

Michele Borba, Ed.D.

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End Peer Cruelty, Build **Empathy**

The Proven 6Rs of
Bullying Prevention That
Create Inclusive, Safe,
and Caring Schools



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Praise for

End Peer Cruelty, Build **Empathy**

“This book provides real results for bullying prevention, awareness, and education and will make a difference not only in the lives of children, but in our communities. Dr. Borba’s expertise in bullying is second to no one: she is a leader in her field and this book will change lives.”

—Sue Scheff, internet safety expert and author

“Dr. Borba compiles and succinctly summarizes the weight of available evidence about what works to prevent bullying at school. Building safe and bully-free schools is not easy and there are no shortcuts. It takes coordination and collaboration by all concerned community stakeholders. This book offers a potent and pragmatic roadmap to help schools achieve that goal.”

—Justin W. Patchin, Ph.D., codirector, Cyberbullying Research Center

“Dr. Michele Borba’s contributions to the field are always practical, relatable, and powerful. Her newest book is no exception and provides a valuable step-by-step guide to help school communities reduce peer harassment and hate from the inside out through policy and programming.”

—Dr. Sameer Hinduja, codirector of Cyberbullying Research Center and professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice, Florida Atlantic University

“An important addition to any educator’s toolbox for breaking the cycle of bullying violence and creating a more deeply caring school environment.”

—Barbara Coloroso, educator and author of *The Bully, the Bullied, and the Not-So-Innocent Bystander*

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to the unsung heroes of the world: educators. Your compassion, competence, and commitment to children are the best hope for bullying prevention and producing a generation of empathetic, caring, and courageous upstanders.

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Introduction

“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me” is a myth that needs to be dispelled. Bullying means that a child is intentionally causing another child pain. That pain may be inflicted emotionally, verbally, physically, or electronically, and it is *always* harmful. Whether a child is bullying others, witnessing bullying, or the target of bullying, the behavior wreaks havoc on children’s emotional, moral, and cognitive development; demolishes feelings of safety; and, if not stopped, can shatter young lives. In fact, bullying is viewed as one of the most serious public health problems in the United States and Canadian school systems.

The effects of peer cruelty are far-reaching and can cause immense stress, anxiety, health problems, depression, and humiliation that may result in serious mental health issues for children. Bullying also induces fear and insecurity, which impacts students’ concentration, academic achievement, and learning performance. This is the reason why educators need to make an earnest effort to prevent bullying on school campuses, and it’s why I wrote this book.

I’ve spent nearly three decades studying youth violence and bullying and working with hundreds of educators, counselors, and law enforcement officials around the world. I know the horrors of school shootings and I’ve held the hands of too many parents whose children have ended their lives because of peer cruelty. I’ve also spoken to countless kids who have witnessed or been involved in bullying at their schools for years and feel powerless to stop it. We need to put an end to childhood aggression, and this book provides a concrete plan to do so. Bullying is learned, and it can be unlearned. Caring, committed educators using research-based strategies can turn this terrible trend around, and I will show you how.



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“I used to tell the teachers I was bullied but I stopped because they never did anything. I don’t think they believed me . . . but maybe they didn’t care.” —Kara, age 11*

“I was bullied for three years. The school librarian finally realized I was hurting and let me stay in the library at recess. If it wasn’t for her, I don’t know what I would have done.” —Jamil, age 10

The Facts About Bullying

“Bullying is unwanted, aggressive behavior among school-age children that involves a real or perceived power imbalance. The behavior is repeated or has the potential to be repeated over time.”

—*StopBullying.gov*

Bullying has no boundaries and impacts all geographical regions. Though it is more prevalent in the middle school years, it affects all school-age students of both sexes. Here is a sample of the latest data about school bullying from StopBullying.gov and other sources that reveal the urgent need for educators to find solutions:

- Bullying happens every 7 minutes in every kind of school: private and public; rural, urban, and suburban¹
- Over 70 percent of students say they have seen bullying in their schools²
- Nearly 50 percent of students report being bullied at least once during the past month²
- More than 40 percent of students say they are *frequently* involved in bullying (two or more times in the past month)³
- Approximately 30 percent of students in grades 4 through 12 report bullying others³
- More than 70 percent of school staff has seen bullying; over 40 percent witness bullying once a week or more³
- Only 20 to 30 percent of students who are bullied notify adults⁴

* Note: The student quotes throughout this book are ones I’ve personally gathered in my trainings; all names have been changed to protect the individuals’ privacy.

1. National Education Association, October 2011.

2. Espelage et al., 2003.

3. Bradshaw et al., 2007.

4. Ttofi et al., 2011.

Bullying Prevention in Schools Today

“Children and youth who are bullied are more likely to be depressed, lonely, and anxious; have low self-esteem; feel unwell; and think about suicide.” —Dr. Susan Limber, bullying expert

“Students who watch as their peers endure the verbal or physical abuses of another student could become as psychologically distressed, if not more so, by the events than the victims themselves.” —American Psychological Association

“School bullying is the single most enduring and underrated issue in U.S. schools.” —The National School Safety Center

Long ago bullying behavior was considered almost a child’s rite of passage and largely ignored. After all, many thought: “Kids will be kids.” Some even believed that “bullying will toughen up kids, it builds character.” Then a deadly chain of incidents on school campuses made us rethink everything. Most infamous was the shooting at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, on April 20, 1999. Two teens brought guns to school, killing thirteen people and wounding more than twenty others. During the years that followed, dozens more school shootings transpired. A 2002 report by the United States Secret Service, who studied thirty-seven school shootings on American campuses, confirmed that bullying is a key factor in many shootings. Their report stated:⁵

Almost three-quarters of the attackers felt persecuted, bullied, threatened, attacked, or injured by others prior to the incident. In several cases, individual attackers had experienced bullying and harassment that was long-standing and severe. In some of these cases the experience of being bullied seemed to have a significant impact on the attacker and appeared to have been a factor in his decision to mount an attack at the school. In one case, the attacker’s schoolmates described the attacker as “the kid everyone teased.”

In addition to homicidal violence, bullying victimization has also been shown to inspire youth suicide. There is even a disturbing term for those who take their own young lives due to bullying: *bullycide*. The list of these victims is long and growing: Tyler Clementi, Ryan Patrick Halligan, Megan Meier, and

5. Vossekuil et al., 2002.

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Phoebe Prince, among dozens of others—and those are just the ones whose names made news headlines. Who knows how many more there have been.

“School got to be unbearable. All I could think about was what the boys might do to me at recess. My grades went down, and all I wanted to do was get home safely. Being bullied puts your whole body in nonstop ‘fear factor’ mode.” —Jacob, age 12

Another dynamic adds to our concern that bullying needs to be taken far more seriously: the electronic age ushered in a new form of peer torment called *cyberbullying*, in which young people use devices such as cell phones, tablets, computers, and digital cameras to bully others. A large global survey scanning eleven countries and almost 5,000 children revealed that one in five teens is cyberbullied. Roughly 85 percent of the time the bullied child knows the child doing the cyberbullying, and that means the child may have to endure seeing his tormenter at school. Though the majority of cyberbullying attacks occur off school grounds, they cause severe distress among students. Forty-one percent of teens said cyberbullying made them feel depressed; one-fifth felt suicidal.⁶

More than half of teens think cyberbullying is worse than face-to-face bullying and 43 percent believe it is a bigger problem for young people than drug abuse.⁶

The impact of bullying on our children’s mental health has led to heightened demand among educators for answers. Today, school bullying is finally receiving the attention it deserves from educators, governing bodies, law enforcement officials, and medical professionals, as well as parents. In recent years, the White House held a special conference on bullying, while state and provincial governments began passing mandates for school districts to implement anti-bullying practices. At this writing, fifty states, several Canadian provinces, and a few other countries have passed anti-bullying legislation, and a lucrative cottage industry of products for schools to use to combat bullying has flooded the market. Schools across the United States, Canada, and other countries have implemented hundreds of these “bullying prevention programs”; unfortunately, current studies show that at best only a quarter of them will actually reduce bullying behaviors.⁶ The problem is that the majority of these programs are not research-based so there simply hasn’t been solid research in the field. That is, until a few large studies on bullying were published—some of which I’ve already cited here—and for the first time pointed to hope: educators *can* make a difference and bullying *can* be

6. Vodafone, 2015.

reduced. But there is a caveat: only certain procedures and approaches work to reduce aggression. One mistake educators make in trying to stop bullying is failing to base their efforts on proven evidence and faithfully apply those findings. While our aim may be to stop bullying, our approach is too often not scientific, systemic, or sustained, and so our results are mediocre at best.

What Works and Does *Not* Work to Reduce Bullying

Bullying is learned behavior and can be unlearned, but solutions to peer cruelty are not simple. All those eye-catching posters and buttons, T-shirt contests, song competitions, one-day trainings, pack-aged worksheets, or “stamp-out bullying campaigns”—while they may mean well—are not effective solutions. Bullying prevention is not a one-size-fits-all approach that uses the same strategy for the targets, bystanders, and students who bully. After all, each bullying incident differs in motivation, type, and dynamics, just as each student’s learning needs differ.

Educators *can* make a difference and bullying *can* be reduced. But there is a caveat: only certain procedures and approaches work to reduce aggression.

The best way to reduce bullying is with the ongoing, homegrown, data-driven efforts of a committed, informed school community trained in anti-bullying. The approaches that are most promising tackle bullying dynamics from many angles and involve all stakeholders—students, parents, administrators, teachers, and *all* school staff, including bus drivers, custodians, cafeteria workers, yard supervisors, counselors, psychologists, secretaries, school nurses, librarians, volunteers, coaches, and crossing guards. The foundation is always based on building a culture of respect and changing destructive attitudes and behaviors by replacing them with healthier habits and views. Applying the right classroom management and discipline policies is also crucial: zero tolerance and expulsion have proven to be ineffective and can backfire.

Ultimately, what works to reduce bullying is *not* implementing a specific program but consistently using a few key evidence-based bullying prevention principles, policies, and practices. Those proven elements form the basis for this book.

Proven Strategies That Decrease Bullying

Researchers Maria Ttofi and David Farrington conducted a meta-analysis of fifty-nine evaluations of bullying interventions such as the KiVa Anti-Bullying Program, the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, and Second Step to identify the features that had the greatest impact on decreasing bullying behaviors. They found that the most important components were:⁷

- parent training
- improved playground supervision
- appropriate disciplinary methods
- student-run school assemblies that raised awareness of the problem
- classroom rules against bullying
- classroom management techniques for dealing with bullying
- tapping the power of peers to combat bullying.

All of these proven strategies are described throughout this book.

How This Book Is Unique

“My seventh-grade teacher figured out that my grades were so bad because I was being bullied. I couldn’t think. She told the other teachers to watch out for me and not to let the kid near me. I survived the terror because of her.” —Will, age 12

No single program (not PBIS, not Olweus, not Second Step, not Responsive Classroom) provides a one-stop shop for preventing bullying and improving school climate. All programs have blind spots, biases, and flaws. *End Peer Cruelty, Build Empathy* is not a program; it is a process to reduce peer cruelty with an “inside-out” approach that relies on those who have the best pulse on the issue: the actual stakeholders. This book will strengthen any program you already have in place by drawing on the best elements from all evidence-based programs and helping you integrate those elements into your own program so your program is rooted in research, culturally specific, and addresses your unique learning environment and students’ particular needs. And if you don’t

⁷ Farrington and Ttofi, 2009.

have a program already in place, I'll share which ones are proven to be most effective.

I'll also share new research, best practices, social-emotional learning (SEL) skills, and character habits that are most likely to reduce the cycle of youth cruelty and create a safe and respectful school community. By far the best result of any of these efforts is when your students perceive their school as a caring place they want to be part of.

The strategies in this book are designed to be incorporated school- or district-wide. Each activity can also be adapted for individual classroom use, but research is clear: the most favorable outcome of bullying reduction involves a three-tiered approach: school-wide, classroom-wide, and addressing individual students. This book is based on a systemic, sustained approach that involves *all* school staff: classified and certificated personnel as well as students, parents, and the community. Each person offers a different set of eyes and ears to identify why and where bullying may be happening as well as solutions to solve it. When adults exert a joint effort to make all students feel respected and welcomed at school, wonderful transformations take place.

THE INSIDE-OUT APPROACH TO THE BULLYING PROBLEM

“Creativity is a lot like looking at the world through a kaleidoscope. You look at a set of elements, the same ones everyone else sees, but then reassemble those floating bits and pieces into an enticing new possibility.”
—Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *The Change Masters*

Rosabeth Moss Kanter, a Harvard Business School professor, is the author of the best-selling book *The Change Masters*. She is also a famous business innovator who has worked with dozens of Fortune 500 companies. Though her book focuses on corporate leadership, the basic principles also can apply to schools. Too often, Kanter tells companies, we make a major mistake of looking to the outside for sources of innovation and change. A more effective approach, she states, is to look within. Kanter calls her approach *kaleidoscopic thinking*.

To understand the concept, recall a time in your childhood when you looked inside a kaleidoscope. Each time you twirled the cylinder, colorful new patterns formed. In fact, you could literally spend hours turning the dial to create beautiful new patterns, but not once did you stop to put in new pieces. Instead, you re-created new schemes and structures by using what was already

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inside. That is precisely what kaleidoscopic thinking entails. Kanter urges leaders to look at what they already have in place in their organization and restructure from the inside out, and that is the method you'll use in this book.

End Peer Cruelty, Build Empathy is a radical new approach to reducing bullying: I am not advocating one particular program to purchase or strategy to adhere to, but instead will guide you to use the kaleidoscopic thinking model to develop the most effective organic prevention approach. Instead of bringing in new pieces from the outside, I'll guide you to restructure your key elements for change, which are the critical parts of any organization: your programs, practices, policies, principles, and people. Not only will rethinking and restructuring those elements save enormous expenses and time, but what you create will be homegrown. Your bullying prevention efforts will be more likely to succeed because the approach is customized to fit *your* students' needs; match *your* culture, demographics, and beliefs; and apply to *your* evidence.

THE GOALS OF THIS BOOK

This book aims to help you develop an approach to bullying prevention that not only reduces aggressive behaviors but also teaches students proactive skills and cultivates a respectful school climate. Here are the core goals of this approach:

- Ensure that your entire school community supports a comprehensive, systemic bullying prevention effort and train them so that everyone is on the “same page.”
- Create a safe, caring school culture based on respectful relationships and social responsibility as the foundations for bullying prevention.
- Engage *all* stakeholders—staff, students, parents, and community—in bullying prevention efforts.
- Implement bullying prevention practices that are evidence-based and address your school culture as well as your students' unique needs.
- Use a three-tiered systemic approach that addresses bullying prevention school-wide, classroom-wide, and with individual students.
- Replace aggression and bullying behaviors with prosocial behaviors by teaching SEL skills.
- Use a systemic and sustained implementation process based on your evidence and needs to create real and lasting change.

About This Book

End Peer Cruelty, Build Empathy is a comprehensive guide to bullying prevention that offers the most effective proven strategies to stop bullying and create safe, caring school climates. It provides detailed guidelines for strategy implementation, data collection, team management, student and parent involvement, skill building, and assessment—everything your school needs to reduce peer cruelty and teach all students proactive, healthy behaviors to replace inappropriate ones. The practices, policies, and procedures herein are culled from a review of hundreds of studies on bullying as well as my thirty-year career working in violence prevention in schools around the world.

I wrote this book with a broad audience in mind—namely, any member of a school community who is or wishes to be involved in bullying prevention. But I expect the book to be of particular interest and usefulness to administrators, principals, assistant principals, behavior program coordinators, bullying prevention teams, and teacher leaders, as well as individual teachers and counselors who are especially committed to reducing peer cruelty. While the strategies here work best when implemented school-wide, they can also be modified for use in classrooms, clusters of classrooms, grade levels, or youth programs. Unlike some highly structured programs that require a “top-down” approach to implementation, the strategies in this book are flexible and can be tailored to meet the needs of many different audiences—from a school principal looking to engage her staff in optimizing existing anti-bullying efforts; to a behavior specialist who is part of his school’s bullying prevention team and wants to share the latest research and best practices; to a math teacher who is looking to form a book study with fellow teachers and model some of these practices, and perhaps even convince other teachers, staff, and school administration to join in (a “bottom-up” approach). However this book is used, the goal in each case is the same: employ evidence-based practices with as many stakeholders as possible to address all facets of bullying: from creating rules for behavior to replacing aggression with acceptable skills.



“It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men.”
—Frederick Douglass
