4th report

"I bit his hand. Then he broke my Lego"
Children's understandings and experiences of teasing and bullying

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Introduction

"*I bit his hand. Then he broke my Lego*". This is how shortly and precisely a 5-year-old boy describes an experience of teasing between himself and a friend at the preschool centre. The two boys were helped by a teacher, and quickly made up again. To tease and be teased are occurrences that feature prominently in children's everyday lives. It is an integral part of how children address and relate to each other. Therefore, to understand what children go through every day, it is also necessary to unearth the meanings that children attribute to teasing and to how this is managed. Children tease for fun and with serious intent. They do so in order to position themselves, to take revenge, out of boredom or impotence, or in response to a fun game that suddenly turns serious. Sometimes, the teasing is instantly forgiven, and the play carries on. Other times, it is such a painful experience for the child on the receiving end that adult assistance is required to sort it out. And in rare instances, malicious teasing or exclusion becomes ingrained in the children's interpersonal relations.

The present report looks at 4-8-year-old children's understandings and experiences of teasing and bullying. It explores the meaning attributed by children to these concepts, uncovering how they perceive specific instances of teasing, and how they cope with such situations. The report is based on interviews with 125 children conducted in Danish in the context of a follow-up research project aimed at systematising learning from Save the Children Denmark's pilot project 'Free from Bullying' (*Fri for Mobberi*). The follow-up research project is carried out by a group of scholars from the Centre for Childhood and Youth Research (CEBUF) at Roskilde University.[1]

In Denmark, bullying prevention programmes have thus far seldom been the subject of research and evaluation. This follow-up research project aims to demarcate, document and assess the processes set in motion on the ground by the pilot project. The research focuses, inter alia, specifically on children's relations with each other, the professionals' interaction with the children, and the degree of parental involvement. An important aspect of the exercise is to identify the children's own perspective on the phenomenon of bullying. This is what we wish to convey by means of this report.

In many regards, the present study stands out from former examinations of bullying in Denmark. A significant difference springs from this research highlighting *prevention* and younger children. It follows a carefully targeted programme for the prevention of bullying, in which a series of schools and preschools in three municipalities have been selected for participation. Previous investigations regarding bullying have primarily sought to quantify and map out the extent of the problem. For example, a survey by the Danish Centre of Educational Environment (DCUM, www.dcum.dk) towards the end of 2006 showed that close to one in five children in a school class are bullied.[2] The present research – following up Free from Bullying – has a more qualitative aim. Furthermore, former studies have turned the spotlight on school pupils rather than preschool children. This has provoked the following comment in Save the Children's background material about Free from Bullying:

[1] Published reports on the project can be found at Save the Children Denmark's website: www.redbarnet.dk.

[2] http://www.redbarnet.dk/Admin/Public/DWSDownload.aspx?File=%2FFiles%2FFiler%2FMobning%2FBaggrund_friformobberi.doc.

"Regrettably, exact knowledge about preschool children's exclusive behaviour is hard to come by. Consequently, we hesitate to claim that systematic bullying takes place in groups of children under school age. However, we are certain that the phenomenon often manifests itself during the school years."[3]

The follow-up research associated with Free from Bullying enables a more qualitative insight into how teasing – and the seed of what might turn into bullying – is experienced by children. One point is to take up and convey the children's perspective on the variegated social phenomenon that teasing and bullying clearly constitutes. By children's perspective we mean an attempt to comprehend the child's *experience* of a given phenomenon, i.e. we refer to *the child's* perspective, and not to a perspective *on* the child. This presupposes a view of the child as an active, competent and opinion-forming subject, who is an expert as regards knowing what it is like to live this particular life (Kampmann 2000: 25; Sommer 2003: 85).

However, research into the child's perspective – in the sense of getting as close as possible to the child's own mental, social and cultural processing and comprehension of the world – is fraught with methodological problems. Even when dealing with children old enough to express themselves verbally through interviews, the approach always involves a more or less interpretative adult perspective. We are forced to 'arrange' the material, not just in the subsequent analysis, but as early as in the actual recording (Kvale 1996). The interviewer is also obliged to give meaning and direction to children's statement by categorising their conduct in terms of 'patterns' in order to convey coherence to others. Therefore, it must be kept in mind that children's perspective always expresses "adults (researchers) trying – by means of reflection – to represent something that is external to them, whereas the children are part of it and in the middle of it, without (necessarily) reflecting on it. Accordingly, the children's perspective is always the adults' *attempt* to understand and identify with children's thoughts and perceptions of their own lives" (Kampmann 1998: 6 – our translation).

One point of taking the child's perspective is obviously to approach an insight into how *children* experience the world, thus gaining knowledge that differs from what could be construed solely through adult reflection. For instance, in connection with the Free from Bullying follow-up research, we have learned that the concepts of teasing and bullying are defined much more openly by children than by adults. In particular for the youngest children, teasing also encompasses episodes where something merely disagreeable, though not intentionally harassing, takes place in interaction with other children. To a child, being pushed by accident may well be characterised as teasing, quite simply because 'to be pushed' belongs to that category. This does not *necessarily* mean that the children are unable to distinguish between what is and what is not deliberate, when they recount it, but it shows us that the definition of teasing is not that narrow for the children interviewed.

Methodology

As mentioned, the present report is based on interviews in Danish with 125 children aged 4 to 8 years. The interviews were conducted in the context of a major collection of empirical material carried out during various rounds over a period of two years. In this connection – and in line with

[3] http://www.redbarnet.dk/Admin/Public/DWSDownload.aspx?File=%2FFiles%2FFiler%2FMobning%2FBaggrund_friformobberi.doc.

the objectives defined for the follow-up research – we have chosen to test a variety of methodological approaches to the interviews with children.

This has encompassed the involvement of children in drawing interviews, walking interviews, interviews revolving around photos of various places on the school premises taken by the children themselves, and interviews conducted on the basis of reading aloud a story about teasing.

All types of interviews would start by asking the child to recall some time when he or she experienced being teased, teased others or witnessed some teasing. Depending on the type of interview, the child was to do one of the following: 1) make a drawing of the episode and talk about it subsequently or during the process of drawing, 2) take a walk with the interviewer around the area of the school or preschool, talking about the teasing that happened at those places which the child chose to show the interviewer, 3) use a disposable camera to take photos of the various places where the child remembered having experienced teasing, and – upon developing the photos the day after – talk about the individual instances, or 4) comment on a story read out loud. The intention of these approaches has been, firstly, to get the children to recall and recount *specific* experiences of teasing or bullying, and, secondly, to home in on the children's understandings of the actual concepts of teasing and bullying. The walking interviews and the photo interviews had the additional goal of gaining insights into children's experience of the school's physical space as an arena for teasing – in relation to their concrete experiences as well as perceptions. The methods tested have served as a kind of 'supportive arrangements' in the interview situation with the aim of fostering a relaxed atmosphere and toning down the interviewer's authority, thus making room for the child's *own immediate* stories, rather than the child's possible impressions of what the interviewer would like to hear. In addition to this framing, the exercise relied on semi-structured interview guides.

The interviewees were selected for equal gender representation, a particular number of children at each age/class level, and not least according to who felt like taking part, since participation was obviously voluntary for the children. The 'story interviews' were only conducted in preschools, 'drawing interviews' took place in reception classes (known in Denmark as 'class 0', i.e. prior to class 1), 'walking interviews' were carried out in preschools, reception classes and year 2 classes, while 'photo-based interviews' were confined to children in year 2 classes. After each interview, the child was allowed to listen to him- or herself on the sound recorder. In our experience, most children found participation in the interviews to be enjoyable.[4]

Translator's note

This study is based on qualitative analysis of statements made in Danish and spoken by children. The translation of the original quotes into British English has sought to maintain the child-like immediacy, including occasional inconsistencies. However, aspects of language influence the information conveyed in natural-sounding speech. For example, a Danish-speaking girl is more likely to indicate the gender of her friends, as the word for 'friend' in her language distinguishes between the feminine form '*veninde*' and the masculine or neutral form '*ven*'. It would be unscholarly to erase such specifications, which are therefore included in square brackets, e.g.

[4] See also the paper "*Erfaringer med børneinterview i forskningssammenhæng*" [Experiences of interviewing children in a research context] by Knudsen et al (2009), which is available on Save the Children Denmark's website as well: http://www.redbarnet.dk. It also discusses a fifth methodological approach, which has not been applied in this follow-up project, namely case-based interviews.

rendering "*mine veninder*" as "*my* [female] *friends*." Furthermore, original terms and expressions in Danish are mentioned and explained as relevant.

1. Children's understandings of the concepts of teasing and bullying

For those aged 4-8 years, teasing (Danish: *drilleri*) is a vast concept indeed. In the children's understanding, it encompasses a series of physical transgressions, such as hitting, kicking, pinching, pushing, pulling hair etc. Most children also include other types of disagreeable or irritating conduct, such as sticking out your tongue at someone, taking things away from others, lying, calling names, excluding others from play, ruining the games of others, following others against their will, and laughing when someone gets hurt. For a great deal of children, fighting is also contained within the concept of teasing, even when it involves two active parties.

In general, there is a degree of common understanding of the concept of teasing across the age groups. Nevertheless, there are also important age-related differences in the children's ways of defining and delimiting the term. For instance, several of the preschool children mention biting, which is not mentioned by any of the older children. This is probably because biting is a conduct that disappears when children start at school. Conversely, slandering and making disparaging comments on other children's looks or dress are types of teasing almost exclusively mentioned by school-aged children. When interviewees explain the terms of abuse that are perceived as unpleasant, there is also marked age-based variation, since the youngest mention words such as 'stupid' and 'shit', whereas children from class 2 bring up more sexually-charged insults, such as 'cock-sucker' and 'whore'. Most children are highly specific in their description of what is understood by teasing, defining it in terms of concrete acts. However, a few children – particularly among the oldest – start from the recipient's experience of the situation: "*teasing is, for example, to do something that others don't want.*" (Florian, class 2).

An interesting dimension of the children's understanding of the concept is that a great deal of preschool children, but also several schoolchildren, seem not to perceive intentionality as a necessary aspect of teasing. Some include falling by accident, pushing or the like, even when this is not done on purpose. An example of this appears from the below excerpt of an interview with a girl at preschool age.

Interviewer: *What's the worst way that you imagine being teased ?*
Sine: *To have sand thrown into my mouth.*
Interviewer: *To have sand thrown into your mouth, well. Did that happen to you? Yeah? What happened then?*
Sine: *It wasn't on purpose that they did it.*
Interviewer: *It wasn't on purpose? No, well …*
Sine: *It was someone trying to dig, turning their back, and digging backwards. That's a bad idea. Then you can't see if someone comes from behind who just hasn't seen it* (Sine, 5 years).

For Sine, it is the unpleasantness inflicted on her that takes centre stage. In line with the above point, some preschool children use the expression "by accident" (the prepositional verb "*komme til*" used in Danish to indicate a mistake committed without intentionality), when they talk about how they have teased others. This is exemplified by the following excerpt:

Mikkel*: It was because I pushed her by accident.*

Interviewer*: Yes. How is that?*
Mikkel*: It was because she said I couldn't take part* (Mikkel, 5 years).

In Mikkel's description, there is no mismatch between the lack of purpose indicated in the expression "by accident" and the fact that there was indeed a motivation behind his act. One interpretation of this – relatively widespread – manner of expression could be that, from a very early age, children are aware that physical transgressions against other children are not a socially acceptable conduct. Nevertheless, they do occasionally resort to violence in response to feeling unfairly treated. As a given rule, children have no intention of hitting, pushing or the like, but their emotions get the better of them, and then they do something "by accident" that they know they should not. Subsequently, they are able to put it in words why they acted as they did, when sitting in front of an adult authority who expects an explanation. In such a situation, "by accident" (*komme til*) expresses the least intention, and hence the greatest innocence as regards the unacceptable act.

Teasing can also be fun, if it takes place among friends. To poke fun and tease each other amicably is part of how many children spend time with their mates, just as it is commonplace among adults. Fatima from class 2 explains:

It's like this. Say I tease him, make fun of him, and then he says… well, then he sometimes starts to get annoyed, and then I say. "Come on, I just said it, like, for fun!" Then we just begin to tease each other for fun (Fatima class 2).

The quote shows that there can be a fine line between fun and seriousness. What is intended as fun, can be perceived as serious, but this can quickly change back if the misunderstanding is cleared up. However, the parties do not always concur in whether an episode was fun or not. Several children talk about being misunderstood, when setting out just to make fun. Conversely, some children narrate experiences in which the child teasing them claimed that it was just for fun, but without this perception being shared by the child on the receiving end. In several preschools and schools, the staff have introduced the expressions "teasing for fun" (*drille for sjov*) and "teasing seriously" (*drille for alvor*) in order to avoid the negatively charged word "bullying" (*mobning*). Seen through the prism of adults, these two types of teasing are distinguished by whether or not *both parties* find something to be fun. Many of the children have adopted the terminology, but do not necessarily attribute the same meanings to it as the adults. For several children, "teasing for fun" simply means that the person doing the teasing is having the fun.

The vast majority of interviewees have a clear understanding that gender differences impinge on how much and in what ways children tease. According to both boys and girls, boys are the worst trouble-makers, and they account for a greater share of day-to-day teasing than girls. However, there are obviously exceptions to this view. Some children believe that girls and boys tease the same, and one girl states that, in her class, the girls' teasing and conflicts dominate. Most children notice that boys and girls tease differently, though some – particularly the youngest – find it difficult to put this in words. The boys' teasing is typically described as more rough and tumble, while the girls' teasing tends to be about saying hurtful things to others, such as renouncing a friendship with someone. Below are three typical statements about gender differences from children in various age groups:

The boys, they push people around, and the girls, they just say something (Nina, 5 years).

The girls' teasing is, like, easy does it, and the boys' teasing is rougher, I think (Lukas, reception class).

I think the girls fight more with words than the boys. They [the boys] *just fight by hitting each other and stuff like that* (Ellen, class 2).

A few of the interviewees, however, also relate that girls sometimes perpetrate physical attacks. For instance, a reception-class boy explains that, although girls do occasionally hit like boys, they do not do so very hard. And a girl from class 2 recounts coming to blows with a girlfriend. Likewise, several children also describe how boys use verbal teasing, albeit in a fashion slightly different from that of girls. A girl from class 2 says that the boys "*use those strong words*", e.g. "*prick*" (*pik*), whereas the girls tend to phrase it more along the lines of "*you're so mean*" (Charlotte, class 2). A preschool girl expresses a similar understanding:

Boys like to say "you're shit", and girls say "you can't play with us". They don't say "shit" or dirty words (Marie-Louise, 5 years).

While boys use coarse invective, girls' verbal teasing mainly targets personal or interpersonal aspects, including threats of exclusion from play, home visits or birthday parties. Another gender difference brought up by several children is that boys can be nasty by laughing and jeering when someone is crying, which many children experience as deeply hurtful.

Teasing is usually associated with interactions with children in the same year or slightly older boys. The children often talk about "*the big ones*" (*de store*), which normally refers to children *just* one year above themselves, and not to the oldest pupils. For example, a girl from reception class talks about how she was teased by children "*so big they were 7 years old*" (Camilla, reception class). For the children, a single year or class has vast significance, so a 7-year-old boy can seem frightening to someone aged 6. A small number of children also connect teasing with children in lower classes or with their own younger siblings. However, in those cases, teasing takes on the nature of a mere source of irritation, rather than as something truly unpleasant, hurtful or scary.

In recent years, bullying has been a widely addressed issue. Accordingly, the idea has found its way into children's vocabulary and conceptual sphere. However, to many of those aged 4-8, the term remains alien, being used hesitantly or in a very broad sense. This applies, for instance, to Hanib from class 2.

You know, I've heard about this – what's it called? – this bullying thing, yeah, and some people have tried to explain it to me, at least [two of my teachers] *Sanne and Mogens have. But I keep forgetting it. (...) I think it's something about teasing or something* (Hanib, class 2).

Hanib's lack of familiarity with the Danish word for bullying (*mobning*) may stem from his non-Danish background. However, this diffident use of the term is also common among children from ethnically Danish families in class 2. Among the preschool children, only a few were able to explain the meaning of the word, whereas some of the somewhat older children both know and use it. A small number of schoolchildren even mentioned the term spontaneously during the interview to describe experiences or relations in their everyday lives. Most of the children in command of the term 'bullying', however, used it more or less synonymously with 'teasing', which is illustrated by the following three quotes:

Bullying is when you tease each other (...) When you kick and hit and say mean words (Lærke, reception class).

When someone calls you a wimp. That's bullying. (...) And saying someone is stupid, and saying someone must be pushed. And then saying someone can't be with us (Mikkel, 5 years).

It means… the ones who tease. It's just another language. 'Bullying' (Joakim, reception class).

The three children quoted do not distinguish between teasing and bullying; it is the same to them. As Joakim says, it is "*just another language*", but it means the same. To him, it is a kind of foreign loanword, which he would not normally employ himself, even if he has a certain understanding of what it means. Other children – particularly at school level – describe bullying as something that is *worse* than teasing:

It's like being teased loads and loads (Fatima, class 2).

Bullying, that's something where you continue to go after the same person, doing the same again and again. Teasing, that's just when you perhaps to it one day to someone, and then to someone else another day (Selina, class 2).

When you bully, it's something that's not really fun. So that you get really, really sad. But when you tease someone, it's just like you get a little sad, and then quickly find someone else to play with again. You get really sad if you get bullied (Miriam, reception class).

In their description of what bullying is, the three children quoted underscore different dimensions of the concept. Fatima explains it as intensified teasing, while Selina highlights that bullying – unlike teasing – singles out one person, who is harassed continually. Miriam defines bullying according to the emotions stirred in the person subjected to it. Both teasing and bullying cause sadness, but the *intensity* of this feeling is different, and so is the motivation, ability or will to put the experience behind and move on to new play relations.

In general, the children's understanding of the concepts of teasing and bullying become more nuanced with age. However, there is also pronounced variation that cannot be ascribed to age. A few children in reception class describe self-assuredly and elaborately the difference between the two, whereas some children in class 2 are uncertain what bullying is all about. Such individual discrepancies may spring from a host of factors, e.g. the children's level of reflection and linguistic awareness; whether they have been introduced to the words concerned in their relations with adults and older children; individual children's general self-confidence in articulating their thoughts, and much else.

2. Children's experiences of teasing and bullying

The pervasiveness of teasing in children's lives in educational institutions is beyond doubt. All the children interviewed were able to narrate experiences, in which they had been directly involved, or where they had been at the periphery of teasing, whether it be as mere spectators or engaged in helping and comforting the person affected. While the preschool children's stories tend to be short

and, to a great extent, about physical teasing, such as pushing, kicking and hitting, the accounts from class 2 children are more detailed, and a greater share of them deal with more subtle types of teasing, such as intrigues and exclusion played out over time.

While most teasing takes place wilfully – either as a kind of pastime or because the children fall out with each other – much teasing and conflict seems to arise from misunderstandings and by accident. Several children recount bumping unintentionally into another child, or similar occurrences, after which the other party reacts fiercely. An example is provided in the following excerpt:

It was because I was playing with my friends, and then I pushed someone by accident, but I didn't mean to. And then he just pushed back. And I said sorry, but that didn't help. That wasn't very nice (Karoline, class 2).

The children's stories suggest that this kind of reaction is rather common. In the situation concerned, Karoline felt wronged, but she refrained from escalating the conflict any further. On other occasions, a fun game or amicable banter may suddenly snap, turning serious for one of the parties involved.

It was because we were playing ball, and then suddenly Hanib lost. And then I said just for fun: "because you lost, you're crying". Then he came up from behind, put his arms round my neck, and threw me on the floor (Fatima, class 2).

It's because when we hit each other, like, for fun, we don't do it really hard. But Anders, when we play, he hits and hits for fun real hard, so it hurts (Katrine, 5 years).

In Fatima's report, she teases classmate Hanib, and crosses his line by alleging that he is crying because he lost. Katrine's account includes the assessment that Anders finds it hard to decode other children's boundaries and unwritten rules about how hard you are allowed to hit, when it's just for fun. Anders's conduct makes him, to some extent, undesired in physical play.

Having your game spoiled

Teasing by sabotaging the playing of a game is an issue that features prominently in the children's stories across gender and age. Playing is important to and for children, since this is their means of creating and maintaining friendships (Andersen & Kampmann, 1996). Therefore, it is both disruptive and frustrating when that play is spoiled. In the following quotes, three children tell about how other children ruined their games:

We invented a game called 'the maze'. You had to be inside this kind of maze that the school has. But then someone got in our way, so we said "cut it out, get lost!" But they just stood there going "no way, we're not moving". So we couldn't play it (Johan, class 2).

My [female] *friend and I, we've made a cave in there. And then someone just came in and ruined it. (...) They just got in there and broke all the twigs and everything. And then they stuffed it with leaves, after we'd put some leaves on a stick, and we'd swept it and all* (Maja, class 2).

It was in a break, down in the schoolyard, when someone called Thomas was teasing Lotte, who is sitting over there, and someone called Mette and me, and then someone called Sine K and another

called Sine M. We were playing together, and then he comes up, for example, while we're skipping, and he jumps right into the skipping rope. And we tell him, like, lots and lots of times to stop it. And he does something like that really a lot (Selina, class 2).

To all three children, the experience of having a good game spoiled was frustrating. But while Johan and Maja report one-off incidents, Selina and her girlfriends went through recurrent sabotage by Thomas, who is from their parallel year class, and refuses to stop when asked to.

Violence and threats

Physical means of teasing – such as pushing, hitting, kicking etc. – are another dominant theme in the children's stories across the age groups. At the same time, this is also the kind of teasing which has the greatest gender gap, since virtually all reports in this field include one or several boys as the teasing party.

I was swinging in this swing. Then I got off, and Mikkel pushed me in the back into the swing, like this, lots of times, and it hurt (Siri, 5 years).

He kicked us. Then he grabbed me by holding on to my bag, because we were on our way to physical education. And then he kicked me, so I fell over backwards (Eigil, class 2).

In both cases, the children were baffled by the incident, since they did not comprehend the opposite party's motives. On other occasions, physical teasing takes over where verbal negotiation fails, and conflict breaks out, which the children are incapable of resolving with words. For example, Astrid from class 2 recounts how she recently ended up in a fight with one of her best girlfriends:

Well, first we were going to play on the computer. Then we saw someone else playing such a fun game. But we couldn't remember our passwords. So, inside a folder thing or whatever, we looked inside to see what our passwords were, because that's where they were written. And then she couldn't be bothered to tell me what my password was, and meanwhile she just stood there, looking at everyone else's passwords. And then we got into a fight. (...) We kicked a bit, and pulled hair (Astrid, class 2).

To Astrid, this was not an agreeable experience, but neither did it appear to be something that left any scars in her friendship with the girl concerned, whom she continued to classify as one of her best friends. Nevertheless, among girls, physical means of teasing are less usual than among boys.

Sometimes, *fear* of the unpredictable is just as serious as the actual act. Anxiety over what *could* happen can be just as nasty and frightening as being subjected to a real physical assault – perhaps even worse, since it may escalate in the imagination. In an interview, 5-year-old Siri tells about an incidence when she and her friend Andrea were out on the preschool playground with a couple of boys. They were playing a game of tag. However, all of a sudden, the game took a different turn, when the boys locked the two girls inside a shed, placing a stick in the door handle to prevent them from getting out. The girls protested, but the boys did not let them out, and there were no adults on the playground, since the oldest children (including these four) had been allowed to go out on their own. The boys did nothing else to the girls, but Andrea became very scared about being held captive, and began to cry. Similarly, Sif from class 2 narrates an experience in which two boys from the parallel year class frightened her and her girlfriends with the threat of beatings:

Then there was some ice right here, and we were skating on it. Then some boys come out of the blue from behind, from that shed over there. They hold a huge long stick, and they say: "just to let you know, this thing, yeah, that's ours". And then we all go: "no, because we're all allowed to be here". Then they start to threaten us with that huge stick. And we run away fast, going somewhere else (Sif, class 2).

While Sif recounts the experience taking place just one day before, she is visibly distressed. Her way of telling the story clearly reveals that what matters is not that the two boys ruined a fun game, but the thought and fear of what those boys might have been capable of doing with that "*huge long stick*". Although the boys were not older and did not outnumber them, Sif perceived the situation as menacing, and accordingly, the girls' response to the situation was to give up and take flight.

Insults and verbal teasing

As previously mentioned, verbal harassment also features prominently in the children's accounts of experiences of teasing. This may take a variety of forms, such as mean-spirited or offensive comments, swear words or rough expressions. The common denominator is that they are hurtful. An example of verbal teasing is telling someone that her clothes are ugly, that she is ugly herself, or the like. Silje provides an example:

She has been telling me that my shoes are ugly, that I wear ugly clothes, and that kind of stuff (Silje, class 2).

This type of harassment does not seem particularly sophisticated, since it is very direct. Nevertheless, it is effective. Another category of verbal persecution consists of making sexual references. Although this can be an exciting subject for children, it clearly transgresses their boundaries when it is experienced as personal. The following quote exemplifies this:

There is someone who teases me – his name is Valdemar – saying the girls will get breasts when we grow up. Then he just laughs (Maiken, 5 years).

Sexual innuendos can also be deducted from the following quote, in which a reception-class girl reports that, among the boys in her class, one is often teased by the others.

It's because there is this girl called Pernille from class 1, right? And then some children walk around saying "Peter and Pernille are boyfriend and girlfriend", stuff like that. And some also say that Peter wears girlie shoes (Nikoline, reception class).

Sexual references provoke and offend children – just as they often do adults – because they relate to a taboo subject. Traditional swearing typically refers to spheres such as religion, disease, and lower bodily functions, i.e. defecation and sexuality, whereas more recent (especially modern children's) terms of abuse, name-calling and swear words refer to social or biological status, ethnic background, low intelligence, lack of masculinity, low-status feelings and characteristics (such as 'small and afraid'), as well as likeness to animals. Among the younger generations, including children, lower bodily functions are also in vogue as means of verbal harassment, while the smallest children, in particular, often use – and feel intensely affected by – references to animals, according to Rathje & Andersen (2005) and Sørensen (2006).

In the following quote, a 5-year-old girl talks about feeling sad after some other kids shouted a hurtful rhyme at her:

When I went to see Selina to ask if she could play, Laura was there, and Laura's two sisters who live with Laura. So the first thing they said was "Selina is on holiday, if that's what you are going to ask about". And then they shouted "a cowardy-custard with a nappy, doesn't make us happy". There was no-one else with me, so I got sad, and then I cycled home to tell my mum and dad (Katrine, 5 years).

As can be seen, the wounding words belong to the aforementioned categories, namely lower bodily functions and the low-status feeling of being a coward. This example is not the only one about being teased about wearing a nappy. It reveals that this is indeed a sore point among children, presumably because it hints at someone still being just a little baby unable to control his own bodily functions. Since this stage in life is not that distant to the children (and even older children may still need a nappy for the night), it is a subject that is in touch with reality, taboo-ridden and hurtful to mention. In the above example, the insult is also set within a rhyme known to most children in Denmark, which is sung as a 'teasing chant'. This naturally intensifies the experience for the girl. As in the above example, several of the words brought up by the children in the following quotes refer to the aforementioned taboo subjects.

Someone has been teasing me today. It's because they said "you baby loser" to me (Valdemar, 5 years).

It was because suddenly someone from class 3, he began to call me "monkey face", I think it was, and then he began to draw, like, faces of monkeys down in the sandbox. And then all of a sudden Jonathan from my class joined him in doing it. And then suddenly someone from class 1 began to do it too. (...) Then I got really, really sad inside (Viola, class 2).

They call me "rubber dog" and "moustache" and "little chicken". And then they say that Alma and I are in love (Lærke, reception class).

The last of the three quotes also features the word 'moustache', which few adults would, on the face of it, take offence from. However, the way this girl talks about it, it might as well have been 'idiot' or another more common term of abuse. The example shows that the crux of the matter is not always *what* is said. It is the context and the way in which the terms are pronounced that determine the interpretation, and hence whether it is seen as teasing, wounding and/or offensive.[5]

The tone of voice cannot be read from the above quote, but, naturally, both intonation and mimicking play a significant role in how the use of language is construed, especially as regards those words that cannot be directly categorised as insults. When the children get so indignant, offended or sad, it is evidently because they perceive the words as swearing, terms of abuse and/or name-calling. Or more precisely, it is because they sense the *intention* of the statement in this fashion.

A girl provides another example of how a word – despite rarely being seen as offensive *per se* – can be used as a tease to wounding effect. She recounts how she and some other girls would tease a boy from their class. They had heard the boy's father call him by a pet name, and then they would use it

[5] See also Sørensen 2006

too, even if it upset him. They also wrote his pet name on a note, leaving it in his locker. The episode was brought up at a class meeting, and the girls had to apologise to the boy. While it went on, the girl recounting the incidence found it highly amusing, but in retrospect, she did realise that they had saddened the boy. Two other girls interviewed narrated the same events. The boy's father had raised the episode with the girls' parents, who had probably discussed it with their daughters. All this goes to explain why this story made such an impression, being reported by no less than three girls independently of each other.

A last example of verbal teasing, which is, incidentally, also narrated by several children, is the following – seemingly harmless – episode, which has been etched into the memory of three girls in one of the preschools:

But should I tell you what was worst on that day? What Frederik said to me, and then to three others. That was Mona, Sine and Sidse. Frederik Belamann, he said he had two slices of bread with liver paste, and that was true. But should I tell you what he said after that? "That makes four", and there were four of us. And then he said "I'm going to break them in half, both of them, and then I'll throw them in your face!" He said that! (Katrine, 5 years).

This type of verbal teasing appears more like cheekiness and provocation than as outright malicious rumour-mongering, name-calling or the like. Nevertheless, the boy's utterance was experienced as mean and as crossing the boundaries of three girls, who all narrate the story independently of each other.

Being laughed at when hurt

Something that is deeply wounding to a child is being laughed at after having hurt oneself, when one is in need of sympathy and consolation. In that situation, other people's laughter is perceived as a let-down, which compounds the suffering. To some children, such lack of sensitivity and empathy constitutes the very worst type of teasing, as the hurt is doubled when one is *both* smarting from physical pain *and* goes through being mocked for it. This applies, for instance, to Annie and Joakim, who recount experiences that made them very sad:

Look, it was that kind of day, a Wednesday, and then somebody tripped me up. I fell right on my knee. And it was bleeding and bleeding. Then there were these two boys, they were laughing (Annie, reception class).

It was because we were playing a game of tag, and then I ran and fell on that thing, because I was running over it, so I fell and hurt my leg. Then Marius was standing there, laughing at me, and I didn't find that very funny. (...) He laughed at me, and I cried. He laughed at me, because he thought it was funny that I'd hurt myself (Joakim, reception class).

In both quotes, the other children's laughter is described as an integral part of the experience. The sense of grievance shines through the story-telling, not least that of Joakim. To him, it is offensive that someone can be amused because he fell and hurt himself, and in his narrative, the pain of being ridiculed seems to overshadow the physical pain from the tumble. In the details, he focuses not on the fall and how much it hurt, or even on how much it might have bled, but on how cynical it was of Marius to laugh in that situation. Even if one does not hurt oneself particularly badly, the laughter of others may be experienced as deeply painful on the inside. The dreadfulness of being ridiculed is

also referred to by Mona, aged 5, in the following quote about her heroic intervention when a mate fell.

Then he said: "thanks for helping me out". So I said: "What happened?" Then he said: "I slipped and fell". Then I said: "That's awful". And I didn't even laugh. I also feel a little sorry for him. I feel very sorry for someone getting hurt. Then I feel really sorry for them (Mona, 5 years).

Mona's story entails a declaration of how other children ought to react when one has hurt oneself, that is, with sympathy.

Intrigues, power struggles and being excluded

To be excluded from play can be a painful experience. Several children talk about standing on the sideline, witnessing the enjoyment of others, while they themselves, for some reason or another, are not able or not allowed to join in. A boy from class 2 recounts how he is sometimes banned from football during breaks:

Then sometimes, when we play football, there are some of them who are totally annoying, like, saying that I can't play with them. Then I'm just supposed to walk around doing nothing. That's totally boring (Jesper, class 2).

Jesper also relates that he finds it difficult to come up with something to do on his own, which is why he ends up just walking around being bored. Many children have tried to feel excluded every now and then, but for most of them it is, fortunately, a rare experience. However, in some groups of children, exclusion becomes a relatively locked-in social convention, giving rise to intrigues and power struggles about the right to define the play and decide who is 'in' and who is 'out'. These patterns appear to be most widespread in groups of girls. Lotte from class 2 tells how some of the girls in class – including herself – are not allowed to play skipping games:

Then there is usually a skipping rope, and then someone who swings it here, and then two playing cat and mouse. And then there are some who aren't allowed to play with them, when it happens. They say that's enough people, and no-one else can play (Lotte, class 2).

Similarly, a girl from preschool talks about her girlfriend who occasionally shuts her out from games:

Sometimes she teases me too, because she wants to be alone. And then she'd like me to play with the small kids, and that's okay, I like to take care of them. And sometimes I also like to play with her, but then she just can't be bothered (Sidsel, 5 years).

Later in the interview, however, it surfaces that the conflict – or game – about who is going to play with whom, is escalated on both sides, since the girl interviewed does not herself shy away from excluding and manipulating:

So I just walked over to her and said: "Are you and I going to play all day?" Then she said "no", and I just played with the others. But then I told the others to play only with me, because she was bullying me, and then they played only with me. And there she stood all day long, calling and waiting, until her mum came (Sidsel, 5 years).

What is interesting about this example is that the girl manages to turn the situation around from herself being wronged to getting her revenge, leaving her friend suffering instead. However, there is no repentance or sympathy in the narration, but rather a sober-minded moral that this is how it goes when you fail to treat your friend properly. The quote reveals that games of intrigues play out among the girls as early as preschool, awarding the power to define play relations to the one who succeeds in gaining the others' sympathy.

The girls' bitter experiences of teasing, slandering and scheming often unfold among girls who otherwise describe each other as friends, perhaps even best friends. The girls' conflicts may spring from a vast variety of issues, but one aspect raised on numerous occasions is about *taking part* in play. The following examples are about physically obstructing the participation of a friend:

It's also happened to me that we had to accompany each other, three [female] *friends going to play with something. And then we went to the after-school centre. And I was walking down the stairs, they were walking below me. And then they just ran away without me knowing about it. They just ran* (Lotte, class 2).

The experience of being shut out is highly concrete in this example, in which the other girls keep their physical distance to the girl telling the story. In the beginning of the quote, she refers to 'we', which also indicates that this is a group to which she normally belongs, whereas the last half of the narration highlights the separation, as the girl shifts to talking about 'I' versus 'they'.

Here is another example of how the girls in class 2 may hurt each other:

It was because we were out for a walk, and then I wanted to climb to get up to my [female] *friends, they were up on that huge tree trunk. And then I couldn't get up, so I asked if they wouldn't help me, but they just shouted: "fatty girl, can't get up to the others!" That made me really sad* (Andrea, class 2).

It is an interesting question whether these girls actually intend to hurt Andrea – i.e. if they are aware of the impression that their taunt makes on her, or if it is, in their own view, 'innocent' – and whether they also categorise Andrea as a friend. We cannot know any of this, but our empiric material shows that some girls, as early as preschool and early school years, engage in intrigues and power struggles, which may affect one girl on one day, and then be turned against someone else on the next. The positions taken up in such a girl hierarchy are indeed dynamic, and rarely point to a static balance of power within the group of girls. In this, adults – both teachers and parents – may have an important role to play in helping the girls understand each other's positions and experiences.

One type of struggle that often unfolds within a group of girls springs from disputes about the assignation of roles in the various games. Nina from the reception class reports that a particular girl has a lot to say whenever they play, and often keeps others out. Nina has herself tried to be denied access to a game. She has also experienced getting all the boring roles, such as a waitress or a cat, while the girl in charge gets to play the princess or the mother. The situation is clearly getting to her. A girl from class 2 also reports clashes over the right to define the games.

We've fallen out me and someone called Maja. It was because she wanted to be the mother. So did I, so I said to her: "You always get to be the mother", because she always does. Then she goes: "But I want to be the mother, always!" But she clearly can't. And then she begins to hit me, and then I say: "stop it!" And I may have shouted a bit at her (Silje, class 2).

This quote also reveals that one party is not automatically submissive, but that both parties do indeed feel entitled to have a say. Silje finally declares that she might shout at Maja, so this example is a fine illustration that she is equally aware that this is a mutual power struggle being played out.

Among the girls in class 2, there are several stories of friends who thought or believed that they had heard someone else saying or doing something unpleasant, although this actually sprang from misunderstandings, or perhaps a deliberate attempt to create drama. Lotte reports:

There's this girl from my class, she talks a lot about me, like, in different places. She often talks about me when I'm not there. And it's quite annoying when I find out about it from some of my [female] *friends, who're a little against what she's saying. Then she says it isn't true* (Lotte, class 2).

This quote, as well as several of those above, serve to illustrate how particularly the schoolgirls interviewed manage to create complicated girl-to-girl relations, expending much energy on reflecting upon and worrying about their position in this game of female friends, where you can apparently never feel quite sure. It also reveals that the girls' prime tool and weapon is language. Although it may still occur to them to come to blows and the like, the *verbal* artillery has become at least as – if not more – wounding.

'The big ones' are teasing…

Teasing takes place both within the same age group and across age, but as previously mentioned, the children tend to associate the most unpleasant and scary episodes with confrontation with older children, particularly boys. One boy from reception class recounts a horrible experience of being kicked by a mob of boys from class 5 without any foregoing dispute:

Once we were on our way back from physical education, when these big boys stood in our way. Then one of them kicked me on my knee. And there was one from reception class A, his name's Morten, he was there too. He was heading for his class after physical education too, and then those boys were still there. Then they kicked him in the belly. Big boys like that, they always do something (Thomas, reception class).

Thomas's last comment denotes a sense of insecurity. He did not understand why the boys kicked him, and he perceived the episode as ferocious, partly due to the violence, but also due to the arbitrariness of that violence, against which he was helpless. Similarly, a girl from class 2 tells how she was once teased by some "*really, really, really big boys*".

"*They just came and grabbed my beanie, running away with it and all. Then they hid it, and threw it into the sand. (...) So I said: 'don't!' and then they threw it. So, my* [female] *friends, they helped me catch it. And then they threw the beanie to each other. And at some point, we got really mad at them. Then we took the beanie away from them, but then they just quickly threw it on the ground* (Maja, class 2).

What seems to characterise older children's teasing of younger ones is a certain arbitrariness and signs of boredom, and not outright antipathy to the little ones.

However, children do not need to be big to appear frightening to others. At one of the schools visited by the researchers, the name of a particular boy in class 2 came up repeatedly in a vast amount of stories about teasing performed by peers of the same age. The boy was described as extremely fierce in his manner of teasing. Sif, a somewhat cautious girl from class 2, believed that everyone at the school was afraid of him. In one of her stories, she recalled feeling vulnerable when she had to go to the canteen to buy food:

So Ahmed, he always arrives like this, pushing the others and jumping the queue. And perhaps takes your money (Sif, class 2).

However, Sif had never experienced Ahmed actually taking anyone's money, but in her fantasy, this was an evident – and scary – risk. She was so frightened of Ahmed that she did not dare raise objections when he was teasing her or her mates.

Where grown-ups aren't around …

Inside, there are lots of grown-ups, but outside there aren't. That's why you can tease them (Hanib, class 2).

As Hanib explains in simple terms, the presence of adults is decisive for how much children tease each other. Teasing usually occurs where adults are absent. Hanib himself is frequently involved in teasing, and in fights as well. As the quote indicates, he is well aware that, to have a chance of getting away with it unpunished, it must take place outside of the adults' sight. At one of the schools visited, this point is clearly brought home due to the school's structural design. Vognsild Parish School has two playgrounds, one small and one large. The large playground is next to the building with the older pupils' classrooms, and it is the most popular due to its array of playing opportunities. The chance to slide down an aerial cableway and to use other challenging playground equipment is alluring, even for the youngest children. On the other hand, the large playground is where the smallest children feel the most vulnerable to teasing. Two children explain why this is so:

There is no-one who gets teased up there [on the small playground]*, because there are often teachers on playground duty. But down here on the large playground, and all other places, you often get teased, because there are no teachers on playground duty. They rarely come around here* (Vitus, class 2).

Interviewer: *Does it happen often down there* [on the large playground] *that someone teases?*
Lærke: *Yes, it's only down there that someone teases, because the big kids can't be bothered to play on the small one. They can't be bothered.*
Interviewer: *So if you stay on the small playground, you won't get teased?*
Lærke: *No, you won't. But I can't be bothered to be on the small one. There is only a climbing frame and some kind of water that's ice, that you're not allowed to walk on. It's boring* (Lærke, reception class).

The two children associate the possible danger of being subjected to teasing with two factors. Firstly, the 'big ones', who constitute potential tormentors; secondly, the lack of teachers on playground duty, who are attributed a preventative effect. Another key point, however, as can be seen from Lærke's last comments, is that the keenness to experiment with fun games may outweigh the fear of being teased during breaktime.

At times, the risk of teasing can also feed into the children's choice of playing arena as an *alluring* factor. The danger of being teased adds excitement to the play. This point was hammered home in one of the researchers' visits to the school. Snow had fallen the night before, and the chance to play in it lured nearly all the pupils outdoors during the breaks. However, a school rule forbade snowball fights in any other place than on the football pitches, which were in the remotest part of the school perimeter. The football pitches exerted a compelling pull on many of the children, including Fatima from class 2, who went through being rolled thoroughly around in the snow by some older boys. She subsequently stated that the experience made her both afraid and angry. Nevertheless, she ventured back there again, because, as she explained: "*We thought it was kind of very exciting*".

When teasing turns into bullying

Most children are subjected to teasing every now and then, and many can also relate one-off experiences that were particularly scary, offensive or wounding. In some cases, however, the teasing becomes more intensive, or it targets a particular child, who is thus subjected to prolonged persecution or exclusion from the various communities of children. According to prevalent definitions, such cases warrant talk of bullying (Knudsen et al, 2008).

In one class 2 visited by the researchers, Karla is characterised by the other children as someone frequently teased, or outright bullied, by boys as well as girls, from her own as well as other classes. Karla is teased about her name and looks, and several of the girls criticise her conduct. They think, for instance, that she is "*annoying*" or "*rather sensitive*". Her classmates mention that she easily gets into a rage, and that she refuses to accept an apology after a quarrel or the like. Although the classmates are critical towards Karla, several also draw attention to the fact that there is something wrong. A girl from the same class explains: "*Sometimes she cries because she has to go to school. I certainly don't think she's well*" (Astrid, class 2). Some of the children are clearly embarrassed to talk about Karla's situation, whereas others willingly recount the teasing against her. In the same class, there was a boy who – one year before – had changed class due to teasing/bullying:

When we were class 1, there was someone who has now left for another class. Then some of the boys, they began to pull his pants down and all sorts of stuff. So he got enough of being in this class. So he moved to another (Astrid, class 2).

A few other children mention the boy concerned, recounting how he was called names, and generally cast out by the rest of the class. One girl explains her view of why the boy was subjected to such fierce teasing:

Interviewer: *How come he was teased?*
Isabella: *Because he was the unpopular boy in class.*
Interviewer: *Yeah. How do you become unpopular in the class?*
Isabella: *He was also totally crazy.*

The quote reveals a tendency often found in bullying cases: that the bullies largely attribute the bullying to particular characteristics of the vulnerable child. This contributes to 'legitimising' the group's persecution, and speaks volumes of the scant empathy with the bullied child.

3. Dealing with teasing

When teasing, and perhaps even bullying, occurs, what matters first of all is to handle it in a positive manner, making it possible to move on. Teasing is coped with by children in myriad ways and at various levels. It is important to act in the situation at hand, i.e. while the teasing is ongoing, but also to subsequently get back on one's feet, both physically and emotionally. In the management of teasing, both adult professionals and the children themselves have a role to play. While children can – and prefer to – deal with some types of situations on their own, others require adult intervention. This section focuses on children's various strategies for handling teasing. It will also be examined how children see their own versus the adults' role, including which situations children cope with themselves, and which ones cause them to call on adult help. One point, however, is that the adults' framing of children's teasing is clearly evident in many of the children's stories about handling teasing on their own, since the children actively employ tools introduced by the adults.

Ignoring or not caring about teasing

As illustrated in the foregoing section, it is evident that not all instances of teasing are attributed the same significance by the children involved. While some cases of teasing are perceived as serious, fierce or offensive, others are seen as harmless or insignificant, and are forgotten soon after. In our interviews, we asked the children what they did to deal with a particular teasing situation. Frequent replies included "*nothing*", "*I just put it behind me*", "*I just played on*" or "*we quickly made up again*." Accordingly, in these stories, the teasing can be characterised as minor interruptions, that did not leave any appreciable scars. However, there are also some children whose handling of teasing involves an *active* attempt to show indifference towards the teaser. Other children talk about giving it up and withdrawing in order to get physically away from the teasing:

I've tried to be teased. There's a girl from class 3, right? She's not very nice to me. I just look at her, and she goes: "Ey, I won't let you look at me, I'm not having it!" And then she shouts into my ear. That's not very nice. (...) So I say: "Would you stop that thing now?" And the goes: "No, I won't." Then I just went into my own area [of my class] (Nikoline, reception class).

As can be seen from the quote, Nikoline tried to assert herself in the face of the somewhat older girl, but in the absence of a positive response, Nikoline retreated under the pressure of superior force.

The ability to ignore or not care about teasing depends on a host of factors, such as the gravity of the situation, the child's current state of mind, the child's general temper, encouragement from others (e.g. parents) to handle teasing in this manner, and much else.

Objecting – on one's own or other children's behalf

When children experience being teased in a manner they dislike, the vast majority of them try to object, i.e. literally telling the opposite party to "*cut it out*", "*stop*" or "*don't do that*". Our interview material presents substantial variation from one educational establishment and from one class to

another as regards the degree to which the children verbalise unambiguous protest. In one reception class, in particular, explicit objection formed part of virtually all the children's stories, just as the children in that class expressed an expectation that a plea to "*stop*" would be respected. Several of these children indignantly recounted experiences in which they had been teased by older pupils, who simply continued, even after being asked to stop. This noticeable difference between the various (pre)schools and classes is interesting, since it clearly reflects how staff members set a framework for the management of teasing at each place. The divergence indicates that children adopt the guidelines of adults, using them actively in their reciprocal interactions.

Some children perceive objection as an effective strategy – at least in certain situations. Other instances call for resort to a different strategy, typically the involvement of an adult, whose authority can contribute to halting the teasing. However, raising objections is a strategy that requires certain courage, especially if the teaser is stronger or bigger than oneself. Some of the children talked about how they had faced down the teaser by seeking support from a friend, thus being two to object. In one class 2, the girls engaged in certain intrigues, which were mainly about individual girls being in charge a lot, shutting out others from play and socialising. One girl, who seemed to be at the periphery of the core group, related that she and a girlfriend, who was also excluded, had talked about what to do about it:

Me and Maja, we've talked it over a bit, and then we've come up with trying to say it, when they do something. For example, sometimes they do stuff to us that we don't want. When they do something to us, we're going to say "stop, we don't want that thing", and then bang a table or something. That's what we've agreed. Because when they do something bad, me and Maja are a little afraid of saying it to them, and so we want to try to do it together (Wilma, class 2).

Wilma's story points to the essence of counting on the support of a good friend in putting a stop to teasing, or other unpleasant and unreasonable interpersonal relations. However, there are also some children who are courageous and caring enough to intervene in teasing which does not affect themselves. One example is Nikola from reception class, who recounts how she helped a friend to object:

It's because there are some boys, and Annie was afraid to… it's because the boys, they want to get Annie's pants wet, and then Annie was afraid to say "don't", but then I said it, because I'm not afraid to say "don't" to the big boys (Nikola, reception class).

In the situation reported, Nikola came to the rescue of her friend, even if it would obviously have been easier and 'safer' not to. In one of the preschools visited, the staff are working purposefully to encourage this kind of brave and responsible act, which is described as being "a knight" (*ridder*) for other children. The children had adopted this terminology, and those recounting their own "knightly deeds" were patently proud of themselves. Here, Katrine aged 5 is asked what it means to be a knight.

Katrine*: It means, when you see someone being teased, or being run into by a bicycle, then you have to… if you're not afraid to tell Andreas to stop… But then I didn't find him.*
Interviewer*: What can you say then, if you'd found Andreas?*
Katrine*: "Andreas, you can't run your bicycle into Camilla. It makes her really sad".*

The way in which the adults frame the management of teasing shines through in Katrine's verbalisation. The knight theme finds resonance with the children, as several of them have not only adopted the terminology, but are also adhering to the guidelines for action that it entails.

'Sorry'

To understand and appreciate the value of 'sorry' – both by actively apologising and by taking satisfaction from *getting* an apology – is evidently not something automatic. Like all other behaviours, this needs to be learned through a socialisation process underpinned by adults. Through countless instances of conflict management with help from adults, the children learn that this magic word has – or can have – a very special symbolic meaning. However, this naturally presupposes that both parties understand its value. Saying 'sorry' is used by many of the children interviewed to cope with teasing and conflict as early as preschool age. In the following quote, 5-year-old Sidsel narrates an episode in which she apologised, thus being able to handle a conflict that was brewing:

Yes, because then I made the mistake of saying something else, because then I also said: "Katrine, you can just play with the boys then", just as I did one day, and then she said: "but the boys, they are not as good". So I said "sorry, okay" (Sidsel, 5 years).

In the same interview, Sidsel also recounts how her friend Katrine handles teasing and conflict by using the word 'sorry':

Look, when Katrine teases someone, she quickly says sorry, because then she feels sorry for them again, and then she quickly says sorry, and she says "don't tell on me [to an adult]*, because now we're going to be good friends". And then I say it's okay* (Sidsel, 5 years).

In Sidsel's version of events, Katrine's apologies seek to remedy injustices that she has committed. To the spectator, however, it may appear as if Katrine's quick requests for forgiveness also serve a strategic function, namely to persuade the other party not to involve an adult, which might lead to a reprimand or telling-off. The quote also shows that an apology need not be a deeply felt admission of guilt to have an effect, but that it also works by virtue of convention. This point is also brought home when the children talk about adult management of teasing. In the interview excerpt below, Isabella from class 2 answers what adults can do to help.

Isabella*: They can talk to the children.*
Interviewer*: Yeah, so what should they say to the children?*
Isabella*: That they must say sorry.*

Isabella's answer suggests that she associates adult help in handling teasing with encouragement – or an outright order – to say sorry. However, the older the children are, the more it is up to themselves to take the initiative and assume responsibility for an apology. In the following example, which is from an interview with another girl from class 2, 'sorry' is no longer used on request from the adults.

Interviewer*: How can you actually solve the problem that you've had, do you think?*
Karoline*: Say that they shouldn't do that again, that it wasn't very nice. And say sorry to each other and stuff like that.*
Interviewer*: Yeah. Does it help when you say sorry?*

Karoline*: Yes. It puts you in a bit of a better mood* (Karoline, class 2).

Karoline has clearly taken to the phenomenon of apologising, seeing it as a natural part of how a conflict or teasing episode can be settled in a good-humoured manner.

Consolation

There were lots of kids who watched Vera cry, and there were lots of kids who stroked her (Liva, 5 years).

Once the damage has been done, and one has been teased and left sad, it is good to be comforted by another child or by an adult. As it appears from the above quote, as early as preschool age, many children find themselves able to help when someone needs it. In our interview material, it is primarily girls who talk about consoling and being consoled.

To crowd round and caress someone who is sad, as in Liva's story above, is not, on the face of it, a particularly sophisticated or demanding form of consolation, but it is a way in which even very small children can express care. And care from other children is highly appreciated:

Interviewer*: What is best, to have one's friends come and help, or the adults come and help?*
Isabella*: I think the other children… when they're your friends* (Isabella, 5 years).

It is good to be seen and acknowledged by friends, when feeling down. In the following two quotes, two girls from preschool and class 2, respectively, explain how they would like to see other children react when they are sad:

They might say: "What happened?" Then I say: "I fell" or "I hurt myself", or something. Then they could help. Or if they saw me cry, they can help too. They can't just walk around going: "Oh well, that's where you're lying down. That's where." And then just walk away without helping. That'd be so annoying (Mona, 5 years).

Interviewer*: Is there anyone else* [than the adults]*, who can help if someone is teasing?*
Andrea*: Those who know about it can, those who've seen it, because then they know what happened, and you don't have to explain. Because when you cry, you can hardly breathe, for all that you cry. So it's easier, because they know what has happened* (...)
Interviewer*: What can they do to help?*
Andrea*: They can comfort you, so they don't just don't care about you. Because that's what you think, if they do nothing* (Andrea, class 2).

What is clearly important – both to Andrea in class 2 and Mona at preschool – is that other children are not simply indifferent, when one is feeling down. To be ignored when you most need help possibly hurts more than anything else. Mona continues to talk about an episode when she helped a boy who fell, thus expressing how she would also like to be treated herself in that same situation:

Then he said: "thanks for helping me out". So I said: "What happened?" Then he said: "I slipped and fell". Then I said: "That's awful". And I didn't even laugh. I also feel a little sorry for him. I feel very sorry for someone getting hurt. Then I feel really sorry for them (Mona 5 years).

Mona's story also hints at a certain pride. She is plainly satisfied with her own effort, and she is not alone with this feeling. To many of the children interviewed, it is clear that having comforted someone makes them puff their chest out and feel significant. Accordingly, children see great value both in receiving consolation from other children and in taking opportunities to express the same care towards others.

Rules for prevention of teasing

Concrete, tangible rules for conduct are important for the children's interactions, particularly in preschool. One kind of rules may have to do with punishment, such as a ban against staying in a particular place, if one has, on some occasion, done something 'not very clever' there. For instance, for some 'trouble-makers' the football pitch and the playhouse are out of bounds, because they always end up in conflict with the other children there. Another type of rules might be written norms for how to behave towards one another. One boy tells what happened when they introduced 'friend rules' at the preschool centre.

Noa*: Jakob would hit us until we got friend rules.*
Interviewer*: So you got friend rules. What are they about?*
Noa*: It's where you must be nice to one another, and you must not hit, and must be nice to one another.*
Interviewer*: Didn't you know that until you got friend rules?*
Noa*: No. Or yes. But Jakob didn't. Before, then he didn't understand it. (...) He stopped hitting, but… he may still get it wrong sometimes, even if we've got friend rules* (Noa, reception class, Vognsild Parish School).

Children at preschool and in early school years are often rather fixated on rules, including pointing out and enforcing them. Among typical rules that loom large in children's worlds are those about not hitting each other, or about being kind to one another. One example is the 'friend rules', to which Noa refers in the above quote. This type is invented by adults, even if children may be involved in the actual phrasing of such rules. Children's ways of relating to the rules can be highly concrete, as such rules are indeed highly concrete formulations of proper social manners, i.e. a part of the socialisation and civilisation process. The no-nonsense approach to the rules shines through in the quote by Noa above.

The same quote also hints at a certain respect for authority as regards the rules. It is not an interpersonal moral issue whether to be "nice to one another", but a question of what the rules say. The field of developmental psychology has been particularly concerned with children's experiences and understanding of *conventional* versus *moral* norms (e.g. Schaffer 1999; Vejleskov 2003; Piaget 1965; Colby & Kohlberg 1987). While conventional norms spring from *choices* that have been made about something specific in a given society or culture, such as norms for how to greet, address older people, play various games, get by in the traffic, etc., moral norms, by contrast, are universal and valid whether or not there is a social consensus in place. This applies, for instance, to the notion that it is forbidden or unethical to steal, to kill etc. (Schaffer 1999: 323). Children's ways of relating to these two types of norms depend, to a great extent, on their age. For example, small children find it easier to relate to conventional than to moral rules, though they may also have greater difficulties in distinguishing between them.

A ban on hurting others – whether it be with words or force – represents a moral norm. However, small children often perceive such norms as conventional, relating to them rather consistently. The younger children are, the more they respect the authority of such rules. According to Vejleskov (2003), children need conventional rules as a point of reference for their actions, though the older they grow, they better they become at understanding their own and other people's actions according to ethical norms, and at reflecting more independently on, say, injustice, or at expressing empathy. Accordingly, when rules are drawn up about behaving well towards each other in a class, as attested by the above quote, it can be seen as the adults' recognition that children need concrete rules in order to adhere to what is, in fact, an expression of ethical and moral norms.

When children cannot handle it themselves – about adult intervention

Thus far, we have looked at how children handle teasing *independently*. While some children, particularly those of a certain age, prefer to sort things out on their own, a great deal of younger children almost instinctively associate teasing management with adult intervention. However, it is a generalised characteristic, regardless of age, that one of the most frequent solution models referred to is to tell an adult. In the interviews, the children often simply state that they "*said that*" or "*fetched a grown-up*". The mere act of calling in an adult is the first and major step on the road toward halting teasing. What the adult *then* does is not portrayed as such a weighty matter, which transpires especially when the children refrain from providing further explanation of the adult's actions. This may happen in situations when the opposite party has committed something that is, beyond doubt, unfair or outright forbidden. But there are also cases in which the adult is called in to help clear up a conflict. An important component of teasing management appears – particularly through the lens of preschool children – to be finding out who carries the blame, or who has behaved (the most) wrongly, so that the person concerned can be reprimanded.

Often, however, the children try, to some extent, to sort it out themselves before involving an adult. Two boys in reception class and class 2 explain:

Gustav: *At least most of them start by saying "don't do that!"*
Interviewer: *Yeah. And what if that doesn't work? What do they do then?*
Gustav: *Perhaps they say it a couple of times. If they still don't stop after that, I think they fetch a grown-up* (Gustav, class 2).

We just tried to stop him, and then we'd had enough, and couldn't stop him, so then we told on him (Noa, reception class).

Apparently, what the two boys say is in conformity with how some adults would prefer teasing to be handled, since several children tell how the teachers encourage them to cope with less serious teasing themselves:

Interviewer: *Who can actually help when someone is teasing?*
Sine: *The grown-ups would like the children to try* (Sine, 5 years).

Once Nicolai from the red room, he was playing boys after girls. So I stood like this and I was caught. Then he rammed that elbow right into me, and I got totally squashed. I got really sad. And then I went to the grown-ups, and the grown-ups told me to go back to Nicolai and tell him to stop all that teasing (Siri, 5 years).

All the children, however, occasionally experience the need to call in an adult, if a situation becomes too awful or complex to handle. Obviously, the limit for when something becomes unmanageable varies from one child to another. Several children point out that what matters to them is how sad they have become in a given situation. Jesper recounts:

When I cry, I usually tell them about it, but when I don't cry, I don't tell the grown-ups about it (Jesper, class 2).

Jesper elaborates by explaining, for instance, that he prefers to tell an adult, if he has been hit very hard. Ellen from class 2 makes a rather different reflection:

I was more angry and sad than what I'd tell a grown-up. (...) Sometimes – right? – it's also like, when I get really angry and sad, I almost never tell it to an adult, because then I forget to tell it to an adult. I think more about… feeling sad (Ellen, class 2).

As can be seen from the quote, Ellen has tried to be so saddened by teasing that she preferred *not* to let an adult in on it. Moreover, she expresses that she is sometimes too absorbed in her own emotions to consider seeking help or consolation from an adult. Both aspects are interesting, since they testify to Ellen's perception that help from an adult is not always a solution model, and even show that she seems reticent to expose the weakness inherent in seeking out an adult when she is in the greatest distress. In general, the children appear to place great trust in the adults' ability and willingness to help them when they need it, but a few children also report having tried to get assistance from an adult without being taken seriously.

Once the adults have been called in and arrive at the scene of confrontation, they may approach the case in a variety of ways. The children narrate how the adult may tell off one party, or impose other punitive sanctions, or how the adult may act as a mediator, getting the parties to speak to each other in the situation at hand. Finally, mediation and conversation may draw in the entire group of children, or school class, in talks that often go beyond one-off occurrences, in which the point is just as much to discuss matters of principle about how to treat each other.

The adult as a punitive authority

The grown-ups tell us off a lot. If you do something. You get told off lots of lots of times. You always do something. You [impersonal 'you', as in 'one'] *always do something naughty, always, always, always* (Sebastian, 4 years).

Sebastian is among the boys who often do 'something naughty', and hence end up in the adults' spotlight, resulting in a telling-off. He clearly does not enjoy that. Nevertheless, reprimanding appears to be a central tool in the adults' handling of children's teasing and conflict, at least when one asks the children. For instance, 5-year-old Mick explains about the adults at his preschool: "*They… keep an eye on us.*" And if someone has bitten or hit someone, "*then they get a telling-off*". For children, telling-off is a typical element of conflict management, and the adult's basic scope for action. An adult reproaching the opposite party seems to be the desired solution, particularly for the younger children, since it serves as a kind of retribution. In this fashion, the adult puts the opposite party in his place, or ensures the revenge that the child was incapable of taking, whether it be

because the child is too small, too afraid or lacks the authority to enforce the rules of the place. In the following quote, the motivation to fetch the adult is clearly to get her to tell the other off, and not so much to get her to help both parties solve a conflict:

Mikkel*: Most of the children, they ask Birgit, because she is the strictest. So all the children ask for Birgit.*
Interviewer*: What do they want Birgit to do?*
Mikkel*: They say to Birgit that I've done something. Or that other children have done something. And when Birgit isn't here at the centre, they say it to someone else* (Mikkel, 5 years).

Some educational institutions have systematised the punishment for teasing etc., for instance by establishing that the 'guilty' child is ordered to stay at a particular place, where the child can then reflect upon his or her actions. In two of the preschool centres visited, children who have teased others risk having to sit on a particular bench or the like[6] in order to "think things through". This is recounted by 5-year-old Sine:

Sine*: And then you sit outside on that bench, or you get to sit over there. (...) That is, if there isn't already someone sitting there, you get to sit there. Because they're not supposed to sit together, then they might enjoy it together, instead of thinking about what has just happened.*
Interviewer*: Okay. So why is it that you get to sit on the bench?*
Sine*: Because you have to think a bit about what happened, and see if it was fun for the others. And that it wasn't* (Sine, 5 years).

The point of having to sit on the bench is, as the quote illustrates, first and foremost to think about what you have just done. However, it also entails a certain punishment, since it would be rather unfortunate if one should end up enjoying being in that position. In continuation of the above, Sine adds that, actually, it rarely helps to think about it, because after that, the boys carry on teasing in the same manner anyway. Although the 'thinking bench' may have some effect nevertheless, it then occurs to her. As she explains, the trees in the playground have now been pruned to give the adults a better view, and this has led to the boys teasing less, "*because* [otherwise] *they have to sit on the bench*". In other words, there is clearly an element of punishment in ending up on that bench. A crude comparison could be a kind of 'pillory', exposing the culprit as a warning to others. Several children, who have tried to sit on the bench, confirm that this is clearly associated with unpleasantness.

Although many children first and foremost associate adult teasing management with reprimanding, this is not necessarily reflected in how a majority of adults in most situations do in fact conduct themselves when assisting children in handling teasing. It merely says something about what makes an impression on children, and hence what they remember and find relevant to relate. However, some children also recount how adults have embarked on sorting out teasing and conflicts without using punishment or rebuke.

The adult as mediator

In several of the children's narratives, the adult features as a kind of mediator who – having put a stop to a situation of teasing – also undertakes to mediate between the children involved, i.e. getting

[6] One boy refers to the place as a 'naughty corner' (in Danish '*skammekrog*', literally 'corner of shame'): "*There are two naughty corners in the green room*" (Jakob, 5 years).

them to talk together and moving on. In the following quote, Astrid from class 2 explains how the adults typically deal with teasing that has ended in fighting:

Astrid*: You know, they go to put a stop to it, so they don't fight anymore, and then they have to talk about it.*
Interviewer*: Do you always have to talk about it, when some children have been fighting?*
Astrid*: Well, at least they have to talk about and say what they could have done differently, if they've hit someone. And then they have to say sorry to each other* (Astrid, class 2).

According to Astrid, the mediation of adults comes with a demand for reflection on the occurrence on the part of the children: what could have been done differently? The mediation concludes with the nearly obligatory 'sorry', in this case on both sides, indicating that hitting each other is not acceptable. Other children recount being required to shake hands with the opposite party as a kind of mutual reassurance that the episode is over.

Mediation also takes place at the level of an entire school class. Several children relate that the teacher regularly asks the entire class how breaktime went, and that this gives rise to talks about teasing and disputes, drawing in more children than those directly involved. Mille from class 2 explains how it works in her class:

Sometimes we get in from the break, and then someone has been teased or something. Then we talk about it. (…)Then [our teachers] *Dorthe or Britt ask how this could have been solved, and we put our hands up, and then they ask us. And perhaps we come up with a good solution to it* (Mille, class 2).

Such talks immediately after breaktime are appreciated by the children, because they address teasing and disputes right away. A girl from class 2 explains the value of such adult-initiated conversations:

You know, it's good to get it out [off your chest]*, so that it doesn't just stay within you. That makes you sadder and sadder, because you don't tell anyone, and you don't get anything solved that way. So it just carries on* (Lotte, class 2).

Standardised framing of how children deal with teasing

In the setting of schools and day-care centres, it has become popular to employ various standardised tools in the work to teach children conflict management etc. For instance, a substantial proportion of all Danish educational establishments for children follow the programme 'Step by Step' (*Trin for Trin*). This provides material to teach children to empathise by decoding their own and other people's emotions and states of mind. Similarly, Save the Children Denmark's project 'Free from Bullying' offers a variety of concrete tools seeking to influence children to respect and tolerate each other, as well as to show care and courage in their interpersonal relations. Free from Bullying focuses on mobilising those children who are often referred to – in the field of bullying research – as 'passive spectators', i.e. children who witness bullying without being directly involved themselves (Rasmussen 2008: 12).

One tool of Free from Bullying is a teddy bear, which – the project suggests – has a variety of uses as regards consolation and objection. Our interviewees, particularly the preschool children, occasionally brought up this cuddle toy in stories about what they had done when seeing other children being unhappy. Several children reported having fetched 'Buddy Bear' in order to comfort a mate. In such situations, the teddy bear takes on a consoling function, which is easily accessible, since it does not require much from the child wishing to express concern. In some of the narratives, the speaker's ability to react with such a gesture of kindness is clearly associated with joy and satisfaction. However, the children's testimony also reveals that a well-intentioned teddy bear cannot always measure up to care from an adult – as seen from the viewpoint of the *recipient* of such consolation. Some children also associated the teddy bear with saying no to teasing. In the following quote, 5-year-old Katrine answers whether she has tried to raise objections to some fellow preschool girls, who sometimes make her feel sad:

Katrine*: I wouldn't dare to say it, but then I didn't have a bully bear, and then I could tell the bully bear to say it. (…) It's because if you're teased on the playground, then it's okay to hurry to fetch the bully bear, and then tell it what to say.*
Interviewer*: Can the bully bear then say something?*
Katrine*: No, you just do that yourself, but then you just pretend that it's the bully bear saying it, even when you don't dare.*
Interviewer*: Ah, so then you can actually say something that you don't dare to say?*
Katrine*: But you just say it anyway. Or you could fetch a grown-up, if you're too scared to say it* (Katrine, 5 years).

The quote shows how the teddy bear may give a voice to children who have to say something to others that they find difficult. The toy serves as a go-between, and so the children are saved from confronting the opposite party head on. However, the quote also indicates that this solution model does not work for all children in all situations. It remains safest to find an adult sometimes. As expressed in this quote from an interview with a boy from another preschool centre, nor does the teddy bear always function in practice:

Jakob*: Then you have to hold up the teddy bear and say stop.*
Interviewer*: Okay, do people stop then, when you say so?*
Jakob*: No, those children in the centre, they don't…* (Jakob, 5 years)

This indicates that, at Jakob's preschool centre, the teddy bear has a more formal than functional role, which has been arranged by the adults, but not adopted by the children. The quote shows that Jakob is well aware what one *must* or *should* do when being teased, but that he also knows that this is ultimately devoid of any practical effect. For the device to be truly useful, both parties involved in a given teasing situation would have to accept the teddy bear's symbolic value introduced by the adults.

The children's negotiations and reflections as regards the teddy bear's value are interesting, because the teddy bear constitutes a new way of framing how to deal with teasing. Employing a teddy bear as a tool deviates from customary management of teasing, as it turns a tangible object into a medium between the parties. The introduction of such a tool evidently requires investment of time and energy to make the teddy bear a natural part of how children cope with teasing.

Conclusion

Teasing accounts for a significant part of children's lives in educational institutions. All children know about being teased, or have been involved in it in other ways. To children aged 4-8, 'teasing' is a comprehensive term, which encompasses myriad ways of being inconvenienced or outright harassed. Our interview material also shows that teasing occurs on several levels and to various degrees of seriousness. It takes place between children who know and who do not know each other, and with varying intensity and severity. The example of 5-year-old Frederik – who threatens two preschool girls of the same age that he will throw bread with liver paste in their faces – is at the mildest extreme of the spectrum. The girls were indignant at Frederik's cheek, but there is no fear or distress in their narration of the episode. Four of them shared the experience, and they all know Frederik, thus being aware that he might be a teaser, but he is not out to harm them. On the contrary, a certain fascination with his naughty tricks can be sensed from the stories. Our data material is full of such tales of banter among friends, which have made an impression on the children, but not affected them mentally to any appreciable degree.

At the opposite end of the spectrum is Thomas's story. He is in reception class, and recounts when he was assaulted by a mob of older boys, who were unknown to him, yet kicked him without Thomas understanding why. This kind of senseless violence is frightening, and so Thomas ends his account by noting that "*Big boys like that, they always do something*". This can be read as an expression that the experience has affected Thomas's trust in and sense of security near older boys.

Karla's situation is also at the rather serious end. She is not subjected to physical assaults, but has – over a prolonged period – experienced negative criticism from many of her classmates, resulting in partial exclusion from the various communities within the class. The teasing of Karla has become a pattern for how the pupils interact in the class concerned to such a degree that it is fair to say that Karla is suffering outright bullying.

These three stories are all examples of teasing, but clearly of highly dissimilar nature, hence calling for different types of adult intervention, if any. As shown in the report, teasing of all kinds is not necessarily for the worse, nor does it always require adults to interfere. Teasing can also take place for fun, and between funny and serious is a huge grey area, which is clearly illustrated by the following remark:

I was just about to tell it to a grown-up, but then all of a sudden it turned funny (Alma, reception class).

If Alma had got to involve an adult in the situation concerned, it would probably have developed differently. However, the children dealt with it on their own, and Alma learned that teasing can, in fact, also be harmless and amusing. There is no doubt that it is important for children to learn to navigate and conduct themselves on their own in that grey zone between funny and serious. The example of Frederik and his slices of bread with liver paste is also in this borderland, where children use teasing to test each other and experiment with ways of interacting.

Furthermore, the report shows that children on their own are, to a great extent, capable of handling the conflicts that may arise from teasing, reaching a solution by means of negotiations and apologies. This only requires the adults to set a framework within which the children can act, and that the children learn tools to cope with teasing, whether it be on behalf of themselves or others.

This report has pointed out that, even when adults are not physically present, their influence is, nevertheless, noticeable in terms of the children's socialisation, as the children employ the competencies and tools that the adults have helped them to acquire. This is illustrated by the children's assimilation of an understanding that the tiny word 'sorry' takes on an almost magical significance, as well as in the children's use of less common tools, such as the 'bully bear'. In the interviews, the portrayal of the adult as 'police officer' or 'fire extinguisher' is predominant, yet several children also tell of how the adults create space for conversation about teasing, conflict, care, etc. among the children.

In our data, we notice disparities between the various educational institutions in how the children talk about coping with teasing. One school stands out from the rest by its pupils referring to this aspect more in terms of *objecting*, not just on one's own behalf, but also, to a great degree, on behalf of other children. Altogether, the children interviewed at this school are more focused on helping others, and they seem to be more concerned with teasing and handling it as a matter that does not just implicate the two parties directly involved. This variation between schools is interesting, because it ostensibly reflects how the teachers have worked with teasing and conflict management. Accordingly, the case reported can be interpreted as the school personnel having succeeded in introducing a more collective sense of responsibility, which the children have taken on board, and are now applying successfully in their everyday lives.

However, nowhere, not even at the school held out as a positive example, do children always manage to deal with teasing on their own. Specific situations can arise, in which the children's competencies in this regard plainly do not suffice, hence calling for direct intervention, help or support from adults. In Thomas's case, it was exceedingly difficult for him to stand up to a group of older boys. That would have required strength and courage beyond what can be expected from a child at his age and position, or of his classmates witnessing the scene. Similarly, Karla's situation seems to be deadlocked. A pattern has formed linked to her status in class, which can be very difficult to break both for her and her classmates. This calls for a person with authority, who can point out to the children what pattern of conduct has arisen, helping them to establish different, more positive manners of social interaction.

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