1. Aggressive behaviors that are unsolicited by the target*
- 2. Aggression is repeated, often with increased intensity*
- 3. Imbalance in power or strength by the aggressor over the target*

Aggression tends to be isolated incidents while bullying describes a pattern of behaviors that repeatedly hurt a target.

### Aggression:

*A behavior intended to hurt or harm others.*

Can be physical, verbal, relational, or cyber. Each situation involves a target, an aggressor, and may also have bystanders.

The big difference between aggression and a bumper is the intention to do harm.

### Bumper:

*A situation that is not particularly desirable but is not aggressive in its nature.*

A person may feel like a target, but the perceived aggressor did not intentionally hurt anyone.



**Intensity of the aggression,  
the consequences and  
the need to make it right**

## Examples of each level:

### **Violence, Abuse, or Extreme Bullying**

- Someone is physically hurting you to a great extent that requires medical treatment.
- You have begun to seek counseling to deal with the emotional pain of bullying or abuse.
- You are threatened with weapons or violence.
- You cut yourself or contemplate suicide because you are depressed as a result of bullying.
- The police have intervened because someone has been hurting you so badly.

### **Bullying:**

- Everyday someone excludes you and refuses to let you join games, sit at a table in the cafeteria, and do things after school with a group of other friends.
- Your older sibling repeatedly taunts you, calls you names, and has started pushing and shoving you too.
- Someone at school has been spreading rumors about you and frequently writes nasty, anonymous messages about you on social networking sites.

### **Aggression:**

- A friend is invited to go to someone else's house after school and tells you that you cannot go because they do not like you or want you around.
- Your older sibling calls you a baby because you have to come home earlier in the evening.
- Your friend does not call you and lies saying she has too much homework to do but called another person instead and was gossiping about you.

### **Bummer:**

- A friend is invited to go to someone else's house after school and cannot hang out with you.
- Your older sibling gets to stay out later than you do.
- A friend forgets to call you one evening because she has a lot of homework to do.

# Step Two: Teach the Language of Peer Aggression

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*As we become better observers, we will see many opportunities to process what is going with our children. Dinnertime or bedtime is often a good place to talk about what may have happened that day with your child or with their friends. Any time can be a time to talk about aggression. This step will give you the words to talk about what you have been observing more effectively.*

Having the vocabulary to describe the dynamics of an incident and to explain the emotions and thoughts that relate to one's experience brings the covert to light. The language of peer aggression is a powerful tool that enables us to begin to address this issue. School counselors state that they spend less time finding the underlying cause of a social problem because children, who know the language of peer aggression, are able to describe the dynamics of the problem. In this step, we identify key vocabulary to create clear understanding of how to accurately describe aggression and those involved with it.

Understanding and using the vocabulary enables parents and children to:

- Communicate about social dynamics and conflict
- Become better observers of their own actions and the actions of others
- Report a problem or ask for help

As you become more familiar with this language, you can decide what words you want to introduce, the vocabulary that is appropriate for the ages of your children. Consistency is key; whichever words you choose, make sure you and your family all know what they mean and use the same words to describe the same behaviors.

## The roles in aggression

Aggressive situations have two primary roles: the aggressor (the person choosing to hurt or do harm) and the target (the person who is being hurt). These roles in overt aggression are relatively easy to identify. Covert aggression needs a much keener observation as the aggressor often takes specific care to obscure their actions through manipulation.

## STEP TWO

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LANGUAGE IS POWER.

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### What you will learn:

- There are three roles in aggression: aggressor, target, and bystander.
- You can use language to determine what is and is not aggressive.

### What you will do:

- Teach the roles in aggression to others.
- Create vocabulary for your home.

We all can easily recognize aggressors and targets; we also recognize how they play out in the dynamics of aggression. Many parents, however, fail to see the power and immediate need for recognizing the third role in an aggressive situation: the bystander who is the key to addressing aggression in schools. Often called a “kid in the middle,” a bystander is neither aggressor nor target, but instead stands witness to the aggressive event. In the home, your child will encompass each of the three roles fluidly so it is imperative to learn how to address aggression from each viewpoint.

The role of the bystander is a critical one. When an incident occurs, how the bystanders respond to both the aggressor(s) and the target(s) will influence the outcome. When the bystander(s) support the aggressor, they empower him and condone aggressive actions. When they support the target, they strengthen her while drawing power and attention away from the aggressor. The bystanders who support targets move into a different role called an upstander. The **upstander** comes to the aid of a target and stops the aggression.

How effective is an upstander? Consider the following research based conclusions about the power of the bystander:

- The Ophelia Project found that only 15% of bystanders intervene in an aggressive situation. However, when they do they are successful over 80% of the time and often within the first 10 seconds. We call this the “15-80-10 rule.”
- Most bullying situations last for an average of 29 seconds. When a bystander intervenes, this amount of time is reduced to 7 seconds (Breakstone, Dreiblatt, & Dreiblatt, 2009).

## Use the language

Language allows us to give a name to what may be brushed off or ignored. We can now identify the roles in aggression, but we need a clear way to speak with children to help them determine what exactly what is and is not aggressive.

Often, there are fine lines between what is appropriate and acceptable, and what is not. Much depends upon who is involved, where it is happening, the relationships that already exist, and individual temperaments (some have tougher skins than others do). Children need opportunities to draw distinctions for themselves and practice their understandings in the safe environment of the home.

To reinforce with your children the difference between what is aggressive behavior and what is acceptable behavior, you can create opposite word pairs. The following chart will walk you through this process. We will use these word pairs in Step Four as part of a teaching tool called a “continuum.” For now, use the language to help your children understand that there are options in their behaviors. The phrase, “He made me do it,” can be erased from your household when you help your child realize she can choose a behavior opposite to one of an aggressor.

<b>Process:</b>	<b>Example:</b>
1. Ask your child: What am I seeing that I do not like?	<b>Parent:</b> “It looks like you are having a bit of a problem with your brother. What is going on?” <b>Child:</b> “I did not want him to touch my stuff. So, I called him a baby and said he can’t play with my stuff. He is just a stupid baby.”
2. Give a name to this behavior that is meaningful and easily understood by your child.	<b>Parent:</b> “That is called <u>taunting</u> and it is aggressive. It hurts another person.”
3. Next, ask: What is the opposite of the unacceptable behavior? What is it that you want to see?	<b>Parent:</b> “What is a way that you could tell your brother to leave your toys alone without <u>taunting</u> and calling him names?”
4. Give a name to this behavior as well.	<b>Child:</b> “I could say please do not touch my things. If he does it, I can come tell you.” <b>Parent:</b> “You’re right. These are ways to handle things without being aggressive. And sometimes we can joke around with our words and not be mean. That is called <u>teasing</u> . It is all in good fun, like when you don’t hit the baseball and I call you Striker.”
5. Discuss that these words are opposites. For every misbehavior, there is a good behavior that we want to see. We make choices every day as to which behaviors we will use and which we will not use.	<b>Parent:</b> “Sometimes it is ok to <u>tease</u> someone, when everyone knows you are just having fun and the person being <u>teased</u> can laugh. But if someone does not like being called a name and feels badly, this is called <u>taunting</u> . Do you understand? <u>Teasing</u> is ok, <u>taunting</u> is not.”

## Becoming a Natural

Now you have the language you need to talk to your child about aggression. You can label aggressive behaviors, and just as importantly label a behavior that promotes a more positive choice. When your child is involved in aggression, use the language for the roles to define what each person is doing and the title we assign to each person involved. The language of peer aggression empowers everyone to clearly describe what they are seeing and leads right into the next step of defining the behaviors that you WANT to see. We will do more with the opposite word pairs in Step Four and use them as a tool for resolving conflict. All of these words are tools. Like any word, any phrase, the more you use it, the more it becomes a natural part of your vocabulary. Soon, you will not be able to think of any other to describe what you are seeing, but for now you need to make the conscious effort until you become a natural.

## Roles in Aggression

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# Step Three: Emphasize Positive Norms

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*We begin instilling our family norms and values into our children very early. Whether consciously or unconsciously, we teach our children right from wrong and how we want them to behave. It is hard work. Think of how many repetitions it took for you to teach your children “please” and “thank you.” The more you are aware of your values, the easier it will be to reinforce them for your children and your family. There are always gaps between what we want to do and what we end up doing. This step will help you find the gaps.*

**Normative beliefs** are expected or accepted guidelines for behavior. To change the culture in a home, everyone needs to agree on a set of pro-social normative beliefs. These normative beliefs (norms) are based on the premise that every one of us participates in creating a safer family climate.

## **Beliefs predict behavior**

A major effort of The Ophelia Project is to change normative beliefs and thereby change behavior. The more that people believe that certain behaviors (such as sarcasm, taunting, excluding, humiliating) are acceptable, the more likely they are to use those behaviors and to tolerate them in others. As we intentionally replace negative peer aggressive behaviors with pro-social normative behaviors, the climate of the school begins to transform into a kinder, supportive environment. The pro-social norms of The Ophelia Project are found below. Encourage your children to offer other examples.

## **Defining Your Family’s Norms**

Work together with your children to figure out what norms you want to support in your home. You may want to simply adopt the Ophelia Project norms (on the following page) or decide what fits your family’s traditions, personal style, and philosophy. Brainstorm what your children like and dislike in social interactions. Add your own observations and values to this process. Then decide together which guidelines your family will follow to create a home where kindness and caring flourishes.

# STEP THREE

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A MAJOR EFFORT NEEDED TO CREATE A SAFER HOME IS TO CHANGE NORMATIVE BELIEFS OF CHILDREN AND ADULTS REGARDING AGGRESSION AND CONSEQUENCES.

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## **What you will learn:**

- Normative beliefs are expected or accepted guidelines for behavior.
- Rules are created to enforce or support norms.

## **What you will do:**

- Create a list of normative beliefs for your family regarding peer aggression.



Let your children know, clearly and specifically, how you expect them to behave. For example, what does ‘be respectful’ look like, sound like, and feel like? Children can act appropriately and create a safer social climate when they know what these behaviors really look like.

Ask your children these questions to help define your norms:

- How do you like to be treated by others in this family?
- Are there things we do in this family that make you feel hurt or uncomfortable?
- What do we do in this family to make you feel safe, valued, and supported?
- Who supports this family?
- What do you hear and see that makes you happy when you are with your family?
- How would you like to feel when you are with your family?
- What things do you say to let your family know that they are important to you?

### Norms vs. Rules

Listing positive norms and expectations is the first step toward changing the culture of your home. The next step is to create **rules** that enforce the normative beliefs. Notice that the beliefs themselves are not rules; your normative beliefs are positive affirmations that assert your expectations for behavior. Rules are in turn used to reinforce the norms. Observe the differences below:

Normative Beliefs of The Ophelia Project	Corresponding Family Norm	Supporting Rules
Aggression is everyone’s problem.	We all get upset or mean sometimes but we all can help each other deal with it.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do not be aggressive.</li> <li>• Do not allow others to be aggressive.</li> </ul>
We treat everyone with respect and civility.	We are nice to each other.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do not put other people down.</li> <li>• Use manners.</li> </ul>
We are each accountable for our actions.	We own our actions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do not lie or blame others.</li> <li>• Admit to your mistakes.</li> </ul>
After we make a mistake, we make it right.	We apologize if we hurt someone.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Say you are sorry if you hurt someone.</li> <li>• Repair anything you have broken.</li> <li>• Make an effort to not hurt someone again.</li> </ul>
Adults help us deal with aggression.	My parents (grandparents/ guardians/ etc.) can help me when I am angry or hurt.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tell me if someone is hurting you, if you have seen others hurt, or you are hurting someone else.</li> </ul>
We protect each other.	We do not let others hurt members of our family.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stand up to people who hurt your family.</li> <li>• Let other people know that you love your family members.</li> </ul>

## Sample Family Norms Contract

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**We, the \_\_\_\_\_ family, believe the following positive norms:**

- 1.** \_\_\_\_\_
- 2.** \_\_\_\_\_
- 3.** \_\_\_\_\_
- 4.** \_\_\_\_\_
- 5.** \_\_\_\_\_

**We agree to try our best to support these norms. If anyone makes a mistake, they will make it right, serve a consequence, and try harder to avoid the mistake again. This is how we learn to follow norms.**

**Signed:**

# Step Four: Practice Pro-social Skills

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*We all have a “bag of tricks” for handling our children’s problems. The secret to being an even more effective parent is to identify teachable moments in your child’s daily experiences with aggression and find ways to embed skill building into life. Children try on all of the roles of aggression, as do adults. In an ideal world, we would like to take a stand when the situation warrants, protect all children who are targets, and teach aggressors to learn from their mistakes and make it right. When you see an opportunity to reinforce norms, or teach one of the skills in this chapter – take it. Teachable moments allow children to not only learn a skill, but also learn the proper context in which to use the skill. This step will provide you strategies for emphasizing specific pro-social skills in your home.*

## Using continuums to help children recognize their own behaviors

Sometimes, children truly do not understand the severity of their actions. When does sharing a story become gossip? When does teasing turn into taunting? What is the difference between being in a friendship group and a clique? There are often subtle differences between what can be acceptable and not acceptable depending on whom our children are interacting with.

You will recall in Step Two that you learned how to create opposite word pairs to describe acceptable and unacceptable behaviors. Now, you can turn these into a tool to help your children understand how they and others interpret peer aggression. At the end of this step, you will see an example of a continuum called “Teasing vs. Taunting.” Notice that the acceptable behavior is on the left. This area is shaded green symbolizing that is acceptable to “go.” On the right is the unacceptable behavior, taunting. This behavior needs to stop so it is shaded in red. Between these two terms is a gray area. This represents the points where behaviors are hard to distinguish. Was that statement meant to hurt, or did the person still think we were just having fun? Sometimes a target interprets a statement to be hurtful when the aggressor thought that he was still being playful. When behaviors turn hurtful, this is “crossing the line.”

# STEP FOUR

1	2	3	4	5
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PARENTS CREATE THE SOCIAL CLIMATE IN THEIR HOMES. THEREFORE, THEY CAN INTENTIONALLY CREATE ONE THAT FOSTERS PRO-SOCIAL BEHAVIORS.

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## What you will learn:

- Skills to work through aggressive situations with your children including:
  - Continuums
  - Upstander strategies
  - Making it right
  - The parent protocol
  - Role plays
  - Options grids
  - Compromise

## What you will do:

- Practice using the skills with your children.

What is hard for children to learn is that the line is fluid from person to person. An overweight person may have a very small green area for teasing about their body. A very self-confident person may have a smaller red area and be able to laugh off many playful statements. Helping your children determine where the line lies for themselves can then lead them to determine where the line may lie for others with whom they interact.

## **Raising a upstander**

Unfortunately, statistics show that 48% of youth are exposed to relational aggression twice a month or more (Davis and Nixon, Youth Voice Project, 2010). Half of our children, then, have an opportunity on more than one occasion to stand up for themselves or someone else and be an upstander. At the end of this step, you will find charts with suggestions for proactive ways children can help stop peer aggression either right when it happens, or seek solutions after the aggression has occurred to make it right. Practice these strategies with your child. Let them find an option that they are comfortable doing and rehearse it often. The more practice you provide, the more likely your child will be to use these tools when they see aggression happening. See the “Encouraging Upstanders Do’s and Don’ts” at the end of this step for more suggestions on raising an upstander.

It is important to teach your children that revenge and retaliation are not acceptable options. Aggression does not stop aggression. It creates a cycle that is very hard to break. The Ophelia Project does not support the “eye for an eye” mindset; we strongly encourage you not to support it in your home. There is one exception to this rule: Hitting back is an option when it is the ONLY necessary means of protecting your personal safety. For example, a child cornered by a physically aggressive bully can use the least amount of force necessary to disable the bully and run for safety.

## **Accountability and making it right**

We all make mistakes, probably more often than we would like to admit. It is a part of life and definitely a part of growing up. It is what we do after our mistakes that is important – how we make it right, and how we move on in an effort to avoid the mistake in the future. Shaming children into apologizing rarely works. We can force an apology, but who feels better after a fake, “I’m sorry?” We want to talk about making it right which makes everyone feel better, even the one who made the mistake.

First, we need the child to actually realize that he made a mistake. Since many children’s first reaction is usually to blame someone else or pretend they did not do it, we have to cut through those defenses with our children. Let your child know: This did happen and you did do it. Call the misbehavior a mistake. Describe what happened. Use a continuum if your child does not realize that his action was aggressive or inappropriate. Once the child acknowledges his mistake, it is time to make it right.

Making it right has three key steps.

1. Apologize with sincere words or actions.
2. Accept the consequences without complaining.
3. Let the target and bystanders know you will try to avoid this mistake again.

See the chart at the end of this step titled, *Making it Right* to see an explanation of each part of making it right and some examples of how to do it. Sometimes parents feel that consequences are not necessary for low-level behaviors. Punishment is not the goal here. Being accountable is. What if the behavior continues? At some point in the process, the repeated mistakes may need additional disciplinary action. Remind your child of that important third step in making it right – trying not to make the mistake again. There may be a need to be a change in consequences and a stronger effort to learn behaviors that are more appropriate. In addition, consequences do not necessarily have to be negative such as a loss of privilege or a time out. Some consequences, such as journaling about the incident, role playing, or action planning positive solutions are positive and productive in their intent.

We all have bad days. We forget what we are supposed to do. Then, we learn from making mistakes. Parents can practice this with their kids on a daily basis. A family where everyone is accountable for their actions is a safe place to live. For example: My brother was mean to me today, but he realized it and came into my room to apologize. Will he be mean to me again? Probably, but I know he is sorry today and that makes me feel safer with him. I also know that everyone in this family is supporting my brother in learning to make safer choices.

Role modeling is a critical tool. Parents make mistakes with their children. This is a great place to show how making it right done. Whether it is right at the time of the mistake or a day later after you realize what you did, you can sit down with your child and do exactly what you have been teaching him. Tell what you did. Say it was a mistake. It might be a good time to say WHY it was a mistake. Then give a heartfelt apology. One way to take further action is to invite your child to point out if you make that mistake again so that you can catch yourself sooner the next time.

### **Know the parent protocol**

When a child reports being a target of aggression, there is an initial reaction that most parents experience: “Who is hurting my baby and how will they be punished for this?” When another adult or even a child accuses a child of being an aggressor, the initial reaction is often: “Not my child.” These emotions are natural. We want to protect our children, and we have high expectations that they will behave appropriately. We also hold a fear that having a child who misbehaves means that we may be poor parents.

To help you communicate effectively with your child’s school or other parents, The Ophelia Project has developed a parent protocol. This protocol acknowledges that adults work together to solve peer aggression issues. There are no accusations brought up by either party, nor should anyone instantly adopt a defensive standpoint. All adults need to work together to make a safe environment for children.

When members of the school administration or faculty contact a family, or a family contacts the school, one of the following phrases can be used to reply to the concern:

- “Thank you for bringing this to my attention. How can we work together to solve this problem?”
- “Thank you for being so concerned. I will be happy to examine this issue with you.”
- “I appreciate your honesty. I will speak to my child/student and then call you back to work on a solution for this issue.”

These statements acknowledge several important points:

1. Whether the actual issue is true, embellished, false, or misinterpreted, the fact that it has been brought to your attention is a cause for you to deal with it.
2. Working with another adult to investigate a problem and then fairly and appropriately handle it assumes that accountability is important for all involved parties.
3. Removing blame, anger, and indifference from a situation allows everyone to rationally approach the problem and come to a reasonable and workable solution.
4. Your child may be a target, a bystander, or an aggressor. Your child’s involvement in any of these roles does not assign you the role of bad parent. Addressing the problem promptly and effectively assigns you the role of a caring and supportive parent.

## **Role plays**

Role plays have many benefits for teaching your children how to deal with peer aggression.

- Role plays provide opportunities for children to explore situations, gain insight, identify problems, resolve conflicts, and create solutions.
- Role plays have children experience and identify with characters and roles that simple discussions cannot.
- Role plays allow children to try multiple solutions for a single incident. They provide options for “alternate endings.”

Practicing role plays with your children may feel awkward at first. Relax, and realize that this is a learning environment. The more you let go of inhibitions and experiment with new techniques for addressing peer aggression, the more natural you will feel in the interaction. It is important, however, to lay some important ground rules for role playing with your children:

- Children never role play as aggressors. It allows them to practice aggression and this is not our goal. In addition, children tend to glamorize aggression or make it humorous – both of these portrayals end up encouraging aggression, which is the exact opposite goal of doing the role plays. Your goal is for your child to learn strategies for ENDING aggression, not perpetrating it.
- Taking risks and trying new skills are encouraged. There are no wrong options, but if something your child says or does during a role play concerns you, “pause” the role play and use this as a teachable moment to discuss what you saw.
- If a role play does not go the way you intended it to, talk about this with your child. “Rewind” the scene and try again. This does not mean the role play was done wrong – instead celebrate this learning experience!

The most important part of role playing is not the actual acting, it is the discussion and processing that follows. Think of some follow-up questions to discuss with your child. “Why did you choose to act the way you did?” “Do you think you could do that with your friends around? Why or why not?” Challenge your child to think critically about her actions and why she chose them.

## **Compromise and negotiation**

Not getting what we want is, unfortunately, a part of life. Children often turn to aggression when they feel they are not getting their way. They may push a child out of the way to be first in line for a swing on the playground. They may call a parent names if they are not allowed to stay up late at night. We need to teach our children strategies for dealing with situations in which they may not get their way. Two of these important tools are negotiation and compromise.

When it comes to a situation with differing viewpoints, there are three basic options:

1. Step aside for the other person.
2. Use various forms of aggression to make sure your needs are met.
3. Use non-aggressive means to reach some kind of compromise or win-win solution.

Many adults and children struggle with these options – you want your needs met. You feel strongly about your viewpoint. Perhaps, however, you are scared to insist upon your needs so you let the other person get their way. Alternatively, you may feel so strongly and so determined to have your needs met that you become aggressive. See the Compromise Wheel at the end of this step to walk your children through this tricky process.

## **Explore all of the Options**

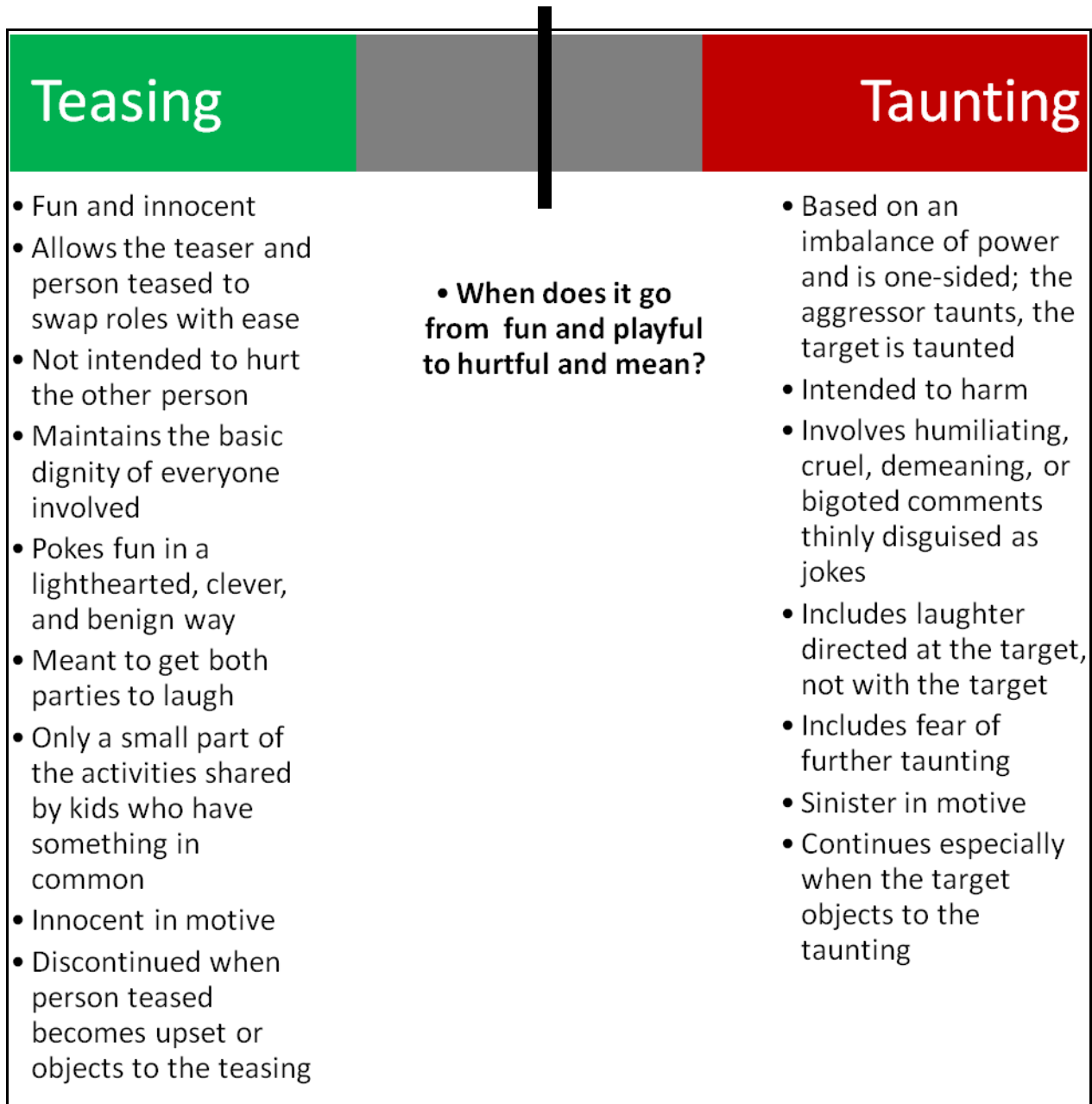
There is no one right way or wrong way to handle peer aggression. You need to find the option that is the most comfortable for you, your child, their school, and the situation. As long as you are committed to safely and responsibly address peer aggression, you are on the right track. The Ophelia Project has developed some option grids that allow you to choose what to do based on the role your child has taken in an aggressive situation. See the Options Grids at the end of this step. Add some of your own. Take the time and care to teach your children that aggression is everyone’s problem, and everyone is going to be committed to being a part of the solution. Using the skill, you have learned in this step, you are on the right track to creating a pro-social home for your family.

## Teasing vs. Taunting

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Joking or kidding with a friend is a way to tease each other in a kind way. It is done with no malicious intent and, if it bothers the person who is being joked with, the joker will stop. Taunting is calling someone names with the intent to hurt another person and to feel more powerful than the person who is being taunted.

Topics that are off-limits at all times when teasing or taunting include race, religion, physical attributes, gender, and mental ability.





## More Possible Continuums

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Other dichotomous pairs or words and phrases to explore on a continuum:

- Teasing vs. Taunting
- Touching vs. Hitting
- Friendship Groups vs. Cliques
- Good Popular vs. Bad Popular
- Supporting Friends vs. Alliance Building
- Sharing vs. Gossiping
- Telling vs. Tattling
- Assertive vs. Aggressive
- Accidents or Bumpers vs. Aggression
- Consequence vs. Punishment
- Healthy Friendship vs. Unhealthy Friendship
- Protecting Yourself/Others vs. Reactive Aggression/Revenge
- Respect vs. Disrespect
- Flirting vs. Sexual Harassment/ Taunting (older students only)
- Flight vs. Fight (to help students understand that fighting back is an option **ONLY** when there is a threat to their immediate physical safety if they do not fight; this continuum is for students in at-risk areas where physical aggression and violence are prevalent)

Several of these are more appropriate for middle school or high school students. Explore other pairs of words as necessary to provide children with the language.

## Interventions for Upstanders

During the Aggressive Act		
Support the target.	Stand up to the aggressor.	Get help.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Change the topic of conversation.</li> <li>• Say something nice about the target.</li> <li>• Don't laugh; leave!</li> <li>• Walk away from the aggressor with the target.</li> <li>• Use humor to diffuse the situation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tell the aggressor to "Make it Right."</li> <li>• Say you do not like the actions of the aggressor and ask the aggressor to stop.</li> <li>• Say, "That's not funny."</li> <li>• Remind the aggressor of possible consequences.</li> <li>• Distract the aggressor from the target.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yell for help.</li> <li>• Quickly get an adult.</li> <li>• Bring attention of other bystanders to what is going on.</li> </ul>

After the Aggressive Act:		
Support the target after the incident.	Talk to the aggressor after the incident.	Get help.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Say: "I'm sorry that happened to you."</li> <li>• Walk beside the target.</li> <li>• Ask the target to discuss their feelings and empathize with the target.</li> <li>• Role play with the target to practice how you could handle the situation next time.</li> <li>• Do not glorify or pass along details of the incident.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Say: "I really don't like what you did there."</li> <li>• Ask the aggressor why they behaved as they did.</li> <li>• Ask the aggressor to "Make it Right."</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Talk to an adult.</li> <li>• Anonymously report the incident.</li> <li>• Talk to other bystanders who chose not to intervene.</li> <li>•</li> </ul>

## Encouraging Upstanders Do's and Don'ts

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### Do:

- Urge children to be upstanders.
- Remind them that seeking help and TELLING (not tattling) is courageous.
- Ask them to come up with several options and choose one they are most comfortable with.
- Offer to role play a solution with them.
- Ask them to list people they can go to for help.
- Share the 15-80-10 rule. When upstanders help, they are effective quickly!
- Be a cheerleader. Give positive support, but be realistic.
- Ask: "Were you able to help anyone today?"

### Don't:

- Ask, "How would you feel if you were the target?" \*See note below
- Ask, "Wouldn't you want someone to help you?" \*See note below
- Lecture about an obligation to help everyone.
- Admonish or shame assistant aggressors, silent supporters, or passive onlookers.
- Encourage interest in seeing aggressors get punished or embarrassed.

\*Note: While it is important to build empathy for the target, these questions can seem patronizing. Of course you would feel hurt or sad if you were a target. Of course you would want someone to help you. To build empathy, use other questions that focus specifically on the target: "What do you think the target was feeling? Do you think she wanted help?"

# Making it Right

Step for Making it Right	Why Do It	How to Do It
<p><b>1. Apologize with sincere words or actions.</b></p>	<p>It is important to let the person know that you feel badly for hurting them.</p> <p>This also allows the aggressor to own her behavior and be accountable for it.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sincerely say, “I’m sorry,” “I feel bad about what I did,” or another phrase that acknowledges regret for the hurtful action.</li> <li>• Say what you are sorry for. This shows you realize what you did.</li> <li>• Look the person in the eye.</li> <li>• Use humble posture and tone of voice.</li> <li>• Fix or replace something you broke.</li> <li>• Return something you stole or used without permission.</li> </ul>
<p><b>2. Accept any consequences without complaining.</b></p>	<p>Simply put: Do the crime, serve the time. For some behaviors, a time out or loss of privileges may be necessary. For others, the consequence may be taking the time to explain what was done improperly. Other consequences can include a role play activity to act out a better solution to the situation that does not involve the mistake. Note that a consequence is not a punishment – it is the result of a mistake and lets the aggressor know the severity of his actions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do not beg or bargain for a lesser consequence.</li> <li>• Do not cry or whine about the consequences.</li> <li>• Do not insist others serve consequences or share in blame.</li> <li>• Own your behavior, and own the consequences that go along with it.</li> </ul>
<p><b>3. Let the target and bystanders know you will try to avoid this mistake again.</b></p>	<p>Some children figure out that all they have to do is say “sorry” and can just keep doing the same thing repeatedly. This is not acceptable.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Say, “I am going to try my best to not do this again.”</li> <li>• Ask for help in coming up with alternate ways for handling a situation.</li> <li>• Avoid people and places that encourage you to misbehave.</li> <li>• Charge someone to help you recognize the mistake as you are making it again.</li> </ul>

## Options Grids

### When the child is a target or a bystander:

	<b>Think about it and Figure it out</b>	<b>Report the aggression</b>	<b>Take action alone</b>	<b>Seek help from peers</b>
<b>Child</b>	What options do you have? What can you do?	Tell a trusted adult what happened.	Assertively confront the aggressor and ask him to make it right.	Enlist your friends to help solve the problem without revenge.
<b>Parents</b>	Talk to your child about the incident. Help him understand what happened.	Call the school or if necessary, law enforcement.	Role play how your child might resolve the issue.	Use the parent protocol; Ask parents of other targets or bystanders to confirm story*
<b>Staff</b>	Listen to the child describe the event. Ask if he needs advice or assistance. Ask other bystanders for an account of the event	Talk to the child's parents and other students who were bystanders.	Help the child take positive action that might resolve the conflict.	Get help from the administration.

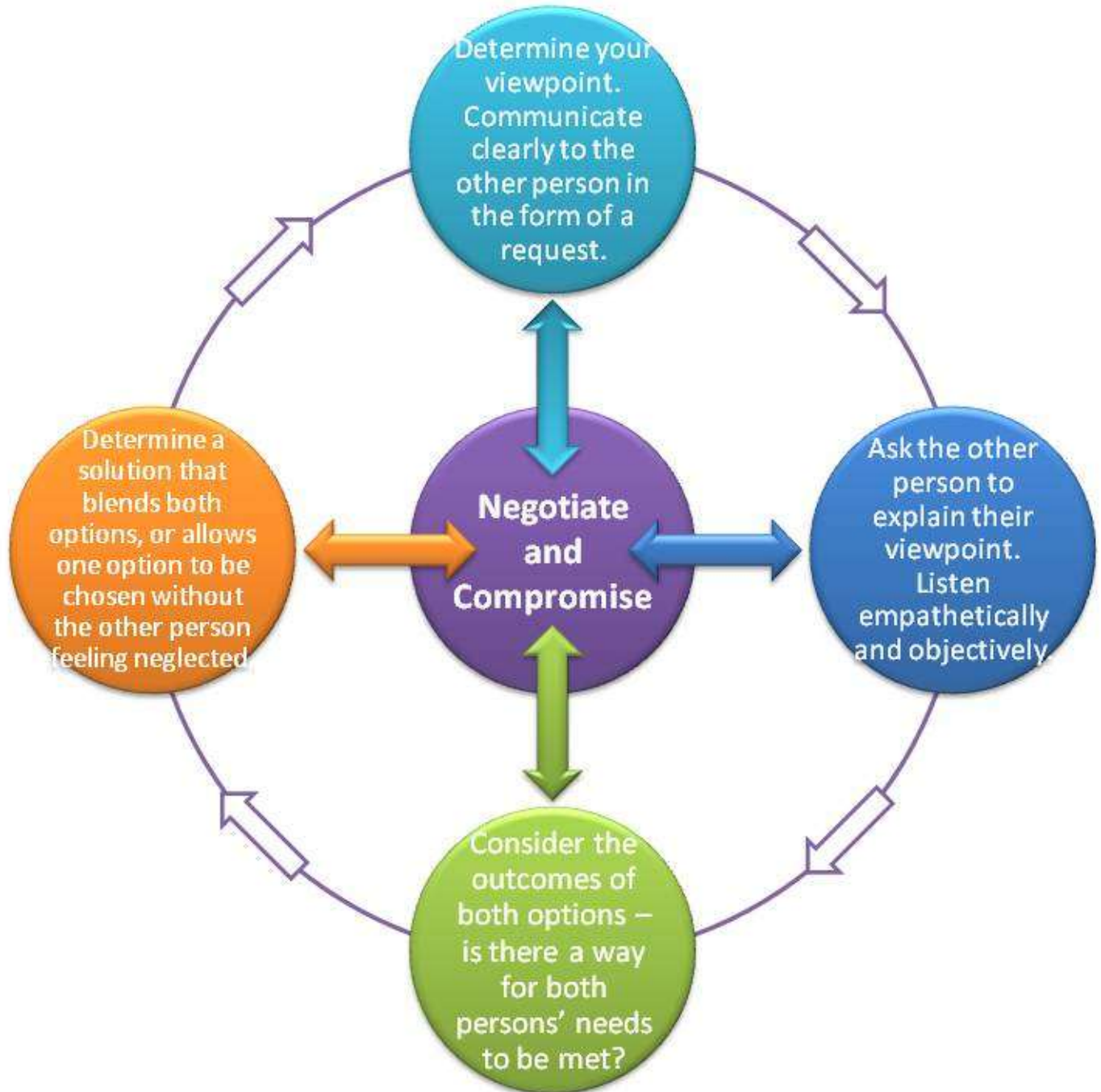
\*Use your discretion when calling other parents. If you know the family and are comfortable speaking about this with them, then call! If you do not know the family well, or are apprehensive about how to handle the situation, go through the child's school.

**When the child is an aggressor:**

	<b>Think about it and Figure it out</b>	<b>Be accountable</b>	<b>Make it right</b>
<b>Child</b>	<p>What options do you have? What can you do? What could you have done instead of being aggressive?</p>	<p>Accept that you choose to hurt or harm another person.</p>	<p>Apologize through sincere words or actions to the target. Serve any necessary disciplinary consequences without complaint. Reassure target and bystanders that you will try not to behave aggressively again.</p>
<b>Parent</b>	<p>Talk to your child about the incident. Help her understand what happened.</p>	<p>Use the continuums to help your child see where she crossed the line.</p>	<p>Help her figure out the best way to make it right and follow up to make sure it is done.</p>
<b>Staff</b>	<p>Listen to the child describe the event. Ask if she needs advice or assistance. Gather more information from targets and bystanders.</p>	<p>Identify with the child where she has violated the code of conduct.</p>	<p>Help the child apologize to the target and/or bystanders and enforce any necessary disciplinary consequences.</p>

# Compromise Wheel

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# Step Five: Share What You Know

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Creating a safer social culture in your home is a major step in changing the culture where you live. In order to work toward lasting change, adults and children need to view their entire environment as safe including the community and school. This requires a commitment to systemic change. Many efforts can be taken beyond the home. Encourage your friends to join your efforts for a safe climate. Share what you know in your friendship circles, your community, and importantly, with your child's school.

## Share with friends

Start your own parent study group. Get together a group of friends, other parents from your child's school, sports team, playgroup or activity. Have a reunion of old college friends in the area and use this as an opportunity to catch up and learn about each other's lives.

Do not let what you know end with you. Creating a safe social culture means inspired, energized change agents like yourself need to share the knowledge and skills that you now have. Speak with the facilitator about your group. Ask for tips on organizing a group and leading sessions. Call The Ophelia Project for help if you need it – we are here to help!

## Share with neighbors

Community is more than just the area you live in. It has a sense of belonging and an identity. Is your community a place where people greet each other as they pass on the sidewalk, or do people hide behind closed doors and shutters? Identify community leaders who can help you subtly change the normative beliefs where you live. These can be local politicians, organizational leaders, religious figures, or an average citizen like yourself looking to initiative change.

# STEP FIVE

1	2	3	4	<b>5</b>
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TAKE YOUR NEW KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS BEYOND YOUR HOME. SHARE WHAT YOU KNOW WITH OTHER PARENTS, YOUR CHILD'S SCHOOL, AND IN YOUR COMMUNITY.

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## What you will learn:

- Changing the social culture beyond your home can have an impact in your child's school and your community.

## What you will do:

- Create a parent study group of your own.
- Find ways to be a part of CASS at your child's school.



## **Share with your child's school**

Set up an appointment with the principal, counselor, or a teacher in your child's school. Share with them what you know about changing social cultures and addressing peer aggression. Let them know that you are committed to being an agent of change within the school. Ways that you can help your child's school address peer aggression include:

- Create a Leadership Team within your school that will meet monthly to discuss ways to promote a pro-social environment in the school.
- Help the school develop positive normative beliefs regarding peer aggression.
- Purchase an anti-bullying program or character education program. The Ophelia Project offers a range of curricula ranging from small classroom based lessons to their whole-school initiative CASS: Creating a Safe School.
- If your child's school already has CASS: Creating A Safe School, your child has learned many of the same concepts that you learned through this study group. Let your children know what you have learned, and let them teach you what they know. A part of CASS is the Parent Team. Consider joining to help write the CASS Update (a monthly newsletter about the program), help plan or present at Community Nights, attend training if one is being offered, mentor new parents who come into the school, or simply be a cheerleader for the program and keep the energy and passion for CASS going.

## **Have cheerleaders!**

We are not talking about girls with pom-poms. Find someone who will support your efforts for change and encourage you on your mission. It can be a fellow study group member, your child, or call The Ophelia Project for a confidence booster. You have spent the past several weeks as a part of a parent study group to learn how to be an agent of change. Do not take this time for granted or waste it in vain – you CAN make a difference. You WILL make a difference. It takes commitment, and systemic change takes time. You may not see the results you want instantly, but through perseverance and patience, you will reach your goals – and The Ophelia Project and your fellow group members are right along with you for support.

Thank you for participating in this program – you have been walked through the first four critical steps and now it is time to **own** them as you embark upon Step Five. Good luck!

# Glossary

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## **Aggression**

Behaviors that are intended to hurt or harm others.

## **Aggressor**

The person who chooses to hurt or damage a relationship. A bully.

## **Bullying**

A real or perceived imbalance of power, with the more powerful child or group attacking those who are less powerful.

According to Olweus (2008),

- Bullying is aggressive behavior that involves unwanted, negative actions.
- Bullying involves a pattern of behavior repeated over time.
- Bullying involves an imbalance of power or strength.

## **Bummer**

A situation that is not particularly desirable but is not aggressive in its nature.

## **Bystander**

The person or persons who are not aggressors or targets but are caught somewhere in between. Also known as a “kid in the middle.”

## **Civility**

Showing positive regard for others in accordance with the normative beliefs of a group.

## **Consequence**

A disciplinary action following a behavior that violates normative beliefs.

## **Emotional Literacy**

The ability to accurately use words to describe feelings and emotions.

## **Empathy**

Defined in two ways: (1) the awareness of another person’s thoughts, feelings, and intentions and (2) the ability or tendency to be vicariously aroused by the affective state of another.

## **Forgiveness**

The process of concluding resentment, indignation or anger as a result of a perceived offense, difference or mistake, and/or ceasing to demand punishment or restitution.

## **Leadership**

The process of social influence in which one person can enlist the aid and support of others in the accomplishment of a common task.

## **Making it Right**

An apology or any restorative action to repair a relationship and reestablish civility between the aggressor and the target.

Consists of three components:

1. Apologize with sincere words or through a restorative action
2. Serve any necessary disciplinary consequences
3. Assure the target and bystanders that you will make an effort to not be aggressive again

## **Mentorship**

A developmental relationship in which a more experienced person helps a less experienced person referred to as a protégé, apprentice, mentoree, or (person) being mentored, develop in a specified capacity.

## **Normative Beliefs**

Self-regulating beliefs about the appropriateness of social behavior.

## **Perspective Taking**

The ability to view a situation from the mindset of another person.

## **Physical Aggression**

Harm and control through physical damage or by the threat of such damage.

## **Proactive Aggression**

Deliberate aggressive behavior that is controlled by external reinforcements.

## **Pro-Social Skills**

The abilities necessary to be aware of thoughts and feelings of others, feeling concern and empathy for them, and acting in ways that benefit others.

## **Reactive Aggression**

An angry, defensive response to frustration or provocation.

## **Relational Aggression**

Harming others through purposeful manipulation and damage of their peer relationships.

## **Revenge**

A response to an aggressive act in which a target assumes the role of aggressor and makes a former aggressor a target; role reversal in an aggressive act.

**Rule**

A principle or statement that governs behavior.

**School Climate**

The quality and character of student life.

**Social Norms**

The most widely shared beliefs or expectations in a social group about how people in general or members of the group ought to behave in various circumstances.

**Target**

The person who is aggressed upon or bullied. The object of bullying.

**Verbal Aggression**

A communication intended to cause psychological pain to another person, or a communication perceived as having that intent; also referred to as verbal/symbolic aggression.

**Upstander**

A bystander who comes to the aid of a target and stops the aggression.