

PRAISE FOR THE BULLYING BREAKTHROUGH

“Everything Jonathan McKee writes is excellent, but this is his most important book thus far. Bullying has become a massive problem in schools, homes, and on social media, and the many initiatives out there haven’t made much of a dent. As the parent of a bullied middle schooler, I was desperate for help but found little that would actually work. In this vitally important book, Jonathan presents an essential guide to preventing and stopping bullying behaviors. Every parent, school administrator, teacher, pastor, and counselor need to keep this on hand as a vital tool.”

—Shaunti Feldhahn, social researcher and bestselling author
of *For Parents Only* and *The Kindness Challenge*

“Most of us are aware that bullying is alive and well—but do we know how to handle it in wise, effective ways? Jonathan McKee’s latest book examines the various facets of bullying in the twenty-first century and shows parents and educators how to come alongside victims, bystanders, and even the bullies themselves in ways that truly get to the heart of the problem.”

—Jim Daly, President of Focus on the Family

“Every one of my five kids have faced a bully or watched someone be bullied. Rather than become a victim, my son asked the bully if he was okay. That day, he came home and told me he made friends with a bully. If you don’t want your child to be victimized nor stand by and allow someone else to be bullied, Jonathan’s book will provide the facts and the encouragement you need. Too often, it isn’t the kids who don’t know what to do; rather, it is the parents and teachers who know what to do but *don’t*. *The Bullying Breakthrough* will empower you to act and do the responsible thing when a bully is under your charge.”

—Stephen Arterburn, bestselling author, speaker, pastor,
Founder and Host of *New Life Live!*, but first and always best,
husband and father of 5 amazing kids

“Jonathan’s most vulnerable and insightful book yet! An eye-opening peek into the world of bullying today and what we can actually do to prevent it.”

–Josh McDowell, author and speaker

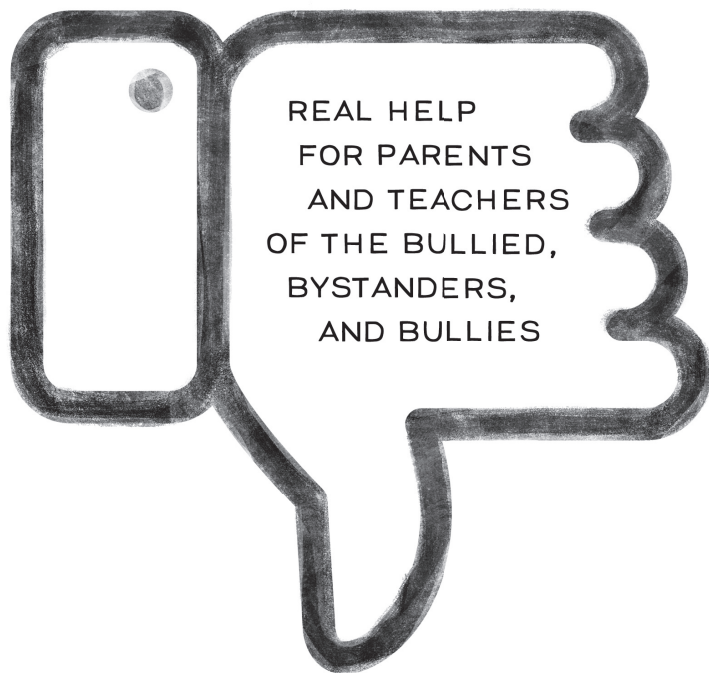
“The world tweens and teens navigate quickly shifts from playful and childlike to harsh, overwhelming, and cruel. Add bullying to the mix, and the climate feels unbearable. Jonathan’s new book offers answers for caregivers. . .and *hope* for kids.”

–Michael Ross, author of *A Kid’s Game Plan for Great Choices* and the former Editor of *Breakaway* magazine for teen guys

“The problem of bullying is ever increasing. The issues are intense and complicated. What Jonathan McKee writes is both disturbing and incredibly helpful. Parents and anyone who works with kids must read this to fully understand a very important piece of the ‘private life of the American teenager.’ I read everything Jonathan McKee writes.”

–Jim Burns PhD, President of HomeWord and author of *The Purity Code* and *Doing Life with Your Adult Child: Keep Your Mouth Shut and the Welcome Mat Out*

JONATHAN MCKEE **THE
BULLYING
BREAKTHROUGH**



SHILOH RUN  **PRESS**

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Thanks to my family for putting up with my insecurity and insensitivity. Lori, you're amazing! All those old bullies are so jealous. I married a cheerleader! (There's hope, fellow nerds!) If only they knew you are so much more. And Alec, Alyssa, and Ashley, I love you more than any words in the front of a book could ever express.

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I can't even begin to name all of "the bullied" I interviewed. Thanks so much to all of you; you know who you are! I share your tears! Wes, and Kayla. . .you especially. Thanks for your brutal honesty.

And I am equally grateful to my team of readers who screened

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And thanks to the Kill Jon Club—you know who you are—for making me who I am. I'm better because of it. Are you?

INTRODUCTION

BULLIED, BULLY, BYSTANDER

It's 6:37 a.m., and I haven't slept for hours.

This has been an emotional project for me, probably the toughest I've ever tackled. Not because the research has been any more burdensome or the topic more daunting, but because never have I heard so much anguish and hurt.

This morning I'm sorting through hundreds of surveys and stories from the personal interviews I've conducted over the last few months—a bizarre collection of voices:

Therapists and counselors working with hurting young people.

Moms and dads who desperately want to help but are learning through trial and error.

Youth workers who are hanging out with teens on the front lines.

Teens and tweens who feel like no one understands.

Jocks.

Nerds.

Mean girls.

Band kids.

Special needs kids.

Rich, poor, overweight, anemic, gorgeous, awkward. . .the whole gamut.

All these assorted people have two common denominators: a mobile device they admittedly spend too much time on, and a story about the hurt they've seen or experienced when someone is repeatedly cruel to another. (You'll be hearing much more from me on each of those two factors.)

Welcome to the world of twenty-first-century bullying!

As the stories poured in, I began hearing familiar testimonies, almost as if there is a secret manual somewhere on how to belittle others:

- “He knocked my binder out of my hands every chance he had.”

- “They told me I might as well go kill myself.”
- “She posted pictures of me with the caption, ‘Whore!’”

There are carbon-copy experiences on almost every campus across America.

THE BULLIED

These stories are closer to home than you might think.

It’s one thing researching these stories from a safe distance, reading articles and studies about young people who were tormented daily, some who committed suicide or lashed out in violence. But I found it even more haunting to sit across the table from individuals who can hardly verbalize their own story without becoming emotional as they reveal how they were targeted by their classmates.

These kids are at the school just down the street from you.

Like the boy who had several other boys chase him down and actually try to cut off his hair. A teen girl whose classmates posted exactly how “worthless” she was on social media and how “everyone” at school hated her. Or the overweight twentysomething college student who struggled to tell me about the guys in the locker room who aggressively grabbed at his “man boobs,” making cruel jokes I dare not even put into print.

As one young man finished verbalizing a painful incident he’d experienced, he finally declared, “That stuff [messes] you up forever!” (I’m paraphrasing.) After another young woman shared about the people who used to torment her, she admitted, “There are people I hate, and I haven’t seen them in fifteen years.”

I’m amazed how young the bullying begins. A sixth-grade girl recounted stories of when she was in fourth grade and other girls began calling her fat. One of her classmates was ruthless, daily calling her “Fatty”

██
██
“THERE ARE PEOPLE I
HATE, AND I HAVEN’T
SEEN THEM IN FIFTEEN
YEARS.”

or asking, “Oh my gawd, how much do you weigh?” Certain insults resounded in this young girl’s head, along with images she couldn’t shake, like when a classmate leaned over to her and said, “When you sit down and I look at your legs, it’s so disgusting.”

Insults like these tend to stick in a person’s psyche. I heard countless individuals recite exact words that were said over ten years ago.

And now, after hearing so many young people’s agonizing stories and witnessing their pain, I can’t get their voices out of my head.

Maybe it’s because it brings back my own painful memories from childhood, my whole class laughing and whispering. My experiences with bullying occurred over thirty years ago, yet I still have dreams of specific faces ridiculing me publicly.

I wonder.

Do they remember my face?

Do they realize what they did to me emotionally?

Do they know I almost took my own life?

Sometimes in these dreams I lash out in rage, even violence, waking up suddenly, my heart racing.

Deep angst.

Honestly, some unresolved issues.

THE BULLY

But I think the most intriguing part of this project for me was interviewing the bullies at the helm of all this torture and pain. I found them two ways: first, asking teachers and youth workers if they knew any bullies and interviewing them anonymously. Some of these kids didn’t even know they were bullies, or they never thought of it in those terms. They knew they were mean and took advantage of others, but had never put a title to it.

Second, I sought out bullies by casting a broad net on social media, asking honestly:

Awkward question: but were any of you bullies? Not necessarily beating up kids and stealing their lunch

money, but being repeatedly cruel to someone online or face to face?

And the responses started pouring in.

These bullies of the past all shared one thing in common.

Guilt.

I guess that's where I was a little surprised. As a guy who had been on the receiving end, I was taken aback to hear so much hurt and shame from those who had been on the inflicting end.

One guy who was a jock, using his size to intimidate others smaller than him—which was practically everybody—confessed to me story after story of harassing others and belittling them publicly. “I enjoyed seeing others in pain to mask my own,” he admitted.

So much regret.

His last words to me were, “Oh man, I wish I had a time machine.”

Don't we all?

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“I ENJOYED SEEING
OTHERS IN PAIN TO MASK
MY OWN,” HE ADMITTED.

THE BYSTANDER

But then I began hearing from a third group. Not *bullies*, not the *bullied*. . .but a group I began labeling as *bystanders*. These are the kids who either laughed along or simply turned away and pretended they didn't see it. I think the majority of kids on any given school campus fall into this category today. Some have even contacted me through the years. Like my friend “Denise.”

I went to school with Denise from fourth grade through high school. Denise and I were in most classes together, on a debate team together, even rode the bus to and from school together. Denise witnessed most of the ridicule I endured. When one of the few bullies in the class would knock my books off the desk or broadcast a quick insult at my expense, she did what most of the class did. She laughed along.

A few years ago I wrote an article about bullying and shared my story. The next day I received the following private message on Facebook:

With tears in my eyes, I owe you an apology. This morning I read your article, and I felt a unique twinge in my spine when I read how you still remember the jeers and pokes from your classmates back in middle school. The dam broke. I was one of those horrible kids who bullied you. While I may not have been the worst, I did it. I've thought about it a lot since coming to Christ, but when I read your post this morning. . .ouch. As I read it through tears to my hubby he said, "Sounds like you need to apologize to someone and ask for their forgiveness." He's right. Jon, I apologize for being one of those kids. and I ask for your forgiveness.—Denise

Interesting that in hindsight she perceived her laughing and joining in as “bullying.”

Denise wasn't the only one experiencing regret. As I interviewed more “bystanders,” I saw more tears, some from people who wanted to reach out to people from the past to beg for forgiveness but, unlike Denise, couldn't find them.

Pain seems to be the common denominator all around. Bullied, bully, bystander. . .hurt isn't partial.

**PAIN SEEMS TO BE THE
COMMON DENOMINATOR
ALL AROUND. BULLIED,
BULLY, BYSTANDER. . .HURT
ISN'T PARTIAL.**

THE BREAKTHROUGH

How do we break through the pain and the emotional walls and actually help individuals from all three of these groups?

Are bullies destined to be bullies forever?

Is there hope and healing for the bullied?

Do bystanders have to just stand by. . .or can they be encouraged and equipped to stand up and do something?

What does real help look like in a world where everyone carries a device in their pocket, in their classrooms, even into their

bedroom at night—a device noting exactly how many friends, likes, and follows they have at any moment. . .a connection to exactly what other people think of them and comment about them. . .a real-time barometer of their self-esteem? (Is it any wonder anxiety, depression, and suicide are all at an all-time high in the US right now?¹)

What does real help actually look like today?

Those are the questions I sought to answer. Not just as a researcher who has been studying the effects of social media and mobile devices on young people, not just as a youth worker who has witnessed mean kids regularly, and not just as a parent of a kid who was bullied so bad we had to switch schools, but also as someone who knows firsthand what it's like to endure daily ridicule and torture.

How can we break through?

CHAPTER 1

VIEW FROM THE EDGE

They don't know

Sticks and stone may break my bones,
but words will never hurt me.

We've all heard it. We all had teachers who reiterated it.

“. . . words will never hurt me.”

Complete foolishness.

Nothing could be further from the truth. I probably don't even need to give you thirteen reasons why.

Anyone who has been mocked or victimized will tell you nothing is more crushing or more demoralizing. Speaking completely candidly, I'd rather get beaten senseless than become the victim of public humiliation—because sadly, I've been there.

That's the intriguing thing about bullying. I've read countless articles and studies, heard theories from well-known psychologists. I've attended assemblies and conferences about bullying. . . *almost always by someone who hasn't been bullied.*

They don't know.

They really don't.

I grew up five minutes from the American River Parkway, a beautiful recreation area where the American River glides 120 miles from the Sierra Nevada Mountains down to the Sacramento River. One of the trails we took as kids would bring us to the edge of a cliff 120 feet high overlooking the north side of the river. Sacramento residents call it “The Bluffs.” A romantic lookout for many, but for me, a location where I would contemplate taking my own life.

When I was sixteen years old I stood at the edge of that cliff staring down at the rocks below.

I can't tell you what was unique about this particular day. I honestly had experienced hundreds of days like this, especially years prior in middle school, being mocked, pushed around, and demoralized while my classmates looked on with laughter or passive approval.

I don't blame them. You had only three choices: laugh, ignore, or say something. Those who spoke up would only be next. . . so everyone chose either laughter or silence.

Literally everyone.

No one ever spoke up.

I probably couldn't have put words to what I was feeling standing on that ledge: loneli-

ness, hurt. . . a longing for someone who understood? Most of the people in my life didn't even know what went on at my school every day. It's not their fault; I never really shared the experiences. If I did, I most likely wouldn't have even used the word *bullying*, because in my mind bullying was a big kid cornering a little kid and stealing his lunch money. My aggressors weren't big kids. They weren't even all male. My aggressors came in all shapes and sizes. But what I was experiencing was actually textbook bullying.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention defines *bullying* as "any unwanted aggressive behavior(s) by another youth or group of youths who are not siblings or current dating partners that involves an observed or perceived power imbalance and is repeated multiple times or is highly likely to be repeated."¹

"Perceived power imbalance"—a good word choice. Kids don't have a positive concept of "self," so they try to make themselves feel better by hurling verbal onslaughts at others. That's an accurate description of what my peers did to me each day. I was an easy target, so I became a stepping-stone others used to raise themselves up so they could feel more powerful.

"Repeated multiple times"—also accurate. For me it was daily in middle school, at least weekly in high school. Certain environments seemed to foster it more than others, none more so than PE class.

That particular day began with gym class, physical education, or PE as our school called it. PE is a cruel requirement for nonathletes, something the physically fit will never understand. PE is where the

weak get intimidated by the strong. PE is where small boys get hung by their underwear or slapped in the back of the legs while bystanders laugh hysterically.

That morning in PE a popular kid had said something cruel. I don't remember the exact exchange, but knowing me, I probably retaliated with a quick verbal jab. I had developed a quick wit over the years. I had plenty of experience defending myself.

But this kid wasn't going to tolerate any banter. He hit me hard in the jaw. I can still hear the cackles from the crowd and feel the stares of those who quickly circled around. Funny, I don't recall the physical pain of the hit.

More words were exchanged. I had two choices: fight or back down. I chose to back down.

Social suicide.

Names were called—cruel names that are difficult even to put into print.

“Pu**y!”

“Fag!”

I was neither, but it didn't matter.

Threats were made. “You'd better watch your back!”

He meant it. And he was right. This altercation had triggered a social seismic shift, and there were aftershocks. You see, once someone is publicly humiliated, the victim bears an invisible KICK ME sign on his back. For the rest of

the day I endured shoves, jeers,

and cruel whispers from kids I

had never even met. Other

kids with low self-esteem

jumped on the opportunity

to step up a notch on the

social ladder by lowering

someone else a rung.

I don't know why this particular day pushed me over the tipping point, since I had experienced many other days like it. Regardless, six hours after the original jab, I stood at the edge of the cliff looking down at the rocks.

Should I jump?

ONCE SOMEONE IS PUBLICLY
HUMILIATED, THE VICTIM
BEARS AN INVISIBLE “KICK
ME” SIGN ON HIS BACK.

I wanted to jump. I really wanted to, honestly, for selfish reasons.

I'll show them.

They'll regret everything they ever said!

BROKEN

Something happens to kids when they are repeatedly mocked and pushed around publicly. It changes them. It happened to my dad, and it happened to me. But the hardest by far was to see it happen to my son, Alec.

When Alec was in fifth grade, we noticed a dramatic change in him over a period of just four weeks.

Our family had just moved across town, and we enrolled our three kids in a new school. The girls adjusted fine, but Alec immediately became a target of harassment. It happened daily. We saw it on his face the first day we picked him up. We asked him what happened.

“Some kids teased me,” he said.

We did what most parents do. We told him not to worry about what other kids say.

See—I did it too. “Ignore it.” It’s a common parental response (so common I’m focusing my entire next chapter on it).

We were dead wrong.

My wife, Lori, and I watched a sweet, innocent, gregarious boy gradually chiseled down to a repressed, dejected little kid. Bitterness began to emerge. His posture literally changed. Previously he walked with confidence and a little bounce to his step. Just a few weeks later, his shoulders drooped and his head hung low, almost as if he was scared to look around.

It’s sad to see what bullying does to a kid. My dad and I both eventually recognized it in Alec. He was emotionally broken. We knew it all too well—we both had been there.

My dad is five foot four as an adult. So as you can imagine, as a kid he was small—plus he was shy and a little on the pudgy side. It doesn’t take too many times hearing the words “fat” or “midget” thrown at you to develop a complex about your weight and size.

Kids don’t even need physical imperfections to be bullied, but if

you have a major physical flaw, you're a prime target. My buck teeth provided plenty of ammo for everyone. I shudder even typing those words—*buck teeth*. It seemed as though not a day went by that I didn't hear them.

My baby teeth were fine. But when my permanent teeth came in. . .wow! It's literally too much to describe; just flip the book over and take a peek at the picture on the back cover. Yeah, that's me in fourth grade.

I heard it every day.

"Hey, Bugs Bunny!"

"Buck-toothed beaver!"

"Chicklets!"

"Hey, can opener!" (You gotta give creativity points to whoever came up with this insult.)

And I didn't just hear it from mockers—I heard it from little kids in the grocery store!

"Mommy, what's wrong with that kid's teeth?"

"Don't stare, honey."

You wouldn't believe the things I heard.

When people poked fun at me, I always hoped adults would intervene. But my confidence in adults quickly faded.

Most adults didn't notice the jesting and teasing. Some actually laughed. In fourth grade I was at a basketball camp when a group of kids cornered me, making fun of my teeth. I remember trying to retort; I don't recall what I had planned on saying, because I never finished my sentence. All I could manage was something like, "Oh yeah, well I can do something you can't. . ."

**MOST ADULTS DIDN'T
NOTICE THE JESTING
AND TEASING. SOME
ACTUALLY LAUGHED.**

And my coach quickly interjected, "Yeah! Chew through wood!"

Once an adult opens that door, it never shuts. No one at that camp called me by name again. I was "Beaver" or "Woody Woodchuck." (Isn't it nice when nicknames are memorable little tongue twisters that kids can all shout together?)

Those who haven't been mocked or teased might not understand the repercussions of nicknames like this. No, for me these labels were not just cute nicknames. They were a badge. Each name was a sign saying OPEN SEASON, and I was an eight-point buck. For the rest of that week I was mocked, shoved, and threatened. Everyone knew it was socially acceptable to demoralize Woody Woodchuck.

"Hey, Woody, why don't you chuck this wood!"

So when my son was being bullied, I knew what he was experiencing.

When I talked with the principal, I provided her with specifics. After all, it wasn't just boys who were picking on Alec. A girl in his class had just turned around in her chair the day prior, leaned on his desk, and said, "Wow, you are the ugliest kid I've ever seen. Your mom must wonder, *Why is my kid so ugly?*"

I shared this incident with the principal. She didn't seem to process it. I wish I would have had a hidden video camera in her office. She didn't address any of the specifics I shared; instead she bragged, "Our school doesn't tolerate any bullying."

She actually showed me a banner hanging in the cafeteria: OUR SCHOOL IS BULLY-FREE, THE WAY IT'S MEANT TO BE.

These Bully-Free signs and banners are becoming even more common in schools across the country today. Google it. You can buy them all over the web, "to send a positive message and inspire students to think before they act."

Really?

I'd love to see that data and hear those testimonies: "There I was, about to knock the books out of Eugene's hands. . .but then I looked up and saw a poster. . ."

My son, Alec, and I still talk about that useless banner to this day.

Alec got to the point where some kids started pushing him and slapping the back of his neck. It was so hard for Lori and me to hear the terrible accounts day after day. Finally I told Alec, "You don't have to take that. You can stand up for yourself."

Alec looked up at me with his big blue eyes, his lip quivering, and said, "I don't want to get into trouble."

I told him, "You won't get in trouble from me!"

Maybe that was just another victim talking. I don't even know if

it was good advice. Lori questioned my reasoning. “Are you sure that’s what he should do? Or is that just someone who was bullied as a kid talking?”

It was a fair question.

Fight or flight. Those are the two natural responses to confrontation. We decided to encourage him to seek “flight.” In fact, we switched schools. He got plugged in with a group of really creative kids—like him—at his new school and at church. But we also enrolled him in martial arts to try to boost his confidence.

Some of Alec’s scars slowly began to heal. That is. . .until the first week of middle school when some kids started pushing him around.

I’ll give you one guess as to where this happened. . .

During PE.

During PE as Alec ran around the track, two boys would stop him and tell him, “You can’t pass.” Of course, the teacher was nowhere to be found.

Note to teachers and administrators: It’s hard to be “bully-free, the way it’s meant to be” like your banner says when gym class is a free-for-all for big kids. (Don’t even get me started on “picking teams.” I still have dreams about standing there alone, the last one chosen.)

I didn’t want to lose all the ground we had gained with Alec, so I asked him more about the situation. “Can you avoid these kids? Can you run somewhere else?”

Flight.

It’s always good to avoid the situation as best as possible. But the confrontation with these two bullies was unavoidable. Day after day they found Alec when the teacher wasn’t around—which was a lot!

I looked Alec in the eye and told him, “Alec, if those kids push you or corner you, hit them in the nose as hard as you can, and don’t stop swinging until someone pulls you off!”

Fight.

Let me add a quick disclaimer here. I’m not advising you to defer to violence. In today’s day of lawsuits, you’ll probably get sued.

But I honestly didn’t care.

They had poked Mama Bear. . .er. . .Papa Bear one too many times, and frankly I was ready to go down to the school and start tossing kids around. I was one straw short of grabbing the keys and

telling Lori, “Call our lawyer—I’m going to be arrested in about thirty minutes!”

But my advice to Alec that day was to swing away.

Alec was shocked. “I thought I wasn’t supposed to fight.”

“Defending yourself is way different than fighting, Alec,” I assured him. “If they bully you, you go *Christmas Story* on them!”

“But Dad, I’ll get suspended.”

I leaned in close to my boy. “If you get suspended for defending yourself, Alec, I’ll take the day off work and take you out for ice cream, and then we’ll hang out and have fun all day. You won’t get in trouble from me for defending yourself. You’ll get rewarded.”

I didn’t know if I was giving Alec sound advice, but speaking candidly as a father, I’ll confess that desperate situations sometimes generate desperate responses. At the time, I just wanted Alec to know that we were in his corner no matter what. And I hoped to provide him with the freedom to defend himself.

The next day when Lori brought Alec home from school, he looked apprehensive.

“What happened?” I asked.

Alec was looking down at the ground while he talked. “I got sent to the principal’s office for fighting.”

This might sound strange, but *I was so proud of him!* I smiled and gave him a big hug. “Sweet! Let’s go for ice cream!”

Over ice cream, Alec told me the whole story. The kids stopped him on the track again and didn’t let him pass. Alec tried to go around, but one of the kids pushed him. Alec swallowed hard and started swinging. He knew how to hit. He hit one guy to the ground and the other grabbed him. Alec somehow managed to get the other kid in a headlock and started punching him as well. The punching turned to rolling on the ground. Next thing he knew, all three of them found themselves in the principal’s office.

The principal knew the other two kids by name; he didn’t know Alec. Alec told him his story. The principal said, “I don’t want to see you in here again. You can go.” Then he kept the other two in his office.

Apparently a couple of Alec’s hits landed pretty hard, because the next day one of those two kids came to school with a black eye.

Alec didn't have any more physical confrontations that year.

I wish I could tell you that Alec's remaining years were bully-free. They weren't. He joined wrestling the next year in middle school, and that really helped. But during his freshman year of high school, bullies actually sat in the hallway and threw pieces of muffins at certain kids, calling them names. Alec said it happened all the time, not just to him, but to numerous kids. He just tried his best to avoid those hallways.

So was it over?

The question Lori and I had was, would all these experiences have long-term effects? Or is the idiom true: “. . .but words will never hurt me”?

I had definitely experienced long-term effects, and apparently I'm not alone. Every time I interviewed an adult who had experienced severe bullying, I heard the same things.

- “I'm still tentative in social situations.”
- “Whenever people are talking with each other at work, I can't help but wonder if they're talking about me.”
- “I am still dealing with what those experiences have done to me. Depression, suicidal thoughts. . .”

Words will never hurt me?

REPERCUSSIONS

I've seen it hundreds of times in over two decades of youth ministry. Bullied kids are more socially tentative, sometimes skeptical of social situations, fearful of rejection. I've seen many of them become prejudiced toward certain social circles: jocks or popular kids.

This social trepidation often causes bullied kids to push others away. Even if other kids are nice or give them a chance, the bullied don't like to let others “in.” They've been burned before.

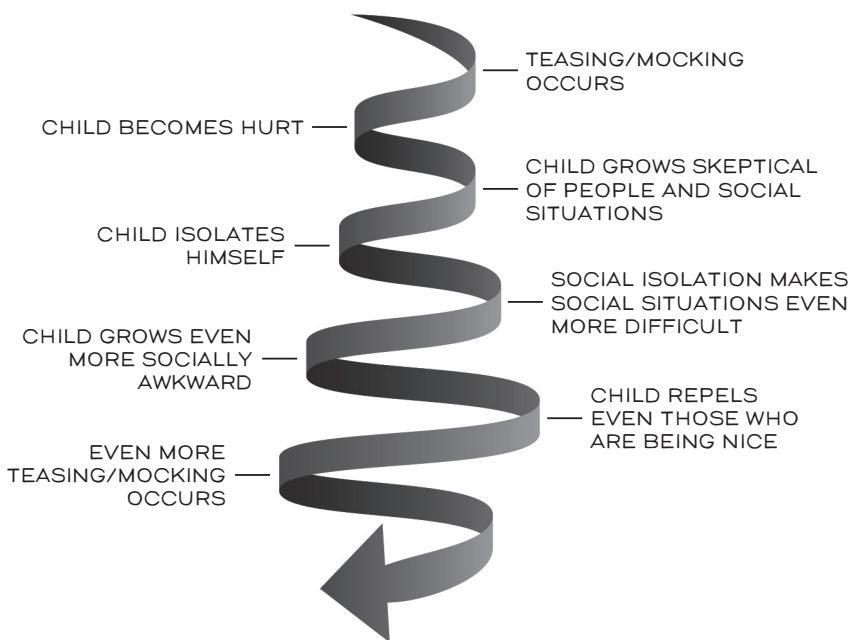
I can relate. I did the same thing, even into my college years. My skepticism toward people sometimes resulted in bitterness and

quarrelling. If you met anyone who attended college with me my freshman year, they'd probably describe me as tense, insecure, and easily aggravated.

The stereotypical bullied kid is often guarded, defensive, and, as a result, socially awkward.

Today the situation is only worsened by technology. Not just because kids are mocked on social media, but because technology offers socially awkward kids a place to escape social situations, which only cripples their social skills. Technology also provides a false sense of “friendship” with people who aren't always positive influences. It becomes a downward spiral.

The pattern looks like this:



That's why the fix isn't easy. Preventing bullying requires more than a school assembly. I appreciate some of today's antibullying initiatives, but it takes more than a nice kid inviting a less popular kid to sit with him at lunch once.

Healing takes time. But it's hard to heal when the scab keeps getting ripped off day after day.

Bullying happens more often than you might think. Most adults just don't realize bullying's pervasive reach. One study found that 50 percent of US high schoolers said they had "bullied, teased, or taunted someone at least once."² Let that sink in for a moment. Half of the kids at the campus down the street from you admit to belittling others.

I believe it. Today's young people have poor self-esteem and little to no conflict-management skills, a double-edged sword that easily cuts down others. When a bully feels low about himself, he cuts others down lower. If someone else bothers him in any way, he

responds negatively. Why? He has self-esteem issues and doesn't know how to respond. The same study revealed that 37 percent of boys agreed that it was okay to "hit or threaten" a person who angered them.

Who is teaching this kind of conflict resolution? This isn't self-defense, mind you; this is just, "If someone frustrates you, hit 'em!"

This destructive cycle results in certain kids, usually the ones at the bottom of the pecking order, getting emotionally hurt.

So how do the bullied typically respond?

The most common response from bullied kids I've observed is withdrawal. Those of us who have been bullied will assure you that *the safest place is alone*.



I APPRECIATE SOME OF TODAY'S ANTIBULLYING INITIATIVES, BUT IT TAKES MORE THAN A NICE KID INVITING A LESS POPULAR KID TO SIT WITH HIM AT LUNCH ONCE.

ISOLATION

Bullying victims seek refuge in a variety of arenas. I always retreated to home, where I could be creative by writing and drawing. I played piano as a child (yeah, I was the entire "nerd" package), so during some of the rough years I began to write songs. In retrospect, I don't think they were very good, but they were therapeutic. And anyone reading the lyrics even today would gain insight into bullying victims' emotions.

My daughters recently looked through one of my “memory boxes” stuffed in the closet under the stairway. After paging through my yearbooks and drawings, they came across a folder with a bunch of my music. They saw some of the lyrics I wrote and asked me candidly, “Dad, were you serious?”

Here are the lyrics they found:

*Alone I am waiting
Nobody caring
This life isn't for me. . .*

*Is anyone out there
Someone who cares?
Someone whose feelings and thoughts I can share?
There has to be someone
Someone who feels like me*

A bridge was scratched out near the bottom:

*This life isn't wanted
I might as well end it*

I don't recall having suicidal thoughts frequently, but I remember feeling completely alone at times and wondering if anyone understood. I longed to meet others—even one person—who felt like me. But I didn't know where to find this person.

Looking back, I'm thankful I didn't have social media to retreat to in search of “friends” who understood. With my obsessive personality, I probably never would have been more than five feet from my mobile device.

Turns out I wasn't alone in my feelings. Even today, all over the world, ostracized teenagers are looking for camaraderie wherever and however they can find it. Sadly, these lonely kids don't always find what they're looking for, so they resort to self-medication. A recent report out of the journal *Pediatrics* revealed that kids who are bullied in early adolescence may be more likely to use drugs or alcohol in their teens. Valerie A. Earnshaw, PhD, of Boston Children's Hospital,

and colleagues wrote, “Indeed, a small but growing body of work suggests that early experiences of peer victimization are linked to worse mental health and greater engagement in health risk behaviors during early adulthood.”³

This report is only one of many showing the lasting ramifications of bullying. A study of kids in the United States, Canada, and France found that victims of bullying are more likely to report depression, low self-esteem, poor school performance, and suicide attempts. These kids, described as “by far the most socially ostracized by their peers,” were “most likely to display conduct problems, least engaged in school, and they also reported elevated levels of depression and loneliness.”⁴


I shuddered when I first read that study because it described me perfectly. *Conduct problems, least engaged in school, lonely.*

I remember talking with a few adults, revealing just a little of what I was experiencing. I wasn’t about to tell them what I really felt.

The fact is, words do hurt. In fact, they played over and over again in my head on repeat, like a skipping CD.

Maybe we need to rethink the whole “sticks and stones” idiom.

But “sticks and stones” isn’t the only little phrase I’ve heard minimizing this kind of hurt. In fact, I’m going to devote the entire next chapter to the one I’ve heard the most.



ALL OVER THE WORLD,
OSTRACIZED TEENAGERS ARE
LOOKING FOR CAMARADERIE
WHEREVER AND HOWEVER
THEY CAN FIND IT

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why did you pick up this book?
2. What was one thing in this chapter that really stood out to you?
3. Jonathan suggested that young people have three choices when they see someone being bullied: laugh, ignore it, or say something. Which did you typically choose?
4. In the definition of bullying by the Centers for Disease Control, bullying is limited to youth “who are not siblings or current dating partners.” Why do you think this is? What is bully-like behavior called in those settings?
5. Jonathan confessed that he advised his son, “Alec, if those kids push you or corner you, hit them in the nose as hard as you can, and don’t stop swinging until someone pulls you off!” What do you think of this advice?
6. Jonathan described the downward spiral that begins when a child gets teased, becomes hurt, grows skeptical of people and social situations, and gradually isolates himself, which makes social situations more difficult, which makes the child even more socially awkward, which repels people more, and then more teasing occurs. Have you observed this spiral? What did you notice?
7. How can you tell the difference between shy kids and kids who are slowly beginning to isolate themselves in an unhealthy way?
8. How can you do a better job of noticing the signs of bullying this week?