

# GIRL BULLYING



**DR SAM**



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## FOREWORD

Right from the start, this book engages us with a convincing mix of pupil voice, personal experience and thoughtful comments on the important topic of girl bullying. The author brings many years of experience in anti-bullying work, and in educational and therapeutic work with schools and with young people. This pays off in terms of the range of thoughtful advice she gives on dealing with the issues. However, the book is also enlivened and enriched by the material from interviews and focus groups with pupils themselves, making for a vivid narrative.

The book is about girls bullying, primarily. To some extent girls bullying is different from boys bullying, tending to be more focused on shifting relationships, denigration and exclusion, rather than the more obvious physical forms. Social relationships in middle childhood and adolescence are now transformed by the widespread use of the internet and social networking sites. The majority of this is enjoyable and can be educational, but as the book makes clear, it can provide opportunities for relationship-based bullying too. The more recent forms of cyberbullying occur with both boys and girls, but there is some evidence that girls are relatively more involved in this than in what has now been called traditional or face-to-face bullying. Nevertheless, there is overlap. Although focused on girls bullying, much of the material, including suggestions for intervention, will apply to bullying generally, whoever is involved.

Whatever forms bullying takes, it is concerned with power and the abuse of power. Leadership, when exercised well, can be a beneficent use of power. But its systematic misuse or abuse signals bullying.

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Experiences of being bullied in childhood can have traumatic effects. This, of course, depends on many factors – the kinds and extent of bullying, how long it goes on for, how the victim tries to cope, and what support they get. Some children and young people can cope effectively in some circumstances. But the imbalance of power in bullying makes this difficult. Large-scale and longitudinal surveys have shown how victim experiences can bring about loss of self-esteem, depression and difficulties of trust in relationships – both in the short term, but also, and especially if nothing is done about it, in the longer term. Cases of suicide due – in large part at least – to bullying or cyberbullying bear tragic witness to what can be the outcome. Such cases are thankfully rare, but must be the tip of an iceberg of suffering that many victims experience.

A strength of this book is that nearly half of it is devoted to ways in which young people, parents and schools can work together to reduce bullying and deal with it effectively whenever it occurs. A variety of sensible suggestions are offered, together with a helpful range of materials in the appendices. I believe the author is right in emphasising the importance of leadership from the senior management of the school. Combining this with a clear school anti-bullying policy (including cyberbullying), adequate ways of reporting bullying, thorough follow-up of incidents, a good relationships curriculum and harnessing the support of the majority of pupils and parents, can make a great difference in levels of bullying and in pupil happiness. This book will surely be a very useful and supportive resource for this endeavour.

Professor Peter K. Smith, Goldsmiths College,  
University of London, author of *Understanding School  
Bullying: Its Nature and Prevention Strategies*

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**PART ONE**  
**GIRL BULLYING**

## Chapter 1

# GIRL BULLYING: WHY ACTION MATTERS

Childhood is central to our personal and social development. The way adults in particular respond to children who are in need of support plays a vital role in helping them understand social and cultural norms: what is right and wrong, what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. Every time girl bullying goes unchallenged, and is allowed to continue, it sends out the message that it's OK.

When this becomes the new 'normal' we have a serious cultural problem on our hands, and one that won't be confined only to school playgrounds. We need to understand that this is not only a problem for girls and young women. As they take their place in society it will affect all of us: their families, the culture, and society as a whole.

On a case-by-case basis, it can all seem so ordinary, so everyday, so below the radar. And after all, we're all busy dealing with problems of our own. It's so easy to miss how small, yet deftly timed, acts of power play can cause such confidence-wrecking damage to the integrity and self-belief of an individual. Here's part of Jodie's story. Jodie was one of the lucky ones – she was able to get support and move beyond the paralysis of social isolation.

## JODIE'S STORY

When I look back, I was a manipulated fool. I enjoyed being friends with the bully because she was pretty and popular – or so I thought. Throughout our friendship I never knew when I went into school in a morning if she'd be speaking [to me]. It was something I expected. She constantly kept me down, telling me she had been invited to parties and made a big thing that I wasn't invited. I now know the parties didn't exist.

I was at a low time in my life when I needed her support and she chose to ignore me ... I wanted her to stop her treating me like this ... She told everyone that I'd told her not to speak to me. She followed me at break times saying nasty comments, turned my friends against me, bringing me to an all-time low. I felt the teacher blamed me for everything. I dreaded going to school and my life was a misery. She told people not to invite me to parties and excluded me constantly. I was isolated ... I felt worthless.

Jodie was bullied to the point where she lost all her confidence. She hated school, began to work on a reduced timetable and study at home. She never knew when those friends she thought she had would turn on her. She was in high school. She was just at that stage in her life when she should have been learning about who she was and where she fitted in to her social world. Instead, that social world became her worst nightmare. Trying to work out who she was just left her confused and angry.

Every day, girl bullying destroys healthy friendships, self-confidence, self-belief and self-concept. For Jodie, it also affected her trust in those she believed should have been most there to support her at school: the teachers in her life. When she tried to speak to her teachers she got the distinct impression that she was being

blamed for not being able to solve the problem herself. Worse still, they led her to believe that *she* was the cause of the problem.

Such confusion and lack of support can make a young person feel invisible, unimportant and incredibly powerless. Like every other child, Jodie should have had the right to feel safe at school and to have had any welfare issues heard with respect and without judgement.

If this lack of due diligence occurred in an adult workplace it would shake our belief in the culture and leadership of that organisation. It would raise serious questions and challenges that could well end up in a court of law. A healthy society is based on safety and trust. Workplace law exists to protect adults from abuse and bullying, and the detrimental effects these behaviours have on our psychological health. If this is true for adults, how much more should it apply to vulnerable young people who are just beginning to develop a sense of identity distinct from that of their family? The high school years are the very ones where young people need most support in learning that trust, mutuality, integrity and respect for self and others (based on shared ethical principles) form the core of healthy, long-lasting relationships and form the basis of a healthy, civilised society.

Sadly, Jodie's experience is not at all unusual. Those of us who have been victims will have been played for a fool, like Jodie, in a social power game. Let's name bullying for what it is: a particularly unpleasant form of social and emotional abuse. At school, many of us were pawns in these games, competing for power and social status. Some of us were victims, while some of us may have been the alpha female or a member of the pack. Whichever role or roles

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we played – and some of us may well have played both – there can be no doubt that we were diminished or damaged in some way by the roles we took or were given. For the victims like Jodie – manipulated, belittled, isolated, made to feel worthless, held accountable by those she looked to for help, dreading the start of each new day – is it surprising that so many turn to self-harm, or even suicide, to simply have their pain heard and be acknowledged?

Jodie was one of the luckier ones. She found the courage to speak to her family. But even with their support, life at school continued to be difficult. Her faith and trust had been betrayed. Her faith and trust in the loyalty of friends, and her faith and trust in the authorities to act against abusive behaviour and vindictiveness, had been significantly damaged. Above all, she was left with an impression that nothing changes; that the silence and inaction of teachers and other adults are tacit invitations for the wolves to continue their predatory ‘games’.

I have learned a lot of lessons in the last few months. It’s been hard but I am stronger. As for [her], she will always be a bully, as no one has ever told her that she is a bully.

**Jodie**

## THE WIDER PICTURE

While Jodie’s family were more than willing to listen to her and give her the support she needed, many young people are not so lucky. For whatever reasons, some families just don’t seem to want

to get involved or take the issues seriously. They may not know how to respond, they may not feel it's important enough to react or they may simply not see anything wrong in bullying behaviour, especially if there's a history of it in the family. This refusal to get involved or take matters seriously only compounds the problem. When a young person in need feels that those they trust most are unwilling to hear them or value their perspective, it can have devastating consequences. It sends out a message to the child that they are not worthy of support. When they get the same message from friends and teachers, it's not surprising that they may feel totally isolated, worthless and cast adrift. They can simply feel they have no one to turn to.

So who is responsible for all the damage that is being caused, often in plain sight? The young people or the adults? Or do we all bear some responsibility? This is not a time for blame but for action that addresses the causes of the problem, not just the symptoms. And we need to embrace the whole picture; to recognise that it's not just the socially isolated child, but also the socially powerful bully, who are in desperate need of help to learn different lessons. They should both be offered the chance to learn how to develop healthy, respectful, mutual relationships in which disagreement and conflict can be addressed through dialogue and other acceptable channels. In fact, many of us need to develop our skills in this area. It's one of the great challenges we face in the twenty-first century. Taking action on girl bullying is as good a place as any to start a shift in our thinking and actions.

That shift is something fairly new, but the problem is as old as the hills. Power has always played a central role in the playground, in

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social groups and in clubs. It was certainly the case when I was young and, I imagine, when my mother and grandmother were teenagers. But when I was young the power games only really affected me and my generation in public spaces: at school, at the youth club, at Brownies or Guides or when we were playing in the streets or the play park.

And although there was no internet in those days, and therefore no cyberbullying relentlessly operating 24/7, the power games and the bullying were still present. I can still remember my fear of the alpha female's glare, her ability to take my friends away and leave me alone and isolated. I remember other times, when I was invited into her pack, laughing with her at the victims we picked on, and then expelled from the pack, laughed at and mocked by her and her cronies.

To my shame, I also remember very clearly trying to get a taste of that power for myself. It was only a fleeting taste, though, because I had no pack to follow me. But how I longed to sense some of that self-validating power for myself. If only I could get my own back by finding someone smaller than myself. And I did. She was certainly smaller than me ... but unfortunately for me (or perhaps fortunately), her older brother wasn't! He sent me a threat which almost stopped me ever going to school again, and which certainly stopped me ever again considering getting involved in bullying behaviour. I was too scared to look at anyone after that, nicely or nastily.

I learned some really powerful lessons from these experiences. I realised that I had no real power to begin with, and at the end I had even less, because to be a bully I needed supporters. I needed an audience. I needed to be someone ... and at that time I wasn't.



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So how does the alpha female gain her status? How does she gain pre-eminence in her territory and over her pack? It strikes me that it's a bit like being a celebrity. Write a few tweets, say a few things to impress, do a few bad things and make them high profile, and you have yourself a *persona*. There's always going to be people who are impressed with stuff like that: hangers-on, those who want to know you, be seen with you, be associated with you. And if your persona is popular and you can prove your social power, you gather the pack around you and your status is set. The pack lurks in your shadow, unconsciously reinforcing your social status.

This is a moment when a teacher might spot the bullying and talk to the bully and the victim. But talking rarely works. 'Let's shake hands and move on' rarely works – because it neither addresses the imbalance of power or the relative status that exists between the bully and the bullied. Bullying is far more complex than a simple dispute between a perpetrator and a victim. That's why so often nothing changes and the behaviour continues. Bullying demands us to examine the nature and dynamics of power as it exists in the playground, in our families, in social forums, in the media and in our culture.

## THE DYNAMICS OF POWER

As young people begin to dis-identify from their parents and siblings, they look to establish their own sense of self. Who am I and how am I different from others? There is a natural sense of individual power that arises in this. It is normal and at its best it is healthy.

However, this use of power can easily become opportunistic. Unless the child has good role models – from home, school and even from the media – about how to build effective and mutual social relationships, this new sense of power can easily become unhealthy and abusive in social contexts and relationships.

The problem is that effective, healthy role models are all too often lacking. At the same time, the child needs ongoing coaching and modelling about what is and is not acceptable social behaviour, so that power is related to personal responsibility. And at the same time the child needs support to develop the ability to notice, challenge and critique the unhealthy models so often prevalent in playground, the media and the wider world.

We are not tackling girl bullying effectively. We are not linking the behaviours to the natural confusion some young people have about how to work with their newly emerging sense of personal power and how much help and support they need with this. Nor are we linking the behaviours to the broader social issues: the existence of negative role models in many homes, the media and even in schools; the unwillingness of many people in authority to acknowledge that a serious problem exists; the lack of deep and sensitive listening when vulnerable children find the courage to express themselves; and the consequent widespread fear of not being heard, or being seen as a 'snitch', that stops children reporting cases of bullying. These are some, but by no means all, of the reasons why it is the unhealthy version of social power that continues to dominate in so many playgrounds.

We can begin to redress the balance by working with these two areas. First, we should recognise that children need exposure to



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**'STICKS AND STONES MAY BREAK MY BONES, BUT WORDS WILL NEVER HURT ME.'**

Folk wisdom usually has something insightful to say. But not in this case. This sticks and stones stuff is about as devoid of sense and psychological awareness as it's possible to get. There's a crisis going on in our schools and in cyberspace that needs our attention – now. Informed action is needed to prevent another generation of young people from becoming distrustful, defensive and psychologically damaged. This situation affects girls and young women in particular. *Girl Bullying* aims to increase understanding of the fallout, psychological impact and support strategies for both the victims and the perpetrators of bullying.

**ESSENTIAL READING FOR ANYONE WORKING WITH, OR CARING FOR, GIRLS OF ALL AGES**

*Girl Bullying* goes straight to the heart of the matter: girls practise and rehearse social relationships with an intensity unmatched by your average boy. Personal and intimate information exchanged 'in confidence' and 'in friendship' can then become a weapon more brutal than a fist or a hammer.

**MARIUS FRANK, MATERIALS DIRECTOR, ACHIEVEMENT FOR ALL**

Dr Sam touches upon every angle to provide a good read and educate those who are in a position to reduce any sort of bullying.

**JAS BASSI, CLINICAL HYPNOTHERAPIST**

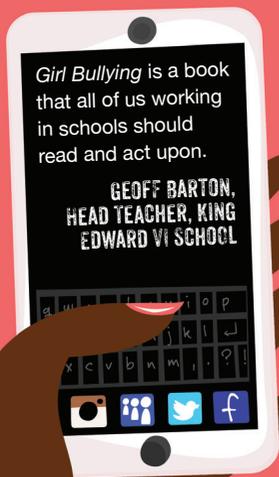
*Girl Bullying* will be reassuring to readers who are seeking to understand and tackle the complex and dark world of bullying. They will be given confidence to tackle this difficult subject.

**CHRISTOPHER CLOKE, HEAD OF SAFEGUARDING IN COMMUNITIES, NSPCG,  
FORMER CHAIR, ANTI-BULLYING ALLIANCE**

Bullying is a thorny subject that can make or break a school's reputation. Reading *Girl Bullying* has given me a greater insight into the issue and enabled me to look at my school's policies and their effectiveness with fresh eyes.

**BEVERLEY DANDY, HEAD TEACHER, OUTWOODS PRIMARY SCHOOL**

**DR SAM** is a child psychologist with extensive experience of working closely on government policy, school approaches to bullying and anti-bullying strategies in schools. She has worked with many of the country's leading children's charities on welfare and safeguarding research, supported young people in court and run private child behaviour clinics in the UK, including London's Harley Street, working with children, young people and their families.



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