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Introduction

Whenever words fly up at me from a printed page as I read, I intercept them instantly, knowing they are for me. I turn them over carefully in my mind and cling to them hard.

David Grayson



Background to the book

Hardly a day goes by without a news item in the press, radio, or television about a bullying incident; or a talk-back program can be heard in which people share their views on the subject. Yet not so long ago there was virtual silence. It was a non-talking point. Nobody seemed to care, not even in schools. Before the 1990s it was exceedingly rare for teachers to discuss bullying. As a school teacher in those early days, I cannot recall it ever being a staff meeting issue. There were no seminars or workshops on bullying; parents did not attend meetings about bullying at school. They did not write letters to the paper about it or approach their member of parliament.

There were no books or chapters in books in English on bullying, rarely even paragraphs in books on educational psychology or developmental psychology, or the health of children; scarcely a mention anywhere. There were no videos on bullying; nobody, it seemed, was even researching the subject. How times have changed within the span of a mere 15 years.

When I began to look at the issue of school bullying in 1988, I could only find one author who had taken the matter seriously: a Swedish psychologist and tireless researcher, Professor Dan Olweus,¹ who had been hard at work on bullying since the 1970s. It was to be many years before educators began to follow his lead. When they did, the floodgates opened. First, there was a very thoughtful book from an English woman, Valerie Besag,² followed by a growing deluge. Today information about bullying in schools is enormous. I have just put “bullying in schools” into my Google search engine and learned that there are approximately 2,760,000 sites on bullying in schools. When I limited my search to publications in psychology (excluding other disciplines) I found 209 books, 728 peer reviewed articles, and 94 dissertations.

Why has there been this remarkable explosion of interest in school bullying? A first guess may be that school bullying has become progressively worse and is simply out of hand. Yet when we look at the evidence, there is no reason to believe that this is true. To date, no longitudinal study has supported the view that bullying has become more common; in fact, a careful study conducted in England during the 1990s concluded that the prevalence of bullying in a sample of schools had, if anything, become slightly less over time.³

Why then are people so concerned? I think there are several reasons, beginning with a general one. Without doubt, in most countries there has been a growing recognition of the basic rights of people who are being discriminated against and even, on occasion, repeatedly and systematically abused because they belong to certain categories. These categories include, or have included, being female (less often, being male); belonging to a less powerful ethnic or racial group; being in some way physically or mentally disabled; having an unconventional sexual orientation; being poor, and being a member of an unpopular religious group. The overall effect has been to increase community awareness of unfair treatment not only towards vulnerable social groups, but also towards individuals who are being treated unfairly, regardless of group membership: for instance, children who are being bullied.

In this climate of increased sensitivity, not surprisingly incidents that had previously been passed over or played down were now headlined. Children were engaging in bullying as they always had, but bullying in schools was increasingly noticed and the effects were seen as far more harmful to the health and well-being of seriously victimized children than had ever been suspected. Especially disturbing were reports of child suicide following episodes of severe bullying.⁴ The more the phenomena of bullying was studied, the more convincing the evidence

became of the serious harm that was suffered by vulnerable children at school.⁵

Much of the focus has been on the victims of school bullying, but increasingly the bullies were seen as a serious menace, not only to their peers at school but also (later in life) to the wider community *unless* preventative action was taken in schools. In the United States in 1999, the killings at a high school in Columbine shocked the world and forced us to consider bullying in a radically different way.⁶ Could it be that victims become the bullies? Does the solution to the problem of bullying lie as much in the nature of the school community and relationships between members of that community as in the individual personalities of those who bully and those who are victimized?

Report after report provided evidence that bullying in schools could be reduced if only we put our minds to it,⁷ and today there are books, programs, and websites that provide information and resources on how to identify, prevent, and intervene in bullying situations in schools.

With hundreds of books about school bullying already written, why do we need another one? Well, I have been looking at the nature and the content of those books. Many of them fall into two categories: those written by researchers (mostly for other researchers) and those written to be more easily understood by educators (mostly for teachers). The former are often highly technical.⁸ The latter are sometimes based in part upon research, but are intended for a wider audience; for example, a popular book by Dan Olweus.⁹ Then there are other books that are not research-based. They are generally the most readable, uncluttered by facts, written from the heart, occasionally useful. One I like is Trevor Romain's short, nicely illustrated book, *Bullies Are a Pain in the Brain*.¹⁰ So they are.

There have been relatively few written specially for parents. Generally, they consist of short booklets which seek to convey basic information about school bullying and contain tips about what caring parents can do. Andrew Mellor writing for the Scottish Council for Research in Education produced one such booklet in 1993.¹¹ The Australian Federal Attorney General's Department commissioned me to write a short guide for Australian parents, published in 2003.¹² Some internet sites provide useful information for concerned parents.¹³ Given their short span, such productions, though useful, are relatively superficial. They skim the surface of this important topic.

There are a few longer books which focus upon what parents can do to prevent their child from being bullied. Unfortunately they are

not research-based. In my view, we have advanced beyond the stage at which everything is simply a matter of opinion. High quality research has expanded hugely in the field of bullying over the last 15 years or so, and whilst no one would claim that we know all the answers, it is no longer acceptable to ignore relevant findings that are continually being provided and often replicated in reputable scientific journals and books.

Why we need this book

There are, then, some books that are largely for parents to read. But to be frank I worry about many of them. I have two major concerns. First, they tend to talk down to parents in a way that doesn't seem to happen in books written for teachers. I spend a lot of time addressing meetings of parents, answering phone calls and emails from parents, and taking part in discussion groups with parents. I most emphatically do not find that they are dumber or less perceptive than teachers. I find that they do want to know about what is and what isn't evidence-based, no less than teachers do. I find there is no need to simplify. I find their attention and interest in understanding bullying at least as keen as that of the average teacher.

My second concern is that the books I see about bullying for parents seem to assume that parents are only interested in what they can do to help their own child to cope better. Now this is certainly a primary consideration for parents, but it is not the whole story. If I am right, parents are interested not only in what they themselves should do, but also in what teachers and schools should do about bullying.

Parents, I believe, need to know what schools are doing about bullying. Of course, the question of what good schools are doing and what not-so-good schools are failing to do is a matter of burning interest to many teachers. An increasing number of good books have been written specifically to help teachers and educational administrators. But bullying greatly concerns parents as well. Thus far they have been largely left out in the cold. Parents need to be brought into the discussion of what schools, as well as they themselves, can do to tackle the problem of bullying. It is only through close collaboration between parents and teachers that we can hope to make much headway. Both parties need to be informed about what is known about bullying and what can be done.

I think we must face the fact that parents and teachers are apt to see the problem of bullying differently. I come across parents who are

extraordinarily angry about what teachers are doing (or not doing) about bullying, especially when their own child is involved in some way. They are inclined to attribute their child's predicament entirely to the ignorance or misguided behavior of the school staff. Equally, I encounter teachers who evidently see the problem of bullying as solely a parental matter. I have heard teachers say that it is the parenting of children that creates the problem. Bullying, they sometimes say, is imported into the school. These different perceptions do lead from time to time to serious conflict between some parents and some teachers. The child is almost invariably the loser. Solutions to bullying problems depend upon close collaboration between the child's parents and the child's teachers.

The answer as always lies in a deeper understanding of the problem, which is impossible as long as each party engages in blame and rhetoric. This book therefore offers an approach towards understanding based upon what is known about the problem of bullying in schools. As a long-term researcher into school-based bullying, I am drawn towards solutions which are evidence-based, or, to be more precise, what is emerging in the field of research—and always subject to correction by later work. But it is of no use if researchers keep things to themselves, confining their findings within the pages of learned journals or monographs. Hence I have felt it necessary to draw upon a good deal of research. Where I can, I have let the facts speak for themselves in the hope that a sound basis can be established so parents can work better with teachers, and teachers with parents, for the good of the child.

What is contentious

I should warn the reader that he or she may not agree with everything I have written. There are several areas that some might find contentious. The first is the unpopular view that some children are genetically predisposed towards interacting with others in an aggressive or bullying manner. As well (I believe) there can be a predisposition in a child towards anxiety and timidity, which can result in a proneness to being victimized at school. It seems to me that the contribution of genetic psychology indicating that everyone is to some degree affected by the characteristics or qualities they are born with or inherit is indisputable.¹⁴ It is also much misunderstood.

Because the claim that genetic factors influence behavior seems “unfair” and the implications depressing, there is a remarkable degree of

denial or distortion on the part of some (not all) professional educators. Rather than examine the evidence and its implications, critics commonly reply with slogans, such as “Bullies are made and not born” and “Bullying is not a matter of having bad genes.” In vain, one may point out that one is talking about the influence of genetic factors—along with the influence of environmental factors, whilst still recognizing the profound influences of parenting and family life. In the interest of an easier life I could have pleased many people by dodging the issue. But I am committed to exploring the scientific evidence. In the long run, I think it is much better for parents to recognize that their influence is one of many that affect how their children behave. More accurately, it could be said that genetic and environmental factors interact in ways that are not always positive for the way a child behaves. At times parents need to know what they may be “up against,” or must take into account, not so that they can resign themselves, but in order that they can take more informed and ultimately more effective action.

Parents are generally more prone to recognize the influence of their child’s peer group. But all too often they see peer group influence as a negative factor. It need not be. In this book I am at pains to point out that positive peer group influence, especially in the area of how children relate to each other in schools, can be crucial in the struggle against bullying. This is especially so when parents and teachers work together to harness the good will and intentions of individual students and student groups.

A further area likely to prove contentious concerns the effects of exposure of infants over an extended period to inadequate child-care services. Currently in western countries there is a great deal of reliance on the care of children by professional carers. There is, of course, a combination of reasons for parents and partners (or single parents) doing so. These include perceived financial need and the desire for professional advancement. One can sympathize with people over the economic straits in which they find themselves, and recognize the commitment some parents feel towards realizing their professional aspirations. Unfortunately the research into bullying behavior is pointing towards the negative effects on children’s social development of inadequate bonding between infants and a primary care-giver.¹⁵ And inevitably this calls into question the practice of leaving young children for long periods with adults who can supervise and care for them, but cannot love and fundamentally bond with their charges.

Finally, as in all new areas of inquiry—and some old ones as well—controversies arise as researchers and educators begin to explore

such basic questions as why children bully and what can best be done about it. I believe parents as well as educators should be encouraged to understand the nature of these disagreements. The last chapter provides a means with which readers can become familiar with what the “experts” are disagreeing about—and can be provoked to think things through for themselves.

The structure of the book

It may be useful to see in advance where this book is going. I am therefore providing a brief overview of the journey. I think this is desirable because some readers are apt to waste time and feel disappointed looking for what they want to know in the wrong place. You will not find tips on what to do everywhere. Some chapters deal with issues that will interest those who are concerned with definitions and research findings—the necessary factual basis for a useful examination of what bullying is about. Some explore ideas such as the impact of genetic and parenting factors, the nature and function of the peer group, and the role of student bystanders. Some are concerned with current controversies. If these do not interest you, skim or skip. Many readers, I’m sure, will be interested in more immediate and pressing matters, such as what they can do to minimize the risk of their child being bullied—or bullying others—at school, and what steps can be taken if their child is actually being bullied and they feel desperate about it. Some readers will be particularly interested in choosing a good school for their children—one that is safe and where children can be happy. I hope that administrators and teachers in schools will also be interested in this one.

An overview of the chapters

Chapter 1: Introduction This provides a brief background to books about bullying and why this book was written. It foreshadows aspects that may be considered contentious, and outlines the general structure of the book.

Chapter 2: The Cares of Parents This examines the deep concerns of parents of children who have become seriously and often painfully involved in bully/victim problems. It draws upon their frequently harrowing personal experiences.

Chapter 3: The Nature of Bullying This chapter takes a hard, objective look at bullying in schools. The term “bullying” is carefully

defined. The ways in which children engage in bullying are described and different levels of severity are distinguished.

Chapter 4: The Research into Bullying in Schools describes what has been learned about bullying in schools from numerous studies undertaken in a variety of countries. This is a chapter for those who want to know about some of the major findings from serious research into the phenomena of school bullying. Drawing mainly, but not exclusively, upon in-depth studies undertaken by the author over a 15-year-period in Australia, with children, ranging from those of kindergarten age to those in senior high school, I report on the prevalence and incidence of different kinds of bullying in schools, gender differences, age trends, and the places bullying mostly occurs. I also describe and discuss the involvement of student bystanders, the reasons children give for bullying others, and the negative health and other sad consequences of children's involvement in bully/victim problems

Chapter 5: Your Children at School invites parents to consider what is known about the world of children at school and the forces that impinge upon them and affect how they relate to each other. It argues that in order to help children deal with any interpersonal difficulties at school, parents should recognize that to some extent their children are genetically predisposed from birth to act in certain ways, and are later strongly influenced, both negatively and positively, especially by their friendship and peer associations at school. When these forces are recognized and understood, parents are much better placed to provide their children with realistic and positive guidance.

Chapter 6: On Telling Children are continually being exhorted to "tell" if and when they are bullied at school. This chapter provides important information on how often they actually do so and why students are often disinclined to tell anybody (apart from other students) when they are bullied. It is suggested that parents need to understand the grounds for such reluctance if they are to help their children when they encounter bullying.

Chapter 7: Bystanders As an illustration of the powerful influence of peers, this chapter focuses upon the various roles of student bystanders. Drawing upon recent ground-breaking research, I examine in some detail the bystander situation in schools, and how and why bystanders respond as they do. This enables one to see the crucial part student bystanders can play in stopping bullying and leads to suggestions as to how both parents and teachers can promote positive bystander behavior in countering bullying.

Chapter 8: Parenting and Healthy Child Development This is con-

cerned with how parents can best promote healthy child development and thereby minimize the risk of the children becoming involved in bully/victim problems at school. Contributions of a range of child-rearing factors are discussed, including early attachment or bonding with infants, the appropriate use of child-care facilities, parenting style (authoritarian, permissive, overprotective, and authoritative), the use of punishment, family dysfunction, and conflict between siblings.

Chapter 9: Parents as Life Educators The theme of this chapter is what parents can do to facilitate the development of life skills and attitudes that will help children to develop positive peer relations and avoid being bullied at school. This includes helping children to make friends and develop the capacity to act assertively when it is appropriate, rather than acting aggressively, in interactions with peers. Suggestions are made about how parents can inculcate such qualities as resilience, acceptance of differences in others (as opposed to prejudiced thinking), being resistant to negative group pressure, and the capacity to play games in the proper spirit. The dangers of exposure to media violence and engagement in power sports without appropriate guidance are also emphasized.

Chapter 10: Parents Helping Children with Bullying Problems This examines what parents can do when they become aware that their child is involved in a bully/victim problem at school. It discusses the conditions in which children are more likely to tell their parents they are being bullied and possible signs that bullying may be taking place. Alternative responses that parents may make to disclosures are examined and evaluated. Positive and negative strategies for dealing with the problem are then considered. Advice is given on when it is appropriate to seek assistance from the school, how such meetings can be best managed, and what further actions may be taken if outcomes are unsatisfactory.

Chapter 11: What Good Schools Are Doing about Bullying This chapter is intended to help both parents and educators to develop a greater awareness of what schools can do to reduce and handle cases of bullying. It provides criteria to evaluate what schools are doing to counter bullying and suggests steps that parents may take to help improve matters for their own and for other children.

Chapter 12: Some Questions and Answers The concluding chapter deals with questions parents often ask when they seek to understand the nature of school bullying and how it can best tackled. The answers given are intended to stimulate thought.

Appendices I believe there are parents who are especially interested

in what schools are doing, or may do, in educating their children about bullying. The resources in the appendices section are essentially practical and are ones that parents (and professional educators as well) may usefully consider when they are seeking to understand and evaluate what schools are doing about bullying—and what they might well do in the future.

Notes These are for the curious who wonder why the author has said such a thing, and maybe want to learn more about the evidence upon which judgments are made.

References For the researcher, student—professional or otherwise—the sources are fully listed.

An antipodean observation on the generality of school bullying

The observant reader will already have noticed that the author is an Australian—and quite possibly speculated on the implications thereof. After all, it may be said, he lives in a remote country with a population of no more than 20 million, best known for its kangaroos and large amounts of empty space. However, I have traveled widely and talked with and listened to parents and educators in North America, Europe, Asia, and Africa. I have also read a lot of reports from researchers in numerous countries. Wherever I go, I am struck time and time again with the most remarkable similarity in the way children behave towards each other. I have also been repeatedly struck by the remarkable similarity in the way parents feel about their children when they are troubled and sad. The issue that is being addressed in this book is one that I have found everywhere. True in some places the bullying is worse than in others. In some places they are trying this method, in another place, that method. But the basic problem remains the same. It is no accident that reports from many parts of the world tell much the same story. Although I use many examples from schools in Australia, you will also find examples and references to bullying in many other places. They reflect very much the human condition.