



The Bully, the Bullied, and the Bystander

Includes
more than 100
practical ways
to protect
your child

From Preschool to High School—How Parents and
Teachers Can Help Break the Cycle of Violence

BARBARA COLOROSO

Author of the international bestseller *kids are worth it!*

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*from preschool to high school—
how parents and teachers
can help break the cycle of violence*

Barbara Coloroso



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I think we can't go around measuring our goodness by what we don't do, by what we deny ourselves, what we resist, and who we exclude. I think we've got to measure goodness by what we embrace, what we create, and who we include.

—Père Henri, in the movie *Chocolat*

*To David Kent
for asking me to write this book
and trusting that I could.
Thank you.*

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BARBARA COLOROSO, *July 2002*

Introduction

I shall remember forever and will never forget

Monday: my money was taken.

Tuesday: names called.

Wednesday: my uniform torn.

Thursday: my body pouring with blood.

Friday: it's ended.

Saturday: freedom.

The final diary pages of thirteen-year-old Vijay Singh. He was found hanging from the banister rail at home on Sunday.

—Neil Marr and Tim Field,

Bullycide, Death at Playtime:

An Exposé of Child Suicide

Caused by Bullying

Bullying is a life-and-death issue that we ignore at our children's peril. It can no longer be minimized and trivialized by adults, taken lightly, brushed off, or denied. Thousands of children go to school every day filled with fear and trepidation; others feign illness to avoid being taunted or attacked on the way to school or in the school yard, hallways, and bathrooms; still others manage to make

themselves sick at school so as to avoid harassment in the locker room. Children who are bullied spend a lot of time thinking up ways to avoid the trauma and have little energy left for learning.

It is not only the bullied child who suffers the consequences of bullying. Many children who bully continue these learned behaviors into adulthood and are at increased risk of bullying their own children, failing at interpersonal relationships, losing jobs, and ending up in jail.

Bystanders are also affected by bullying. These onlookers may observe the bullying, walk away, jump in as accomplices, or actively intervene and help the bullied child. All of these options come at a price.

Breaking the cycle of violence involves more than merely identifying and stopping the bully. It requires that we examine why and how a child becomes a bully or a target of a bully (and sometimes both) as well as the role bystanders play in perpetuating the cycle. A deadly combination is a bully who gets what he wants from his target; a bullied child who is afraid to tell; bystanders who either watch, participate in the bullying, or look away; and adults who discount bullying as teasing, not tormenting; as a necessary part of growing up, not an impediment along the way; as "boys will be boys," not the predatory aggression that it is.

If this triad of relationships is not radically transformed, we have enough incidents in our recent past to convince us that it is not only the bully who may terrorize and haunt our community. Some victims whose cries went unheard, whose pain was ignored, whose oppression went unabated and unrelieved, have struck back with a vengeance and a rage that have racked our communities with incomprehensible horror and sorrow. Others, like Vijay Singh, who reached what they felt was an utterly hopeless and irretrievable point, have turned the violence inward and killed themselves. Feeling they had no other way out of the pain and torture

heaped on them by their tormentors, no one to turn to, no way to tell, they made a tragic and final exit:

- January 1999; Manchester, England: Eight-year-old Marie Bentham hanged herself in her bedroom with her jump rope because she felt she could no longer face the bullies at school. Marie is thought to be Britain's youngest bullycide.
- January 1995; Belfast, Ireland: Maria McGovern overdosed after being bullied. The diary she left behind recorded a life of daily terror at the hands of her schoolmates.
- April 1997; Nanaimo, British Columbia: A grade four student pulled a knife on another student who was taunting him. According to his mother, the knife-wielding boy had been tormented by his peers for over a year. "He gave up all forms of sport, wouldn't do his homework, and would just end up leaving school—he was angry all the time. He was picked on, period. Home was the only place he could go where he wouldn't get picked on."

After the knife incident, the boy and his family were required to take an anger management course. The school took no immediate disciplinary steps against the children who had bullied him.

- August 1997; Invercargill, New Zealand: Fifteen-year-old Matt Ruddenklau committed suicide. The coroner's report stated, "Bullying and victimization were a significant factor in the boy's life in the months leading up to his suicide."
- November 14, 1997; Victoria, British Columbia: Fourteen-year-old Reena Virk died after being lured by schoolmates, attacked, and beaten unconscious. Reena's arm, neck, and back were deliberately broken before she was dumped in the Gorge Inlet. She had tried to fit in and had wanted desperately to belong to their group, but she was regularly mocked

and taunted about her brown skin and her weight. Particularly startling was the fact that hundreds of students knew about the relentless taunting and even of her death before someone tipped off the police.

Two of the girls who lured Reena to the waterway where she was mobbed and killed were sentenced to a year in custody and another year of probation. The fourteen-year-old said she was angry with Reena because she believed Reena had been spreading rumors about her. The sixteen-year-old was mad at Reena because she believed Reena had been involved with her boyfriend.

- April 20, 1999; Littleton, Colorado: Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold used assault weapons and homemade bombs to lay siege to their high school. The two boys killed twelve classmates and a teacher, injured eighteen other teenagers, and then killed themselves.

Their friends said the two boys were constantly ridiculed and taunted at school. An unfounded accusation was made by an anonymous classmate that Eric and Dylan had brought marijuana to school, prompting a search of their property. Then there was another incident, even more humiliating than the search. "People surrounded them in the commons and squirted ketchup packets all over them, laughing at them, calling them faggots. That happened while teachers watched. They couldn't fight back. They wore the ketchup all day and went home covered with it."

In the suicide note left by Eric, it was apparent that he and Dylan felt bullied and alienated, and in their minds it was "payback time."

- April 1999; Taber, Alberta: A fourteen-year-old boy who was an "at home" student (he did schoolwork at home because he feared school) walked into the main hallway of the high school, shot and killed a seventeen-year-old student, and

badly wounded another before surrendering his gun and meekly submitting to arrest. Classmates said he was “everybody’s best punching bag.” One student said, “He’d sometimes get body-checked into the lockers. They’d try to pick fights with him and he’d just take it. They knew he wouldn’t fight back.”

The summer before the shooting, while on an outing with peers, this “new kid in town” was stuck on a rock outcropping, unable to climb up or down. His peers laughed about his predicament and taunted him instead of helping him out.

- March 2000; Surrey, British Columbia: Fourteen-year-old Hamed Nastih leapt to his death from the Patullo Bridge. He left a five-page note for his family describing in detail the bullying and taunting that drove him to suicide: “Mom, I was teased at school by my mates, my classmates, even my own friends laughed at me. They always called me four eyes, big nose, and geek.” His mother said one of Hamed’s last wishes was for people to stop harassing one another and to realize that taunting is hurtful.

Hamed’s friends felt powerless to stop the taunting.

“Everyone gets bullied. But this went too far. We stood up for him, but people couldn’t get the hint that this went too far, and this pushed him.”

- November 10, 2000; Mission, British Columbia: Fourteen-year-old Dawn Marie Wesley hanged herself with her dog’s leash in her bedroom. She left a suicide note naming three girls at her school she said were “killing her” because of their bullying: “If I try to get help it will get worse. They are always looking for a new person to beat up and they are the toughest girls. If I ratted they would get suspended and there would be no stopping them. I love you all so much.” The girls named in the note were suspended from school.
- January 2001; Holyoke, Colorado: Fourteen-year-old

Miranda Whittaker killed herself with a gun in her family's home. Her parents have filed a suit against local school officials for their failure to "deal seriously with the aftermath of the sexual assault" of their daughter. They accused the school district of "failing to provide their daughter with a safe and secure learning environment free of sexual harassment."

According to the suit, Miranda was a twelve-year-old student when she reported that a sixteen-year-old popular student athlete in this small rural community, had raped her. The sixteen-year-old pleaded guilty to second-degree sexual assault and was sentenced to four years of probation and a deferred judgment. (He was later accused of raping and impregnating another girl. Paternity tests concluded he was the father of the child.)

Miranda's parents alleged that school officials did nothing to stop other students as well as teachers from taunting and harassing their daughter. Miranda was called a "slut" and a "whore," blamed and shamed for being a rape victim of a star student. Her parents also contend that the school took no action against the boy, against whom Whittaker had obtained a restraining order. In their lawsuit, the parents said that one teacher (Miranda's basketball coach, who made it clear she supported the boy) forced the girl to stand next to her rapist in class, even though the restraining order required he not be within her sight. School officials have denied any wrongdoing.

- March 5, 2001; Santee, California: Charles Andrew Williams, a fifteen-year-old high school freshman, brought a gun to school, shot and killed two schoolmates, and wounded thirteen more as well as several adults.

Friends said he was picked on constantly. "He was so skinny that some people called him 'Anorexic Andy.'" His older brother, Michael, said Andy was used to being taunted.

"He has big ears and he's real skinny. People liked to pick on him. It was like that as long as I can remember."

"He was always getting picked on. He's scrawny, he's little," said a friend, Neil O'Grady. "People think he's dumb. Recently, he had two skateboards stolen." Another teen admitted, "We abused him pretty much, I mean verbally. I called him a skinny faggot one time."

- March 7, 2001; Williamsport, Pennsylvania: Elizabeth Bush, a fourteen-year-old eighth grader, brought her father's gun to school and shot and wounded a friend who allegedly turned on her and joined in with her tormentors, who often called her "idiot, stupid, fat, and ugly."
- November 2001; Tokyo, Japan: A primary school boy stabbed his tormentor in an attempt to end months of *ijime* (bullying).
- April 8, 2002; Halifax, Nova Scotia: A popular and outgoing student, fourteen-year-old Emmet Fralick shot and killed himself in his bedroom. He left behind a suicide note saying he could no longer take the bullying from his peers. It was reported that Emmet faced extortion, threats, and beatings from other teenagers.

The list could go on for many more pages, detailing incidents from countries around the world. The common thread in all of these accounts is that these children were bullied relentlessly and, in most cases, the bullying went on without substantial objections, indignation, adequate intervention, or outrage. We are devastated by the final act of violence but rarely outraged by the events that led to that final act. The bottom line: These tragic outcomes need not have happened. Bullying is a learned behavior. If it can be learned, it can be examined, and it can be changed. Whether you're dealing with a long-standing or escalating problem, or

whether you're concerned because your child is exhibiting some of the early warning signs—or you've seen behaviors among his or her friends that concern you—this book can help.

We cannot live only for ourselves. A thousand fibers connect us with our fellow men; and among those fibers, as sympathetic threads, our actions run as causes, and they come back to us as effects.

—Herman Melville

When the dignity and safety of an individual is assaulted, the dignity and fabric of the group as a whole is diminished.

—William M. Bukowski and Lorrie K. Sippola,
“Groups, Individuals, and Victimization: A View of the
Peer System” (*Peer Harassment in School*)