

BULLY

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THAN
DAMAGE
CONTROL



The harm done by bullying is reaching epidemic levels in this nation, and although quick fixes exist, few programs start early enough or last long enough to significantly change the school environment, resulting in little more than damage control. It takes three years to alter the climate in a school, but it only happens with everyone's participation—teachers, counselors, coaches, librarians, administrators, support staff, parents, and of course, students. Only those involved can change it. While those of us who are concerned watch the committees form and wait for them to act, I suggest adding more books that contain the theme of harassment to language arts classrooms and libraries. We do not have to wait until after the bullying to put on the Band-Aids; we can read books and talk about the problem at a safe, objective distance as an early preventive plan. Who knows how many bullying events could be avoided? Bystanders make up approximately 75 to 80 percent of the school population, but when motivated, they can make a difference. Research shows that when bystanders do nothing, both the bully and the targeted student think these silent witnesses support the bully, even if the silent witness is an adult.

For the last eight years, bully books have been my main reading focus. As I explored titles dealing with bullying for young adults, I found bullies everywhere—from picture books for younger readers to chapter books and high school titles. The more easily these books are made available, the more students will benefit. Books can save lives, but first they have to be within reach. These are some of my favorites and most recent finds.

MIDDLE SCHOOL

Home and Other Big Fat Lies by Jill Wolfson tells the story of Whitney, a sixth grader who would be “different” in any setting. As

she heads for foster home number twelve, she cannot help pulling up her defenses again. Once there, she discovers several other foster youth at school, who explain that in this logging town, the loggers are unable to work so they take in foster children to help pay the bills. After some very tense moments, Whitney wins over her family and the whole town. Foster children, who are sometimes ashamed to admit their circumstance, often feel like outcasts. I loved this book mostly because Whitney bubbles with energy and determination.



James Howe's four main characters, Bobby Goodspeed, Skeezy Tookis, Joe Bunch, and Addie Carle of **The Misfits**, have rallied schools across the country. During school elections, these four students start an independent political party with a No Name-Calling platform. Although they do not win the election, they impress the principal with their slogan: Sticks and stones may break our bones, but words will break our spirit. As this book became popular, a movement began. Middle schools and elementary schools take part in a national No Name-Calling Week each January. For information on how to get involved, go to the Web site at <http://www.nonamecallingweek.org>. Howe's companion book, **Totally Joe**, focuses on Joe Bunch.



Poison Ivy by Amy Goldman Koss takes place in a ninth grade government class where Ms. Gold teaches about the judicial system by staging a mock trial with every student assigned a role. To simulate a case, she convinces Ivy to bring harassment charges

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against the three girls, Ann, Sophie, and Benita, who have bullied her since early elementary school. This book could easily be read aloud as the chapters are told in the voices of several participating students. Before finishing, ask students how they would vote. The book's verdict will shock some, but it will lead to great discussions about justice and fear.

Sharon G. Flake gives readers another wonderful story in **The Skin I'm In**. Maleeka Madison, the darkest-skinned student at her school, can't seem to get a break. Her father died two years ago, and her mother is just starting to emerge from depression, so Maleeka decides she can't let mom know that bully Charlese Jones calls the shots at school. In an attempt to protect herself, Maleeka offers Charlese a deal—she will do all of Charlese's homework and run errands for her if Charlese will just keep the other bullies away, but of course, it does not work. Skin color does not always secure membership even within one's own race, but heroic Maleeka comes to realize hers is the skin she is in, and others can deal with it.



In a small British Columbia town, unspoken rules and an invisible line divide the whites from the Indians or First Nation, even on the school bus, but one white girl crosses that line when she starts dating a First Nation. The *Romeo and Juliet* theme pervades young adult literature, but **The Yellow Line** by Sylvia Olsen updates the discussion. This book serves to show that we are not yet done with prejudice or the bullying that results because of it.

Amal, an Australian Palestinian, makes the decision to wear a hijab, a Muslim headscarf, attracting constant attention in her snobby prep school in Sidney. In the United States many people have little understanding or tolerance of Muslims. **Does My Head Look Big in This?** by Randa Abdel-Fattah educates while introducing a spunky, intelligent, brave, young woman with a deep faith.



Endgame by Nancy Garden was written in answer to a request from a Columbine teacher. Fifteen-year-old Gray Wilton, in prison waiting for a jury to decide his fate, tells his story through sessions with his lawyer. The extreme bullying he suffered at the hands of the school football heroes drove Gray to take a gun to school and use it. Newspaper headlines report that school shooters exist, but few people believe it could happen in their own neighborhoods. The damage begins long before the gun is brought to school, and community attitudes and favoritism contribute to the creation of these empathy-lacking, elitist bullies.



Carlos Amoroso in **Getting It** by Alex Sanchez does not have the confidence to talk to Roxy Rodriguez, but he notices Sal, the gay guy at school, has no trouble talking to girls. Inspired by the television show *Queer Eye*, Carlos asks Sal for some dating advice, which seems to work, except Carlos's friends start to wonder why he is hanging out with Sal. Witty and realistic dialogue humorously delivers needed life lessons.



Huge by Sasha Paley tells the story of two weight-challenged girls. April Adams has never been happy with her weight and earns the money to go to Wellness Camp, a fat camp. While she dreams of becoming the person she wants to be, Wilhelmina Hopkins intends to gain weight until her parents love her the way she is. Even though everyone at fat camp has body image issues, there still exists a hierarchy based on who is closest to being thin.



In the graphic novel **The Plain Janes** by Cecil Castellucci and Jim Rugg, Jane goes looking for friends among the "normal" people instead of the in-crowd and discovers a lunch table of loners who are really very creative and adventurous art lovers. She fits in perfectly. They band together in a different definition of the word clique to pull off some secret art projects.



Matt (Matilda) tries to go unnoticed in her new school, but the vicious school bully, Rat, seeks out Matt and her Quaker foster family in **Quaking**. The title hints at the double meaning of quaking with fear and being Quaker. When the bully takes his hatred out on Matt's entire family, her feelings of guilt and powerlessness multiply as she realizes she cannot be invisible any longer.



Thirteen Reasons Why by Jay Asher is an intensely haunting story that dissects the events leading to a suicide. Clay Jensen receives a strange package of audiotapes that



CYBERBULLYING

Cyberbullying is being cruel to others by sending or posting harmful material or engaging in other forms of social cruelty using the Internet or other digital technologies. It comprises online social aggression.

Different Forms

- **Flaming.**
Online “fights” using electronic messages with angry and vulgar language.
- **Harassment.**
Repeatedly sending offensive, rude, and insulting messages.
- **Denigration.**
“Dissing” someone online. Sending or posting cruel gossip or rumors about a person to damage his or her reputation or friendships.
- **Impersonation.**
Breaking into someone’s account, posing as that person and sending messages to make the person look bad, get that person in trouble or danger, or damage that person’s reputation or friendships.
- **Outing and Trickery.**
Sharing someone’s secrets or embarrassing information or images online.
Tricking someone into revealing secrets or embarrassing information, which is then shared online.
- **Exclusion.**
Intentionally excluding someone from an online group, like a “buddy list.”
- **Cyberstalking.**
Repeatedly sending messages that include threats of harm or are highly intimidating.
Engaging in other online activities that make a person afraid or fear for her safety.

SOURCE

Willard, Nancy. **Cyberbullying and Cyberthreats: Responding to the Challenge of Online Social Aggression, Threats, and Distress.** Research Press, 2007. 320p. \$34.95 pb. 978-0-87822-537-8. Glossary. Index. Source Notes. Appendix. **VOYA** June 2007.

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Hannah Baker made explaining the thirteen reasons why she killed herself. He must listen to them and then send them to the next person on the list. This powerful book covers the destructive force of ugly words, sexism, sexual harassment, and bullycide—suicide to escape the bullying. Going back and changing what one has said or done is not a possibility in life, and although Hannah pointedly accepts responsibility for her actions, she wants others to understand their contributions.

Laurie Halse Anderson always tells a great story, and **Twisted** is one of her best. Formerly the invisible boy at school, Tyler Miller’s life changed when he spray-painted the high school with obscenities and earned himself probation and a summer of hard, physical labor. It’s not much of an improvement, except that now most people leave him alone—but not Chip Millbury, elitist bully and brother of Tyler’s heart’s desire, Bethany. When the big trouble goes down, the blame falls on Tyler, and his thoughts turn to suicide.



CYBERBULLYING

The Internet brings wonderful opportunities, a wealth of knowledge within fingertip reach, and new dangers. Although online journals and blogs improve writing skills and give students the opportunity to practice social skills that give them confidence in the real world, people easily lie online. Believing that no one will ever know real identities enables the creation of alter egos and things we would never do if held accountable. Cyberbullying is the fastest-growing form of bullying happening around the world. The anonymity that the Internet offers frees the bully to take even greater risks in his or her attacks. Because the targeted individual does not know the identity of the cyberbully, the whole world becomes enemy territory.

Most schools do little about cyberbullying because lawyers have told them it happens off the school campus, which becomes a very weak defense. Camera phones take and send photos with incredible speed. Students practice text messaging without looking so that they can hide their phones under their desktops and text while looking straight at the teacher. Some cell phones connect directly to the Internet, and the damaging photos reach home computers before the victims arrive.

The number of books dealing with cyberbullying unfortunately is small but growing, and I am constantly looking for more.

Even though her friend Janice screams for attention in **Chat Room** by Kristin Butcher, Linda tries very hard to be invisible, but she discovers that in the school’s online chat room she can anonymously practice being herself. This book shows how tempting chat rooms can be, and the more sophisticated the student body, the more refined their motives, exchanges, and attacks.



Audrey in **Good Girls** by Laura Ruby never imagined bad things could happen to her because she has always been one of the good girls. But when she meets Luke DeSalvio at a party, they have sex—magical, incredible, hot sex—in a back room, and even though she knows he is no good for her, she hates to give up the sex. Eventually she realizes she must, and for their last meeting she decides to give him a good-bye to remember. While kneeling between his legs, she



does not hear the door open or see the flash, but she does see the photo—on everyone’s cell phones and in her parents’ e-mail.



Socio-economic and cultural differences inspire the queen bee, Liz, in **Queen of the Toilet Bowl** by Frieda Wishinsky. After moving from Brazil with her family, Renata enters an elite high school in the United States while her mother supports them by cleaning houses. In an attempt to avoid Liz and her clique, Renata stays as invisible as possible, but when Liz finds out what Renata’s mom does for a living, she posts on the Internet a picture of Renata’s mother with her head in a toilet bowl, captioned “Like mother, like daughter.” For some cyberbullies, family members are not off limits.

Russell Trainor, Elliot Gekewicz, and Catalina Aarons are bully targets who form their own support group. They tell their stories on the school’s KidNet, under the heading of The Revealer, in **The Revealers** by Doug Wilhelm. They soon receive many bully stories from other students as their idea takes off, prompting one teacher to liken it to an underground newspaper. Schools that create these self-contained school networks need to accept the job of educating students on Web etiquette and responsibility, reminding them that it is public space.



In **Something to Blog About** by Shana Norris, Libby needs a private place to record her thoughts, so she creates a password-protected blog. Her life would be much easier if only Angel, who has been bullying Libby since kindergarten, would leave her alone, but then Libby discovers her mom’s secret boyfriend is Angel’s father. Their parents attempt to better acquaint the two with a dinner at Libby and her mother’s home. During the meal, Angel slips into Libby’s bedroom, finds her computer open, and posts her blog everywhere.



Anderson’s **Twisted** also contains cyberbullying. At a blowout party, photos are taken and then posted on the Internet of Bethany, drunk, nearly naked, and passed out. Of course, Tyler is blamed. The party photographs that appear on the damaging Web site, which was probably created at someone’s home, could be accessed everywhere, even at school.

We find ourselves in books—as do young people—and whether one identifies with the bully, the target, or the silent witness, readers can see the consequences before they have to live with them. There are very few helpful adults in these books, which according to research is typical. My instinct is to believe it is because adults do not know what to do. Reading these stories helps us understand the effects of bullying, but we must also educate ourselves to find ways to help young people. They deserve more than damage control. ■



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