



# GUIDANCE MATTERS

Dan Gartrell with Julie Jochum Gartrell

## Understand Bullying

Karen, a Head Start teacher, writes:

I heard the words *shut up* and went into the bathroom to find out what was happening.

Shayna was sitting in the corner crying. I said, “Shayna, why are you crying?” and she answered, “Amanda and Christina said they aren’t my friends anymore.”

I asked Shayna if she had told them to shut up, and she said yes. I told her I was sorry that they made her feel sad and angry, but those words bother other people in our classroom. (Amanda and Christina were watching and listening to us talk.) I explained to Shayna that maybe next time she could tell the girls it made her sad to hear they didn’t want to be her friends.

I told Amanda and Christina that Shayna was feeling sad because of what happened. They went over to Shayna and gave her a hug and said they were sorry. Later, I saw the three playing together. (Gartrell 2007)

**This column explores** the longtime hot topic of bullying. In a broad-based study for the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, Nansel and his colleagues (2001) discuss bullying from the viewpoints of young people who bully *and* the victims of bullying, both of whom tend to perceive themselves as being less than fully accepted members of a group. The authors state that bullying often has to do with inflicting aggression on another in order to establish a perceived place of prestige by lowering the social status of the other.

Although the Nansel team’s study focuses on preteens and teens, the findings generally apply in early childhood as well. Moving from a place of established social status in the family to the social uncertainty of the early childhood classroom, most young children feel some level of stress. Couple this dynamic with the young child’s limited social perspective and ongoing brain development, and the result is the almost daily I’m-your-friend/I’m-not-your-friend phenomenon heard in the comments of Amanda and Christina. And who is likely to be the odd child out? The child who may be moody, sometimes unfriendly, not consistently outgoing—that would be Shayna.

In early childhood classrooms, children are just beginning to learn patterns of social acceptance and rejection. Sprung, Froschl, and Hinitz emphasize that this is why a teacher’s response to early bullying needs to be proactive and preventive (2005). Although it may almost sound like Karen was beating up on the victim, the teacher knew Shayna well and was teaching her an alternative response to *shut up* that the other girls would find less objectionable. At the same time, by including all three children in the mediation, Karen was sensitizing Amanda and Christina to the fact that Shayna has a right to be fully accepted as a classmate.

According to the sound approach recommended by Sprung, Froschl, and Hinitz, mediation is only the immediate follow-up in a broad-based effort. Through ongoing class meetings, the teacher establishes from day one that the classroom is an encouraging place for all. The teacher builds such an environment by modeling inclusive group spirit as well as teaching it. In the clarion call of Vivian Gussin

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Please send comments to [dgartrell@bemidjistate.edu](mailto:dgartrell@bemidjistate.edu). Thanks to the two former Head Start teachers of northern Minnesota who contributed these anecdotes, which first appeared in Dan’s books and have been adapted here. The names of teachers and children have been changed.

With this article, Dan closes the Guidance Matters column to work on the 5th edition of his textbook.

Illustration by Patrick Cavanagh.



Paley, "You can't say you can't play" (1992). Children have the right to choose their own friends, but in the encouraging classroom, they need to be friendly to all their "mates."

Because it is a hot-button issue, some programs advocate zero tolerance for bullying. However, quick fixes lead to automatic reactions that do not encourage teachers to think about the individual situations of the children involved. Let us continue with the anecdote involving Karen and Shayna:

**A little later, Shayna walked over to the breakfast table. She started crying again. I asked, "Is something making you feel sad, Shayna?"**

**She said, "I miss my Daddy." Her father had been killed in a car accident a few months earlier.**

**I sat down on a chair, hugging and holding her. I said, "Shayna, my daddy died when I was a little girl, and it made me very sad too. I am so glad you told me why you were crying." We sat by each other and ate breakfast.**

**Shayna went to the housekeeping area for choice time and joined Amanda and Christina. Later in the day, she came up to me and said, "I'm over my daddy now."**

**I said, "Shayna, it's OK to feel sad about missing your daddy. I still miss my dad. If you need a hug or want to talk, you come and tell me."**

**I made other staff aware of the incident and that night talked with Shayna's mom. The next day, Shayna sat on my lap at the playdough table, and we made cookies together. (Gartrell 2007)**

We do well to remember that children's life stories, although not usually as heartbreakingly sad as Shayna's, lie behind every incident of bullying. Recognizing that certain children may be vulnerable to bullying—due to life experiences, behavior, and/or physical appearance—we befriend these children and guide them toward behaviors that will help them gain the acceptance of their peers. Every child has a story worth knowing, one that hopefully resonates with a caring teacher, as Shayna's did with Karen.

### **Bullying as physical aggression**

Nansel and his team make the case that bullying by girls usually involves taunting, exclusion, and gossip (2001). Bullying by boys can, and sometimes does, degenerate into physical aggression. While (sadly) physical aggression may be on the increase with older girls, the pattern found by Nansel and his team tends to hold true in early childhood.

**Liz, a Head Start teacher, writes:**

**I walked onto the playground and immediately saw that a child from another room, Paul, was hitting Kevin. Kevin stood against the fence with his arms up over his head. I hurried over and arrived at the same time as Paul's teacher. She pulled Paul away from Kevin, and we both knelt down to talk to them, each holding a child.**

**Before either of us spoke, Kevin looked at Paul and said, "It made me very mad when you hit me." He continued, "You're supposed to use words, not hit." Paul did not respond in any way during the discussion.**

**I thanked Kevin for using his words and not hitting back. The other teacher stayed to talk with Paul. She later told me that she and her teaching team had scheduled a "staffing" concerning him that day and would meet with Paul's family. (Gartrell 2007)**

For many young children, bullying is a form of instrumental aggression—harming another physically or psychologically in order to obtain a goal. Teachers need to use their leadership skills to guide children to more socially responsible, alternative behaviors. For a few children, bullying is reactive aggression—a child experiences stress, does not know how to ask for help, and acts out against a perceived unjust world as a reaction to the stress. The child attacked may have done little or nothing

to provoke the aggression. Teachers sometimes must work hard to figure out what made the child vulnerable.

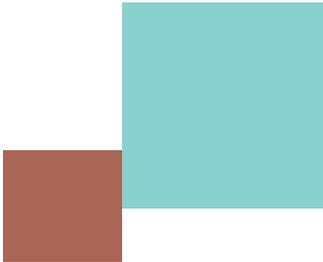
Not many children would have responded as Kevin did. Support for him in the days following the incident was important. At the same time, Paul had problems in his life that were bigger than he was. The circumstances required staffing, meeting with parents, and a comprehensive guidance strategy. Paul's teacher showed she was committed to that process.

### Liberation teaching

*Liberation teaching* is a term I use in my writings, part of the meaning of which is to not give up on any child (Gartrell 2007). Liberation teaching means the teacher realizes that comforting the victim and punishing the bully only further the bully-victim syndrome in the class. Instead, the teacher helps the one child express feelings about being bullied and assists the other child to learn that bullying does not help with finding an identity within the group. With each intervention the teacher responds to the question, What can I teach these children right now so they can learn to get along? This teaching process is interactive, with the teacher learning about the children even while teaching mutual acceptance and negotiation skills.

Liberating teachers work for a unified, programwide approach to bullying.

When teachers *and* administrators work together to build encouraging classrooms, develop positive relations with parents, use guidance to handle conflicts, and take a planned approach to bullying that includes both prevention and intervention, bullying behaviors markedly decline (Hoover & Oliver 1996; Beane 2005). Working with fellow staff and administrators, liberating teachers can accomplish what they cannot do on their own.



### To increase your knowledge

#### Professional resources

**Beane, A.L. 2005. *The Bully Free Classroom: Over 100 Tips and Strategies for Teachers K–8*. Minneapolis: Free Spirit Press.**

Positive and practical, reinforced with true stories and enhanced by reproducible forms, checklists, and resources, this solution-filled book can make yours a classroom where all students can learn without fear. Other Bully Free resources include mini-guides for educators; a workbook; *Bully Free Bulletin Boards, Posters, and Banners*; and *The Bully Free Classroom* CD-ROM.

**Jackson, C. 2007. *The ABCs of bullying. Teaching Tolerance, Classroom Activities* (January).**

Bullying often begins with verbal abuse. In this article, Teaching Tolerance offers resources to help educators, families, and students address bullying in the classroom and beyond.

[www.tolerance.org/teach/activities/activity.jsp?ar=771](http://www.tolerance.org/teach/activities/activity.jsp?ar=771)

**Minnesota Association for Children's Mental Health. 2006. *SuperMe: A Campaign to End Hurtful Teasing*. Saint Paul: Author.**

In this packet, short stories, coloring pages, classroom activities, and a bulletin board display get students thinking, drawing, and writing about nonviolent ways to handle teasing and bullying. The packet includes the SuperMe Booklet and the SuperMe Team Materials, with new lesson plans and bulletin board pinups of the SuperMe Team.



**Moss, P. 2007. Gender doesn't limit you! *Teaching Tolerance* 32 (Fall).**

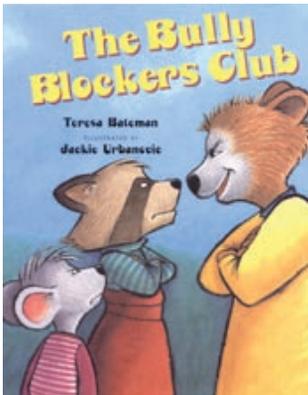
A prominent researcher and an elementary school team up to identify what works—and what doesn't—when teaching young children about gender bullying.  
[www.tolerance.org/teach/activities/activity.jsp?ar=841&pa=3](http://www.tolerance.org/teach/activities/activity.jsp?ar=841&pa=3)

**Sprung, B., M. Froschl, & B. Hinitz. 2005. *The Anti-Bullying and Teasing Book for Preschool Classrooms*. Beltsville, MD: Gryphon House.**

This guide addresses teasing and bullying as a continuum of intentionally hurtful behavior, from making fun of someone to repetitive physical abuse. Creating a caring environment at the beginning of the school year reduces the need for children to assert themselves through negative behavior such as teasing and bullying.

### **Children's literature (preschool to grade 3)**

**Bateman, T. 2004. *The Bully Blockers Club*. Morton Grove, IL: Albert Whitman. 30 pp. Pre-K–3.**



On the first day of school, Grant Grizzly, the class bully, taunts and teases Lotty Raccoon. After trying several tactics that do not work, Lotty comes up with a solution: the Bully Blockers Club. A class discussion on bullying ensues, and the teacher and students compose rules to help everyone feel safe and welcome.

**Carlson, N. 1990. *Arnie and the New Kid*. New York: Viking Press. 32 pp. Pre-K–3.**

Philip uses a wheelchair and is new in school. This combination makes him the target of bullying by Arnie, until Arnie falls, breaks his leg, and finds himself in a similar situation. As Arnie begins to understand Philip's challenges and capabilities, they become friends.

**dePaola, T. 1979. *Oliver Button Is a Sissy*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt, Brace. 48 pp. K–3.**

This picture book tells the story of a boy who is teased because he likes to dance. He overcomes the bullying not by fighting, but by continuing to do what he likes best in spite of the harassment.

**Henkes, K. 1991. *Chrysanthemum*. New York: William Morrow. 32 pp. K–2.**

After being taunted by her peers at school, Chrysanthemum wants to change her name. When the class learns that their popular music teacher has an unusual name—Delphinium—Chrysanthemum feels better and the other children accept her.

**Hoffman, G. 1996. *The Big Bad Bully Bear*. New York: Reverie Publishing. 24 pp. K–3.**

Arthur and his friend Emmy Bear invite all the teddy bears in the neighborhood for cake. They join together to teach Bully Bear a valuable lesson, and Bully Bear realizes he would rather have friends than be a bully.

**Keats, E.J. 1998. *Goggles!* New York: Viking Press. 40 pp. Pre-K–2.**

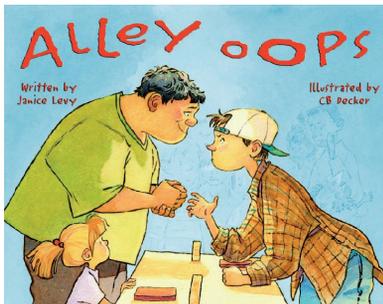
Archie and Peter find a pair of motorcycle goggles, and the neighborhood bullies try to take them. They use their dog, Willie, to help them outsmart the bullies.

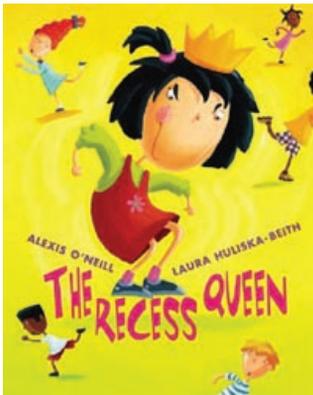
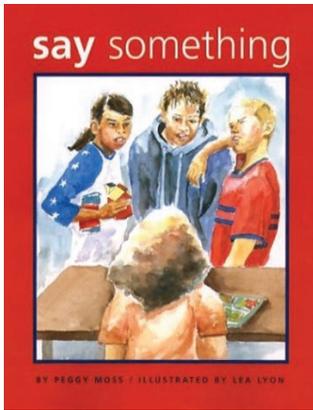
**Levy, J. 2005. *Alley Oops*. New York: Flashlight Press. 32 pp. K–3.**

This story relates the aftermath of bullying from the perspective of the bully, J.J. Jax, who has been tormenting an overweight boy, Patrick. After Mr. Jax tells J.J. a story about when he acted as a bully and how sorry he feels now, J.J. talks things over with Patrick. The boys' shared interest in arm-wrestling becomes the conduit for resolution and a budding friendship.

**Lovell, P. 2001. *Stand Tall, Molly Lou Melon*. 32 pp. New York: G.P. Putnam. Pre-K–2.**

When Molly Lou Melon starts at a new school, Ronald, the class bully, teases her for being short, being bucktoothed, and having a voice like "a bullfrog being squeezed by a boa constrictor." Molly remembers what her grandmother told her, and she feels good about herself, which helps her overcome the bully's taunts.





**McCain, B.R. 2001. *Nobody Knew What to Do*. Morton Grove, IL: Albert Whitman. 24 pp. K-3.**

A boy tries to figure out what to do when he repeatedly witnesses a classmate being bullied. Though frightened, he decides to tell his teacher. When the bullies start up again, the boy and his classmates band together with the student being harassed until adults intervene and help.

**Moss, P. 2004. *Say Something*. Gardiner, ME: Tilbury House. 32 pp. Grades 2-4.**

A young narrator describes different examples of bullying that she witnesses at school and on the bus. One day, she must sit alone in the cafeteria, and several students make jokes at her expense. The girl feels angry and is frustrated with the other kids, who look on sympathetically but say nothing. The next day, she approaches a quiet girl who is often teased and finds a new friend.

**O'Neill, A. 2002. *The Recess Queen*. New York: Scholastic. 32 pp. Pre-K-2.**

All the children fear Mean Jean, the playground bully. Then a new student, Katie Sue, unknowingly does all the things Mean Jean forbids. When Mean Jean attempts to set the record straight, Katie Sue pulls out a jump rope and asks Mean Jean to play with her. She does, and the social environment of the playground improves for everyone.

**Thomas, P. 2000. *Stop Picking on Me (A First Look At series)*. Happaug, NY: Barron's. 29 pp. Pre-K-3.**

Written by an experienced psychotherapist and counselor, this picture book examines bullying in simple terms—the fears, worries, and questions and the dynamics in young children's relationships. The book encourages children to understand personal and social problems as a first step toward solving them.

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### Web sites

**About Bullying** is part of the 15+ Make Time to Listen . . . Take Time to Talk initiative. It provides information about bullying and methods for communicating with children about the climate of fear created by bullying. The messages exchanged between children and their caregivers in just 15 minutes or more a day can be instrumental in building a healthier, safer environment.

<http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/15plus/aboutbullying.asp>

**Anti-Defamation League Curriculum Connections** focuses on Words That Heal, a tool to help educators find books and other resources to include in the curriculum to teach about bullying, stopping bullying, and so on.

[www.adl.org/education/curriculum\\_connections/Default.asp](http://www.adl.org/education/curriculum_connections/Default.asp)

**Bullying—No Way!** from Australia's educational communities, creates learning environments where every student and school community member is safe, supported, respected, valued—and free from bullying, violence, harassment, and discrimination.

[www.bullyingnoway.com.au/who/default.shtml](http://www.bullyingnoway.com.au/who/default.shtml)

**Connect for Kids** gives action steps and tips for parents whose children are bullied. It explains cyber bullying, how it affects an individual, and how to prevent it. It also has a place for parents and students alike to share their comments and concerns and support one another. [www.connectforkids.org/node/3116](http://www.connectforkids.org/node/3116)

**PACER Kids Against Bullying**, for elementary school children, focuses on children with disabilities. Informative and creative, it educates students about bullying prevention and suggests methods to respond in bullying situations. The site features animated characters, information, celebrity videos, Webisodes, interactive games, contests, and other activities. Parents and professionals will find helpful tips, intervention strategies, and resources for use at home or school. [www.pacerkidsagainstabullying.org](http://www.pacerkidsagainstabullying.org)



## Steps you can take

Learn more about bullying and the dynamics that lead to it. Consciously work with colleagues to build a classroom in which every child feels valued and accepted. Notice incidents of bullying that still may occur. Even as you intervene, study the situations. Work to make these conflicts into learning experiences for the children involved, the class, fellow staff, and families.

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## Thank You, Dan

Guidance Matters, Dan Gartrell's column about positive approaches to guiding young children's behavior, first appeared in *Young Children* in November 2005. In every issue since then, Guidance Matters has offered readers practical ideas to help young children build the social and emotional skills needed to live and work in a democratic society.

This is Dan's last Guidance Matters column. On behalf of our readers, the *Young Children* editorial team offers our sincere thanks to Dan for his meaningful contributions. Although we will miss his stories and relevant suggestions, readers can continue to read and refer to the many Guidance Matters columns already online in Beyond the Journal—*Young Children* on the Web

[www.journal.naeyc.org/btj/archive.asp](http://www.journal.naeyc.org/btj/archive.asp)

— Derry Koralek, Editor

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