

[Here are the first few pages of *Bullying in Schools*.]

Bullying in Schools

What You Need to Know

There are many ways to hurt another human being. And there are some people—students you may know—who try their best to do just that. These kids are bullies, and each day they behave in ways that cause deep and lasting pain to others.

Here are five brief stories of bullying. They are all true, and there are countless other stories just like them.

Tarah

One afternoon, on the bus ride home from school, I watched Maribel, a high school junior, picking on Tarah, a ninth grader.

Maribel was shooting spitballs at Tarah's head. They were landing in wet clumps all over the place—on Tarah's seat, on her coat, in her hair. During this time, Tarah pretended to be asleep, but I knew she was awake. She was just too scared to do anything.

Maribel seemed to be annoyed that Tarah was not responding. She got up impulsively and started walking to the front of the bus. Other kids giggled as she crept up behind Tarah's seat. Then she pulled a pink glob of chewing gum from her mouth and shoved it deep into Tarah's long, curly hair. Kids at the back of the bus cheered as the gum clung to Tarah's scalp.

“Mar-i-BELL! Mar-i-BELL!”

During this whole time, Tarah didn't budge. She seemed frozen, as if she was somehow safer if she remained motionless. Yet everyone kept laughing and pointing to the neon pink mass tangled in her hair.

The next day, Tarah didn't come to school. When I saw her several days later, I noticed she avoided eye contact with me. And I could see that a section of her hair, roughly the size of the gum wad, had been cut out. Tarah tried to hide this by changing her hairstyle, but I knew what had happened. While I felt sorry for Tarah, I was grateful the older kids in the back of the bus had her to pick on instead of me.

Brian

Brian was a boy who followed me and my friends around when we were in sixth grade. Having been held back in school, he was a year older than the rest of us, and about six inches taller. His voice was loud and grating, and his insistence on being our friend irritated us. It didn't occur to me then how badly he must have needed a friend.

On the playground one winter day, we explained to Brian that we had thought of a new game. One of us would be the prisoner, while the rest of us would be divided into "prison guards" and "rescuers." Brian would have the honor of being the prisoner first. Excited to finally be part of our gang, he agreed. We collected all the jump ropes we could find and tied Brian to a tree at the very edge of the school property. Telling him that we would go organize ourselves into "guards" and "rescuers," we left him there. When the recess bell rang, we went to class. A teacher finally found Brian and untied him, and we were all called to the principal's office.

Instead of turning us in, Brian claimed that the whole game was his idea, and that he told us not to untie him because he wanted to escape on his own. He looked at the floor when he said this, and I could tell he was holding back tears. We were relieved not to get in trouble. But when Brian tried to play with us the next time, we chased him away.

Leslie Ann

Leslie stood out the second she got on the bus. Heavy-set with limp, greasy hair, she was so shy she couldn't even look at us. She would just sit there in her frumpy clothes barely saying a word. In class she was no better, keeping her eyes in her books and speaking only when teachers called on her.

One day in gym class, someone joked about how Leslie's thick body looked more like a man's than a girl's. That's when the rumors started that Leslie was gay. Soon people began joking about her name.

"Hey lesbian, I mean *Leslie Ann*, how come you're so quiet?"

The joke stuck. Soon it seemed everyone was calling her lesbian as if it was her name. Sometimes, when we were really bad, her face would get pink and blotchy like she was about to cry, but she never fought back except to say "stop" or "leave me alone." Most days, she pretended to ignore us, but you could tell she knew what we were saying. Then someone made up a story about how Leslie was spying on girls changing in the locker room. It spread all over school. One of my friends put a picture of Leslie on Facebook. It seemed like half the school wrote comments about her being gay. Even people who barely knew her were spreading rumors.

One afternoon, I saw her crying in the hallway. A teacher was asking her what was wrong but Leslie just kept sobbing and shaking her head. I knew the answer, and I felt bad, but I wasn't about to snitch on my classmates. After a few months, Leslie stopped coming to school. Someone said her mother decided to homeschool her, but someone else told me her parents split up and she moved in with her father.

I don't know what really happened. But I am certain of one thing: we had made Leslie's life miserable.

Rob

The bullies attacked me when I wasn't looking.

They'd been teasing me for days, calling me a "teacher's pet" ever since they learned I was on the Honor Roll. Normally I sat in the front of the bus and the bigger kids sat in the back. But on this day, the front seats were taken, and I had no choice but to sit closer to the bigger, louder kids.

I was 14, a skinny freshman in high school—the only freshman boy on the bus this particular day. Sitting in the back two rows were four seniors. They were big guys who liked to smoke; one even had a beard.

It happened quickly. I heard a voice shout "Hey, what's that?" and I turned. In a split second, two hands grabbed my shoulders and held them in place. Another kid sat in front of me so the bus driver couldn't see what was happening. A third grabbed my underwear from behind and yanked with all his might.

The pain was instant. The fabric of my shorts pulled tight and crushed my groin. Then it began to rip, forcing the cotton into uncomfortable places on my backside. Worse than the pain was the laughter. Everyone cackled as if the whole thing was a joke. But I wasn't laughing.

With a heave, he snapped the elastic strap, and a large section of my underwear came off in this kid's hand. He held it up like a trophy, and his friends cheered. Then he tied the torn strap around his forehead like a headband. Girls nearby clapped while the other boys relaxed their grip and shoved me into my seat.

I sat there trembling with anger and rage. If I had had a gun, I might have shot them all. "How dare they touch me!" I thought. "How dare everyone laugh!" But thankfully I had no gun, and the bus was stopping at my house.

"Look, he's going to cry," said the kid who tore my underwear. "Go ahead and cry, you little girl."

Sometimes today, years later, I still think about those boys and feel rage in my chest.

Shannon

In eighth grade, there was a new girl named Shannon in our class. She was very shy, very skinny, and her clothes were a bit out of style.

Within weeks of Shannon's arrival, a popular girl in our class started saying that Shannon had bad body odor. She claimed that Shannon smelled like "fish," and that she didn't clean herself. Before long, boys as well as girls joined in the teasing. They gave Shannon a nickname, "Seafood Shanty," after an actual restaurant in our neighborhood.

Soon people began making jokes about "crabs" whenever Shannon was around. Her face would get red, but she never said anything. Sometimes people pretended to be afraid of sitting next to her.

"Are you sure I gotta sit here? Something stinks!" they'd say if a teacher assigned them to a seat anywhere near Shannon. Boys claimed they saw shrimp and crabs crawling around under her desk. Some even called her "Sushi Shannon."

One day, one of my friends took a piece of chalk during lunchtime and drew a giant crab with the words "Now Available at Seafood Shanty" on the chalkboard. We all entered the class at the same time and read the sign. Everyone was laughing hysterically when Shannon walked in.

She looked at the chalkboard and the laughing faces around her—people enjoying her suffering—and she burst into tears. And then she did something that surprised me. She wailed out loud like a child in pain and ran out of the classroom.

Many people laughed even harder when she did that. I laughed, too. But deep inside, I knew we had gone too far. Still, I never had the guts to say anything. I wonder where Shannon is now.

Each of these stories is painful to read. But, sadly, such stories are very common. If your school is like most American schools, it's filled with people who have experienced or witnessed bullying. Perhaps that includes you.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, nearly one-third of middle and high school students have experienced some kind of bullying. While this problem is more frequent among boys, about 1 in 4 girls from this same age group reports having at least one encounter with a bully. These interactions can be face to face, or they can happen electronically. In a recent study, 32% of teens said they've been bullied and harassed online or through text messages.

Look around. If your classroom contains 20 students, at least 6 of them—and most likely more—have dealt with bullies in one way or another. If you have not yet experienced this problem, you probably will.

What will you do? One thing is almost certain: at some point you'll have to make a choice about how to act in a bullying situation.

This booklet was written to help you prepare for your next encounter.

The Three Parts of this Book

Almost everyone agrees that bullying is wrong—even most bullies will admit this if you ask them privately. While knowledge alone does not seem to stop the problem, it's a start.

■ **PART ONE** of this book takes a close look at bullying to get a sense of what it is all about.

■ **PART TWO** provides true stories about bullies and their targets. These stories and the accompanying activities will help you walk in others' shoes and gain a deeper understanding of this widespread problem.

■ **PART THREE** presents ways to respond to bullying and cyberbullying situations.

ACTIVITY

Take ten or fifteen minutes to write about a bullying experience you've had. It could be a time when you witnessed a bully's attack or were more directly involved. Don't worry about grammar, punctuation, and spelling; just get your thoughts down on paper. Try to include details that help others see and hear what really happened. You may decide to end your paper by describing what the victim in the experience must have felt.

Writing will help get you thinking about your involvement with bullying. If you feel comfortable doing so, you might want to share what you've written with your peers. If not, keep your notes; you may be able to draw upon them for a writing assignment in Part 2.

PART 1: BULLYING: THE HARD FACTS

Bullying is the deliberate and often repeated attempt to intimidate, embarrass, or harm another person. At its core, it involves the misuse of power. Those who bully typically have greater size, status, popularity, and control than their targets. They use each and sometimes all of these “strengths” as weapons against their more vulnerable peers. For years, bullying was dismissed as a normal part of growing up, something not to be taken seriously. Today, however, we know better.

Bullying is a serious and potentially deadly problem. On any given school day, approximately 160,000 kids skip school to avoid being picked on by their peers. A much larger number endure torment in silence. Children who are bullied are often too scared or anxious to focus on their school work, and their grades and test scores decline. Others experience stress-related illnesses including headaches, stomach troubles, panic attacks, and depression. In some cases, depression can be so severe that targets become suicidal, homicidal, or both. Research points to a significant link between bullying and the more than 4,000 teen suicides that occur yearly in the United States. Claims that bullying is harmless or just “kids being kids” could not be further from the truth.

Targets of Bullying

Anyone can be the target of bullying. Today it could be the new kid who just transferred to your school; tomorrow it could be you. Most bullies single out people who stand out in some way. But almost any quality—positive or negative—can become the focus of a bully’s attention. If your grades are too high or too low, your style too different, your accent too foreign, your hair too long or too short, your body too big or too small, you may find yourself the target of a bully.

Witnesses of Bullying

Even if you have not been targeted by bullies, you have probably witnessed them in action. In most bullying situations, there are often more witnesses than there are bullies or targets. Ironically, these bystanders have the greatest power to determine what happens in school. Unfortunately, they usually don't use their power to stop bullying. Instead they often make it worse. Why?

A big reason is fear. Many who witness bullying choose to “stay out of it” because they are scared. They worry if they say something, the bully might turn on them. Others fear they might lose popularity if they intervene. Some are afraid they'll be labeled a “snitch” if they tell a teacher about the problem. For many students, this fear is so strong that they actually pretend to be friends with peers who bully. They may laugh at their jokes or join in their insults, becoming something of a bully themselves. Yet alone and away from the bully, these same people may be nice and friendly. Like targets, witnesses to bullying endure stress and fear as a result of what they see. Some may carry guilt for many years because they didn't help their peers. These kids are frightened bystanders, and schools everywhere—including yours—are filled with them.

Causes of Bullying

While there is no simple reason to explain why people become bullies, researchers have identified risk factors linked to this behavior. Young people with aggressive or impulsive personalities, for example, are more likely to bully. Physical size, especially among boys, can contribute to this problem, allowing bigger, aggressive children to dominate their smaller peers. However, size and personality alone do not make someone a bully.

Environmental factors can also influence bullying. Poor adult supervision in schools and communities increases the likelihood

that bullying will take place. In addition, schools that lack violence-prevention programs or that do not deal effectively with bully-related incidents are more likely to experience bullying problems. Bullies thrive in environments where they are not held accountable for their behavior. This is one reason why the Internet, a place where identity is easily hidden, is so attractive to bullies.

Home environment also plays a significant role in bullying. Young people who spend long, unsupervised hours exposed to TV and video game violence are more likely to accept such behavior—and practice it. According to recent surveys, by the time the average American child is ten years old, he or she has witnessed thousands of acts of TV violence, including assault and murder. Video games intensify this exposure, encouraging kids to participate in aggressive and often brutal “play.” Constant doses of this screen violence can make viewers less sensitive to the real thing. Because TV and video games hide the lasting pain that true violence causes, young people do not develop empathy and compassion for sufferers around them.

Exposure to *real* violence is another major factor in bullying. Research shows over and over that victims of bullies often become bullies. Whether they suffered at the hands of abusive family members or were tormented by other kids, bullies often copy the behaviors used against them. Their negative and hurtful experiences scar them and teach them a false and damaging lesson: to protect themselves, they must be mean to others.

Think about it: if a bully is the “toughest kid” in a classroom, who will pick on him? If she can come up with the cruelest insult or control “the crowd,” who will dare stand up to her? In each case, bullying serves as a kind of armor. But instead of being a sign of strength, it is often a sign of deep hurt, insecurity, or fear. Look closely into the eyes of a bully, and you may be looking into the eyes of a former victim.

Yet these factors alone do not fully explain bullying. Not every bully has been victimized or suffers from poor self-esteem. Some appear to have a *strong* sense of self, perhaps too strong. They

don't bully to feel better about themselves; they do it because they look down at their peers. For them, bullying is a way of showing superiority over those they consider physically and socially "beneath" them. Bullies with this view lack compassion for their peers and even go so far as to blame their targets for their attacks!

They are wrong. *All people—regardless of their background, race, religion, appearance, or sexual preference—deserve civility. Everyone has a right to be free from threats, intimidation, and cruelty.* This is particularly true for children, especially in school. For these and many other reasons, bullying cannot be tolerated. Reducing it is difficult, but it can be done. Many schools have succeeded in doing so. Yours can too.

To begin reducing this problem, however, you must first understand it.

Types of Bullying

Research tells us that bullying is most common in grades 6 to 10, but it can happen at nearly any age and among both sexes. While it takes many forms, bullying usually involves several kinds of behavior.

Among boys, *physical bullying* seems to be the typical method of attack. Pushing, tripping, and hitting are widespread and well-known examples of this type of behavior. Among girls, however, social bullying dominates.

Social or relational bullying is the use of peer pressure and manipulation to isolate a target and hurt his or her feelings. A social bully may, for example, convince an entire group of people to ignore, shun, or avoid a particular student. Those who endure this type of attack often feel trapped in an invisible cage—one in which they have no friends, no one to talk to, and no way to escape.

Just as painful—and perhaps most common—is *verbal bullying*. This occurs when bullies tease, mock, threaten, insult, and taunt their peers. Verbal attacks also include spreading rumors, gossip, and lies. Often these false stories are passed rapidly by word of

mouth. Designed to be as hurtful as possible, verbal attacks usually focus on things outside their target's control, such as physical appearance, race, family, or parents' income. Insults of this type may also focus on a target's sexuality or spread lies about his or her sexual history. Verbal bullying disproves the old saying that "sticks and stones break bones, but names can never hurt." Cruel words *do* hurt. They cause immense pain, embarrassment, and shame to those who are targeted.

When verbal and social bullying take place over the Internet or an electronic device, they become something else: *cyberbullying*. Cell phones, instant messages, social networking sites, website chat rooms, and even online video games are the spaces where this growing form of bullying strikes. Using this technology, bullies have been able to intensify and spread their attacks on a scale that wasn't possible years ago. Targets of cyberbullying are caught in a real-life nightmare, surrounded by people online *and* in person who torment them. As with other forms of bullying, many know who is responsible for the attacks but refuse to get involved for fear that they will lose popularity or suffer the same abuse. As a result, the targets end up alone and isolated at a time when friends and support are most needed.

Some forms of bullying—including cyberbullying—actually involve criminal behavior. Bullies who vandalize property, take lunch money, make threats, steal someone's online identity, spread inappropriate photos, or post someone else's private information on the Internet are committing acts that are not just hurtful; they are crimes. In fact, about 25% of school-age bullies end up with criminal records before they reach the age of 30. Bullies are also often the instigators—and victims—of school violence. School shootings in a number of states (most notably the 1999 massacre at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado) can be traced directly to bullying.

The message is loud and clear: bullying is no laughing matter. It deserves your attention right now. As a student in school today, you are on the front lines of this problem.

ACTIVITY

Take a minute or two to get a quick sense of bullying at your school.

- How many actual bullies do you know of at your school right now?

___ none

___ 1-5

___ more than 5

- How many targets of bullies do you know of right now?

___ none

___ 1-5

___ more than 5

- How many frightened bystanders do you know of right now?

___ none

___ 1-5

___ more than 5