

Read the following story as if you are the one experiencing it:

It's a normal day at school, just like any other day. On the playground, you see a bunch of your friends standing around in a circle. You go over to investigate. In the middle of that circle is Kayla, one of the decidedly un-cool kids in the school.

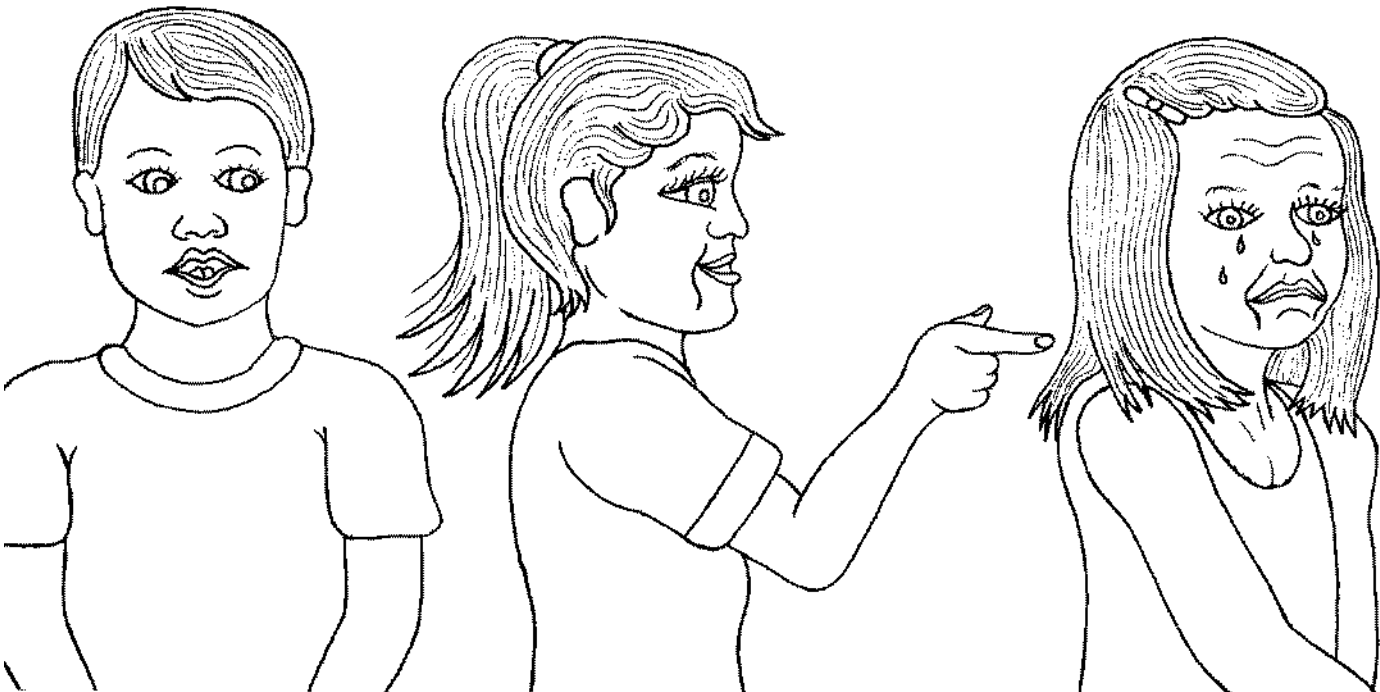
She has never really fit in. Nobody talks to her much, and the girl stands out like a sore thumb. You guess her family is poor. She often wears the most god-awful clothes, like she shops at a thrift store. Appearances aside, she seems like a nice person, and you've never had problems with her. One day you even try to start a conversation with her, but she was just really quiet and didn't say much of anything. So you never really talked to her after that.

Until recently, everyone just kind of ignored her. But lately she's been getting teased a lot. And today on the playground, all the other kids are circled around Kayla calling her names. They're saying she lives in garbage and might as well be garbage herself. They say she eats cockroaches for dinner, not because they're poor but because she likes cockroaches. They say she French kisses her brother.

You're not exactly sure what their deal is, but you have two choices: Either you go along, or you take the side of the "loser" that everyone is making fun of. So you agree. "God, Kayla, only a loser would wear pants like that," you say. It's not that you really hate Kayla, you just want to feel like one of the group. Everyone laughs at your comment, and it feels good to be on the popular side. Now you're the center of attention, and everyone's looking at you in an admirable way. So you fire off one more: "Hey guys, what's the difference between Kayla and a circus monkey? At least people like to look at the circus monkey." Everyone bursts into laughter again.

Eventually Kayla storms off and tries to hide in a corner. A few of the kids follow her and taunt her some more, until eventually they lose interest and run off to join their friends.

It goes on like this for several weeks. Nobody sits next to her at lunch. The only time anyone talks to her is to say something cruel. You know that kids throw things at her on the bus. You never go out of your way to tease her, but you don't stop yourself, either. One day she lines up next to you on the way to class, and your friend starts staring. You can tell what he's thinking. You're afraid he'll accuse you of hanging out with losers (which would make *you a loser lover*). So you turn around and say "Hey, retard, get the heck away from me. Why don't you go to the back where no one has to put up with your loser stench." You can tell by the look on her face how hurt she is. The reason she lined up next to you in the first place, you suspect, is that you're one of the ones who isn't constantly teasing her. You didn't mean to be so cruel, it just sort of came out. But heck, you tell yourself, she put you in that position by standing so close. Fighting back tears, she marches off to the back, facing a torrent of criticism along the way. You forget about it and go on with the rest of your business. That was Friday.



You have a fun and exciting weekend, then you're back in school on Monday. You're happy to see all your friends again. But something seems wrong. Your teacher has a sad look on her face, and your principal is in the classroom. There's also some other lady you've never seen before. You ask who it is, and someone says she's a school counselor.

As you take your seats and get ready for class to start, your teacher says the principal has an announcement. He gets up and says that one of your classmates – Kayla – killed herself over the weekend. He explains that she'd been having problems with kids at school and was being bullied. It must have made her feel pretty worthless, so she hung herself in her room. She was only 11-years-old.

You feel yourself getting stared at by some of the other kids in the class. They don't say anything, but they know. They know you're one of the ones that was picking on Kayla. They know about the mean things you said. Just as importantly, you know. As the counselor talks, it starts to sink in that you were one of the last kids to talk to her, and your words were so cruel they nearly made her cry on the spot. It makes you feel sick to your stomach. You had no idea she was *that* upset about what was going on. You didn't want her to kill herself. Now you just wish you could take it all back.



*Now that you've imagined yourself living through this story, answer the following questions:*

1. Write what you would be feeling if you were in that situation. Be specific: What thoughts would go through your head?

2. Is there ever a way to tell when someone is that close to the edge? If you could know this, would you treat them differently?

3. Teasing may seem like fun and games to the teaser, but it's just the opposite to the teased. Is there a way to tell how hurtful your words really are?

4. Imagine you had to talk to Kayla's mother. What would you say?

