

Winter 2009

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Recommended Citation

Danielson, Kathy Everts and LaBonty, Jan, "Reading and Responding to Children's Books About Bullying" (2009). *Teacher Education Faculty Publications*. 62.
<https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/tedfacpub/62>

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Reading and Responding to Children's Books About Bullying

Which of the following scenarios is an example of bullying?

- A. Older boys repeatedly steal a second-grader's lunch money.
- B. A group of girls start and perpetuate vicious rumours about a shy classmate.
- C. On a daily basis, a boy makes fun of a peer's old-fashioned clothes.
- D. During recess, bigger kids push, shove, and taunt smaller children.
- E. All of the above.

If you guessed E, you not only know a lot about test construction, you also understand the classic definition of bullying: "Bullying is a deliberate attempt to hurt another that is repeated over time," (Craig, 1997, p. 123). Each scenario above contains a truth about bullying: bullies tend to be older and/or bigger than their victims; bullying involves both physical and verbal abuse; victims are usually different in some way from their peers, whether it involves dress, size, language, or social skills; and bullying occurs most frequently on the playground or in isolated locations where there is no adult supervision (Craig, 1997; Olweus, 1993).

Addressing the parameters of bullying in schools; studying the characteristics of victims, bullies, and bystanders; and examining successful school wide anti-bullying programs laid the foundation for this

project involving third and fourth graders and books about bullying.

Parameters of bullying

Bullying remains a serious problem in many elementary schools, and children of every age have been the target of bullies or have witnessed bullying. In fact, one in seven children has been a bully or a victim; the remainder are bystanders. Bullying involves an imbalance of strength, a negative action (either physical or verbal), and a deliberate, repeated attempt to hurt another person (Craig, 1997). For the bully to feel powerful, he/she must see evidence that the victim is indeed intimidated, humiliated, hurt, or controlled. Physical bullying seems to increase through elementary school and peak in the junior high years, but incidents of verbal abuse remain constant. Examples of verbal bullying include name-calling, taunting or teasing, and starting rumors. School size, racial composition, and school setting (rural, urban, or suburban) have no relationship to frequency of bullying (Banks, 1997). While more boys than girls are physical bullies, as many girls participate in verbal assault or retaliation against a classmate in an attempt to isolate their victims. When victims don't defend themselves, bullying may escalate or carry on for years (Olweus, 1993).

Victims

What do we know about the victims? Children who are perpetual victims of bullying tend to share

certain characteristics. They are generally smaller and weaker than their peer group (Olweus, 1973). While victims may be poorer students, it is difficult to determine whether this is the cause of bullying or an effect of it. Victims are also more likely to have a submissive or passive response to aggression and to appear overly needy to their peer group (Bernstein & Watson, 1997). Children who are the victims of bullying are often social isolates; however, this may be because other children are afraid to associate with them for fear of becoming a victim themselves. A reluctance to respond to bullying fuels the notion that somehow the children who are bullied are at fault (DeHaan, 1997).

There can be long-term effects for victims that include anxiety, embarrassment, guilt, loneliness, panic attacks, and sleep disorders (DeHann, 1997). Children who are bullied see school as an unsafe and unhappy place. Being bullied can lead to low self-esteem and depression later in life (Batsche & Knopf, 1994).

Perry, Williard, & Perry (1990) surveyed fourth graders and concluded that children could easily identify who in their class would be victimized by a bully. Fortunately, when the characteristics that make children likely to be victims are identified in children, early intervention programs can reduce their victimization



and help children develop more self-confidence and social skills (Bernstein & Watson, 1997). Children can be encouraged to tell someone if they are being bullied, to learn to act more confidently by taking a martial arts or yoga class or by developing skills in art, music, computers, or by joining a club to make friends (New, 2007).

Bullies

Not surprisingly, bullies also share common, identifiable qualities. Boys who bully are usually older and bigger than their victims and are not as strong academically. Contrary to prevailing myths that bullies have low opinions of themselves, children who bully are more likely to have high self-esteem and suffer less anxiety and insecurity than their peers (Olweus, 1993). In general, they are disciplined more physically at home and lack empathy skills (Viadero, 1997).

Unlike their male counterparts, size and age are not determining factors when girls are the bullies, and female antagonists usually do better on intelligence tests and have higher grades than other children. Neither male nor female bullies have empathy for their victims, and both are more likely to be aggressive and have the need to dominate others (Olweus, 1993). Bullies select as their victims children who are less likely to retaliate (Bernstein & Watson, 1997).

Some feel being a chronic bully can have negative long-term consequences. Bullies more frequently continue the aggressive behavior as adults that leads to criminal arrests and they lack the ability to develop and maintain healthy relationships (Banks, 1997). They generally have friends who encourage risky, aggressive behavior and fail to develop a mature sense of social justice (Watkins, 2007). Former bullies are at risk for becoming uncaring, punitive parents whose children in turn become bullies (Goleman, 1987).

Bullies can benefit from efforts to understand their own behavior and to learn healthier ways of dealing with other children. Finding ways to channel aggression through productive means such as sports or theatre may be a productive approach. Talking with a mentor or counsellor can help bullies begin to understand their behavior and its impact on others and to take initial steps to develop empathy. Providing meaningful apologies to their victims and making

reparations for damaged property can have an impact on the ability of bullies to take responsibilities for their actions (Watkins, 2007).

Bystanders

Those who are bystanders when bullying takes place also play a role. Students or adults who don't initiate bullying but who stand back and watch it or laugh are encouraging this aggressive behavior. In a survey of students, Oliver, Hoover, and Hazler (1994) found that a clear majority of children felt that victims were somehow responsible for being bullied. They stated that bullying toughened a person and taught him/her appropriate behavior. Victims were characterized as students who were 'weak' or 'afraid to fight back'.

When school personnel view bullying as a harmless rite of passage they contribute to the continuation of aggressive behavior (Banks, 1997). In fact, Charach, Pepler, and Ziegler (1995) concluded that few children believed that adults would help those who were bullied and that if adults did intervene, they would only make things worse. Children reported that teachers seldom or never talked to their classes about bullying at all.

Unfortunately, if children who see bullying notice that there are no consequences for the bully, they may become aggressive and blame the victim (Viadero, 1997). Therefore, teachers and adults must be proactive and reactive in matters of bullying and must make it clear that bullying will not be tolerated and that victims and bystanders will have support.

School wide intervention programs

Bullying occurs in a social context in which teachers and parents may be unaware and children are reluctant to get involved (Charach et al., 1995). For school wide intervention programs to be effective, they must not merely focus on victims, bullies, and bystanders but must involve the entire school community. Smith and Sharp (1994) recommend establishing policies about bullying and its consequences, curricular attention to the topic, improving the school environments, and empowering students by teaching conflict resolution, peer counselling, and assertiveness training. Olweus (1993) adds further recommendations: involving parents in supporting anti-bullying efforts,



and having teachers develop rules against bullying in their classes and employing role-playing and the use of cooperative learning activities to reduce social isolation. Increasing adult supervision on the playground and at lunch also reduces opportunities to bully.

Children's literature can initiate important classroom discussions of bullying. Books can provide a source of relief from the worries of bullying (Cionciolo, 1965) and can give students strategies for dealing successfully with bullies (Tietjen, 1980). When teachers read books that deal with bullying to children, it provides an opportunity for in depth discussions. Children can explore their feelings as they discuss how it feels to be bullied and how bullying can be stopped (Galda & Cullinan, 2002). **While bullying may seem too significant a societal problem for young children to address,** an African proverb tells us: "If you think you are too small to make a difference, try sleeping in a room with a mosquito."

The project

This project had two components: First, following a discussion about bullying that enabled students in third and fourth grade to discuss examples from their own lives, learners listened, discussed and responded to books about bullying. Second, the students compiled lists of Do's and Don'ts for dealing with bullying.

One title used for this project, *The Bully Blockers Club* (Bateman, 2004), is a story about a group of children who have been bothered by a bully. To solve their problem, they decide to form a club (The

Bully Blockers Club) and every time the bully tries to bother them, one of the club members confronts the bully and in so doing they alert the teacher of the bully's behavior. Eventually the bully wants to join the club, and the children teach him an important lesson about tolerance.

In another title used for this project, *Loud Mouth George and the Sixth-Grade Bully* (Carlson, 1983), George tricks the bully who keeps stealing his lunch by making him a horrible, disgusting lunch. After reading these books together and discussing them, the children voted on the book in which the main character dealt with the bully in the best way.

The results are shown in Figures 1 and 2, along with students' written rationale for their votes.

Figure 1: 3rd graders' votes and rationale on which book character handled the bully better:

11 Votes	<i>The Bully Blockers Club</i>
✓	"She told her parents"
✓	"I think if you made a bad lunch they will probably tell their Mom and Dad"
✓	"I like this book because they didn't hurt or make someone cry"
✓	"They didn't hit the bully when he took stuff from other kids. They said, 'What are you doing?'"
✓	"They made a club of bullies and if somebody is picking on someone and they could fix the problem"
✓	"Because they didn't trick the bully"
✓	"They don't do bad stuff to make him sick"
✓	"In this story they didn't harm the bully"
✓	"Because they made a club and when they see the bully they always say, 'Hey, what are you doing?' That's my opinion"
✓	"They made a club and if they are taking your things then your club will come and say, 'What are you doing? Then the teacher might hear and the bully is going to get in trouble"
✓	"They made a club and had a lot of people in it"
1 Vote	<i>Loudmouth George and the Sixth Grade Bully</i>
✓	"I like this book. It is cool"

Figure 2: 4th graders' votes and rationale on which book character handled the bully better:

17 Votes	<i>The Bully Blockers Club</i>
✓	"It's a way to get them in trouble"
✓	"They didn't hurt the bully in any way"
✓	"I think this is a better one because you get in more fights if you gave someone a gross lunch. You can't cause trouble making a club"
✓	"The way they handled it was not harmful and it couldn't make a person sick"
✓	"They didn't hurt the bully or do anything mean. The friends helped and were a team"
✓	"It will let you have more defense and you won't have to worry"
✓	"You're actually solving the problem than making another problem in the other story"
✓	"They had proof that he was bullying"
✓	"It was funny and it was longer than the first story"
✓	"There's a bigger chance of the bully getting in trouble"
✓	"They didn't hurt the bully or do anything mean. The friends helped and were a team"
✓	"They didn't get back at the bully"
✓	"In this book they would help other people who the bully was picking on"
✓	"It deals with the bully in a peaceful way and not being the bully"
✓	"If a bully gets in my way, my friend helps me"
✓	"They dealt with the problem and made sure everybody couldn't get bullied"
✓	"They told an adult"
7 Votes	<i>Loudmouth George and the Sixth Grade Bully</i>
✓	"I liked that they worked as a team"
✓	"He probably won't take the lunch again, plus Lance will be there if he does"
✓	"Making a horrible lunch is like saying stop to the bully secretly"
✓	"I like making gross stuff for people's meals"
✓	"They made him stop doing what he was doing. And I also liked how they worked as a team"
✓	"They made the bully a terrible lunch"
✓	"I think that would teach the bully not to take his lunch any more"

Next, students wrote about bullying and dealing with bullies after reading and discussing the bullying books. The following Do's and Don'ts of bullying came from students after hearing *Say Something* (Moss, 2004). The students' Do's and Don'ts paralleled the recommendations of New (2007). She identified

specific ways for students to prevent a run-in with a bully and strategies to apply when being bullied. Her suggestions and a sample of the corresponding Do's and Don'ts from the third and fourth graders are provided below.

The Research Says...	The Students Suggest...
Preventing a run-in with a bully	
Don't give the bully a chance. As much as you can, avoid the bully.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do ignore the bullies Remember not to stay and don't just play
Stand tall and be brave. Sometimes just acting brave is enough to stop a bully.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do ask them to stop Remember to defend, don't delay
Get a buddy and be a buddy. Two is better than one if you're trying to avoid being bullied. Get involved if you see bullying going on in your school.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Have a buddy Do help others when they are bullied
If the bully says or does something to you	
Ignore the bully. Try to ignore what a bully says. Pretend you don't hear and walk to a safe place.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Walk away Do try to ignore the bully for the day
Stand up for yourself. Pretend to be brave and confident. Tell the bully, "No!" and "Stop it!" in a loud voice. Stand up for someone else who is being bullied.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tell them to stop and that you don't like it Look them in the eye Stand up for yourself Do try to say, 'Stop bothering me' Remember to end the bullying with words not fists Remember to speak with courage Remember to defend, don't delay
Don't bully back. Fighting just makes the bully happy and can be dangerous for you.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Don't become the bully because then you will hurt other people's feelings Don't make the bully get madder at you Don't hurt them back! Don't be the bully! That includes saying bad words or punching them The important thing about dealing with bullies is not to do dangerous things to them Remember to not become the evil cruel bully Do be kind to them because they probably never had a friend Don't make your friends fight the bully
Don't show your feelings. Don't show that you are angry or upset.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Remember to stay calm Don't get aggressive
Tell an adult. Find someone you trust and tell them what is happening.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do tell someone about your problem Do inform somebody if someone's getting bullied But the important thing about dealing with bullies is to tell someone!!! Remember to always tell someone

Discussion of the results

The students shared many insights as the project proved to be a successful method of initiating a classroom discussion of bullying, an essential component of successful, school wide intervention programs identified in the research (Olweus, 1993; Smith & Sharp, 1994). Students in the third and fourth grade classrooms contributed personal stories from their own lives about bullying. They were reminded that bullying can be both physical and verbal and talked about how it felt to be bullied. The discussion about the different ways to handle bullying behavior was productive. Students talked extensively about being nice to everyone so that no one feels excluded and would consequently be tempted to exhibit bullying behavior. They discussed strategies they might employ for handling future bullying issues themselves and the importance of speaking up when bullying happens.

Third graders overwhelmingly preferred the strategies for dealing with bullies described in the *Bully Blockers Club*. Working as a team appealed to them and they responded that hurting the bully back was not effective. More fourth graders than third graders liked the retaliatory story of *Loudmouth George and the Sixth-Grade Bully*. The component of revenge against an older student who was stealing George's lunch everyday appealed to them, although they still liked the *Bully Blocker Club* better. When asked to develop their own lists of ways to deal with bullies, student responses paralleled what the research tells us is effective.

In addition to the two books used in this project about bullying, there are other picture books that can spark important conversations about this very real issue. (A recommended list of books is included at the end of this article.)

Conclusion

Bullying remains a serious issue in our schools today. Reading and discussing books that deal with this problem is one way to start the conversation about appropriate ways to respond to and deal with bullies. Talking and writing about characters' choices help students learn about their own possible solutions to dealing with bullying problems. With the help of an informed, compassionate adult, bullies can begin to develop empathy skills, victims can acquire strategies



that will help them deal with bullies, and bystanders can realize the important role they have in preventing this aggressive, taunting behavior. In the words of Thom Harnett, a Civil Rights Attorney "One person speaking up makes more noise than a thousand people who remain silent."

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Recommended Children's Books About Bullying

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