

**WILL WORDS EVER HARM ME?****B. Geiger**

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Classroom peers are a major source of self-esteem regulation and evaluation to young adolescents, aged 12-14, who are going through the developmental stage of identity vs. role diffusion (Erikson, 1968). This fact makes young adolescents particularly sensitive and vulnerable to the criticism, ridicule, sarcasm, and verbal abuse of their peers, which may testify to their own inadequacy and worthlessness. Based on in-depth qualitative interviews, this study provides the opportunity to 145 sixth graders to tell in their own words how they feel and react when subjected to verbal and emotional abuse from their classmates. Content analysis of the interviews indicated that students differentiated between verbally aggressive messages that were meant to be for fun and those that were not based on (1) contextual cues, (2) the degree of friendship between the transmitter and receiver of the abusive message (3) the reaction of the other present, and (2) malleability of the personal features that were the topic of the attack. When interpreted as not being for fun, verbally aggressive messages primed hostile thoughts, anger, and the desire for retaliation. Pronounced gender differences were found in the reasons provided for not retaliating with girls being better able to rationalize away verbal abuse as a sign of their male classmates' immaturity. However, when verbal provocation touched a permanent trait or characteristic, or people that are an integral and indispensable part of the student's sense of self and social identity, then gender differences disappear concerning the affective state of the students. When the message was interpreted as attacking the self, humiliation, and anger resulted and justified the escalation from verbal to physical aggression. Observing peers were found to play an important role in tension reduction and in the prevention of the escalation verbal to physical aggression. Recommendation to practitioners are suggested.