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Relational Aggression

Helping the Young Victims of Emotional Bullying By Jenn Director Knudsen



Two weeks into her daughter's second grade year, Trudy Ludwig received a disturbing phone call. "Something was going on with Allie at the playground. It isn't pretty," Ludwig recalls a friend telling her of her then 7-year-old daughter.



The ugly thing was bullying. Soon after the incident, Ludwig found out from her daughter's teacher what had transpired:

A group of about six girls surrounded her daughter, trapped her within a play structure and blocked off all exits. Simultaneously, Allie's peers rained down verbal taunts about whether or not she was a loyal friend. And then one of the girls began climbing toward Allie in a menacing way.

Panicked, penned in and feeling the situation spiral out of control, Allie started to cry. Fortunately, another of the girls recognized the horror of the situation and summoned the teacher, who intervened immediately, Ludwig says. But not before the damage was done.

A victim of emotional bullying for six months prior to this climactic event, Allie had begun to show outward signs of stress and anxiety:



nervousness, complaining of headaches and tummy aches, crying at night, clinginess. “She didn’t feel good; she just wanted to stay close to me,” Ludwig says.

Also, Allie’s invitations to events like slumber parties and play dates “slowed to a trickle,” her mom says. Soon, Allie no longer wanted to go to school.

Ludwig wanted to help her daughter and so sought out resources about the kind of bullying Allie had become a victim of. A lot was out there for and about middle school and high school students, but not one book existed about elementary-age children.



So Ludwig wrote that book. *My Secret Bully* (RiverWood Books, 2004), illustrated by Abigail Marble, is available now both in stores and online. Already in use nationwide by teachers and parents alike, the story – accompanying resource lists, discussion questions and tips – helps parents and their elementary school kids – whether the bully, victim or bystander – navigate and rise above the murky terrain of bullying.

Relational Aggression

Bullying has many faces. It can be physical or verbal. The kind Allie suffered and that is fleshed out in Ludwig’s book is called relational aggression, a phrase coined only nine years ago.



This perhaps more subversive form of bullying is defined as the use of relationships to directly or indirectly manipulate and hurt others, Ludwig says. She adds it has two main components: an imbalance of power and the intent to harm.

Though a relational aggression episode can occur over and over, it also can be a one-time event, according to Jennifer Ruh Linder, professor of psychology at Linfield College in McMinnville, Ore.

“[Relational aggression] is putting conditions on a friendship, and it starts early,” says Ludwig. “You’ve heard of conditional love; this is conditional friendship.”

In the course of researching her book, which went from idea to published work in 18 months, Ludwig dug up some disturbing statistics:

- Children are the targets of bullying about once every three to six minutes from the start of kindergarten to the end of first grade, according to a November 2003 report released by the Center for the Advancement of Health and supported by the National Institute of Mental Health.
- Bullies identified by age 8 are six times more likely to be



convicted of a crime by 24 years of age and five times more likely than non-bullies to end up with serious criminal records by age 30, according to a 2000 Maine Project Against Bullying report.

- If interventions don't occur before a child turns 8, the child is likely to develop delinquent behavior and require more intensive and expensive programs later in life, according to a 2000 report by the Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice.

Ludwig discovered not only that Allie was not alone, but also that bullying occurs often and early on in a child's life.

It's a Girl Thing

Though boys engage in relational aggression, too, most often it's young girls who do so; boys tend to take out their aggression in physical ways, says Linder. "From a very young age, girls receive the message that 'girls should be nice,'" she says. "As a result, when they become angry, rather than using direct forms of aggression, they resort to covert forms ... to maintain a facade of 'niceness.' Relational aggression is the ultimate form of covert aggression."

And relational aggression can start as early as preschool, says Kathie Masarie, a mother of two grown children and a pediatrician who gave up her medical practice in 1997 to start [Full Esteem Ahead](#), a Beaverton, Ore.-based nonprofit dedicated to supporting youth and encouraging healthy self-esteem through adolescence.

Children as young as 4 are capable of harming a peer from a power position, says Masarie, who collaborates with Ludwig on presentations and written teaching materials for the schools.

Masarie says a preschooler may say: "If you don't give me that toy, you're not coming to my birthday party." That may sound mild – possibly even "cute" to an uninitiated parent – or maybe simply indicative of a developmental phase. Yet statements like that can blossom into more hurtful conditions as children develop and become more sophisticated, as in Allie's case.

Tips for Parents Whose Children Are Being Bullied

The nonprofit organization [Full Esteem Ahead](#) offers these tips for parents to sensitively communicate to their children:

- Know that it's not your fault and that you don't deserve it.
- Tell the bully to stop.
- Remove yourself from the situation.
- Get help from people you trust, a school counselor, babysitter or Mom or Dad.
- Hang out with people who let you be you.
- Use humor to deflect bullying.
- Don't become a bully yourself.



Mission Tough but Not Impossible: Teaching Empathy

Ludwig also learned that children are not born mean. "The reality is this is a learned behavior," she says of relational aggression. Therefore, it can be unlearned.

And the key to doing so is teaching young kids empathy, says Jean Butcher, an internist and active volunteer in her 10-year-old daughter's public elementary school in suburban Portland, Ore. Ludwig agrees. "I really believe the bottom line to all this bullying is lack of empathy," she

says.

But experts and parents alike say teaching young children empathy – the art of putting oneself in the shoes of another – is a huge challenge.

“Teaching kids that concept is very tough,” Masarie says. But it’s not impossible.

Kids are copycats, so one powerful tool a parent can use to curb bullying and teach empathy is modeling. For example, kids overhear their parents gossiping to other adults and might turn speaking poorly of a friend or relative into a bullying tactic on the playground at school.



“We wouldn’t have a kid problem if the adults were being appropriate,” says Masarie.

Likewise, if parents include their children in a goodwill project – such as gathering clothes for and bringing them to the homeless – the little ones can make a physical connection between something they have that others need even more. They could learn to *empathize* with a less-fortunate individual.

This also could be an opportunity to teach young kids the importance of respecting all people, whether less smart, less well-heeled or less fashionable than you, Butcher emphasizes.

My Secret Bully as a Teaching Tool

Taking advantage of available resources, such as reading Ludwig’s book to your

child (or in the classroom, for teachers), is another way to curb bullying.

My Secret Bully, though fiction, is the thinly veiled story of Ludwig’s daughter, Allie. The book chronicles an active elementary-school girl named Monica whose “friend” Katie bullies her until Monica no longer wants to go to school and complains of feeling sick all the time:

“Last month, for the third day in a row, I told my mom that I had a bad stomachache and didn’t feel good enough to go to school,” Monica narrates in the middle of the book.

The main character goes on to confide in her mom: “I told her how hard it is to be friends with Katie: ‘...I even think she’s been saying bad things about me to my friends so they won’t like me,’ I explained.”

Eventually, through the use of role-play, Monica stands up for herself and severs her unhealthy relationship with Katie. “...I don’t feel bad anymore. It’s nice to know that whatever I do, I’m going to be just fine!”

“Using *My Secret Bully* as a read-aloud to the entire class, kids began to recognize themselves in the characters and understand the implications of their behaviors,” says Carol Young Lerner, assistant director of special education in a Woonsocket, R.I., school, where Ludwig’s book was used in a classroom of 25 elementary kids. “Even those on the sidelines could empathize and learn valuable coping strategies in social situations that make them uncomfortable.”

Ludwig, who speaks passionately about the subject of relational aggression to individuals and audiences at speaking engagements, concedes her book is not the sole source for solving the problem of bullying. Rather, she calls her book a “springboard for more information,” and “just ... one of many solutions.”

It’s a solution she and her daughter, Allie, finally settled upon to end her victimization.

Allie, too, ended the relationship with her bullying friends and moved on. Today, says her mom, her fifth grade daughter “has grown a lot; she’s a very mature child for her age,” she says. “She’s got really good communication skills.”

Allie’s experience taught her the importance of making and hanging on to a few true friends. This is the hope for all young kids.

Turning Bullies into Friends

Turning Bullies Into Friends is a spin off of [The Tallest Leprechaun: A Tall Tale of Terrible Teasing](#) written and illustrated by 11-year-old [Emily Grace Koenig](#), published by Little Treasure Books. This campaign consists of a one-hour book reading and interactive question and answer discussion presented by our “Tallest Leprechaun,” 6 foot, 7 inch actor Craig Hanzelka, whose birthday just happens to be on St. Patrick’s Day, and who will be dressed as a leprechaun for the program presentation. When available, guest speakers will accompany Craig to speak on the topics of bullying and diversity.

“If there was ever a time to encourage children to eliminate prejudice and bullying, it’s now,” says Paula Lizzi, marketing director of Little Treasure Books. “We will be working along with school guidance counselors, librarians and community service officials to ultimately eliminate bullying in schools and neighborhoods, and at sporting events,” says the book’s publisher, Bernadette Garzarelli.

Little Treasure Books kicks off this nationwide anti-bullying campaign on November 6, 2004. For a list of event locations, times and dates, [click here](#).

Want to see more?

- [Battling Bullies: Putting an End to Schoolyard Conflicts](#)
- [I Think My Child is Being Bullied! A Guide for Parents](#)
- [Safe Freedom: Giving Your Children Room to Grow](#)
- [Talk about it!](#)

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