

## Anti-bullying Presentation

Catherine Urdahl, author, *Polka-dot Fixes Kindergarten*

### Summary

In recent years, the media has turned its attention to the problem of bullying. Much of the focus is on the high-cost of cruel behaviors – both to the victims and to the bullies themselves. But less attention has focused on how to stop bullying and mean behaviors *before* they cause long-term issues. How, for example, do we give children emotional tools to deal with issues directly and positively – rather than taking them out on others? How do we help children stand up for themselves and take steps to stop cruel behavior? How do we help children develop empathy, or the ability to identify with others?

One of the most effective ways to give children emotional tools is to help them experience difficult situations through characters in books. In my recently published picture book *Polka-dot Fixes Kindergarten* the main character encounters a number of challenges on the first day of school, including verbal taunting from a stripe-loving girl named Liz. Ultimately, the struggle between the girls helps young readers understand the *why* that can underlie mean behaviors and find the courage and the words to stand up and say *STOP*.



Because of my passion for this issue, I have developed a school presentation that uses this book to facilitate a discussion about mean behaviors and offers a variety of tie-in activities. My ultimate goal is to help schools in their effort to address these behaviors at a young age – from preschool through the early elementary years – before mean behaviors and words become entrenched bullying.

### The Challenge

Unfortunately, bullying is a significant issue in our nation's schools and neighborhoods. According to the International Association of Chiefs of Police, as many as one in three teenagers are involved in bullying, either as a victim or a bully. And studies show that bullying is even more common among elementary and junior high school students.

The effects of bullying can be devastating—both for the target and for the bully. For example, a National Education Association (NEA) report indicates that 160,000 bullying victims miss one or more school days a month because they are afraid to go to school. Some bullying victims actually drop out of school and—in extreme cases—suffer mental health issues and even attempt suicide.

Bullies themselves also suffer consequences when their behavior goes unchecked. About 60 percent of boys identified as bullies were convicted of a crime by age 24, compared with 23 percent of boys not involved in bullying, according to the nonprofit organization Fight Crime: Invest in Kids.

One of the keys to addressing these issues is to reach children when they are young—before occasional mean words turn into patterns of bullying. The good news is that schools can make a difference. For example, the Olweus Program, a Norwegian initiative developed in the mid-1980s, appears to have reduced bullying behaviors by as much as 50 percent in some elementary, middle and junior high schools. Schools also credit the program with improving the social climate of classrooms and reducing anti-social behaviors.

Effective anti-bullying programs involve a variety of components, including the use of relevant children's books. When children engage in a book—and identify with a character—they experience the world through the character's eyes and feel the struggles of that character. Through a book, a child can feel the pain of being bullied—or the insecurity that might trigger bullying behavior. For example, my picture book *Polka-dot Fixes Kindergarten* allows children to step into the shoes of main character Polka-dot, as well as “mean-girl” Liz, whose insecurities provoke her unkind behavior. This can help build empathy and pave the way for discussions in the classroom and the home. In this way, a children's book—together with other anti-bullying initiatives—could help prevent mean behaviors that could escalate into bullying.

### **Polka-dot Fixes Kindergarten**

*It's the first day of kindergarten, and Polka-dot is ready. She's packed a fix-it kit just like Grandpa's, with duct tape, runny soap and dotted bandages. But when it comes to dealing with the mean words of stripe-loving Liz, Polka-dot might need something more...*

In *Polka-dot Fixes Kindergarten*, the main character encounters a number of challenges on her first day of school. Her biggest problem is Liz, who has something mean to say about everything from Polka-

dot's dress to her artwork. Ultimately Polka-dot is able to stand up to Liz and – in an unexpected act of kindness involving the creative use of duct tape – saves Liz from a kindergarten crisis of her own.

The book speaks to the challenges of both the “mean” girl and her target. Readers see Polka-dot summon the courage to stand up to Liz. They then see her grapple with the dilemma of whether to retaliate or to assist Liz, once Liz herself becomes the subject of taunting.

Liz, while not an entrenched bully, has targeted Polka-dot with mean words and behaviors that have the potential to escalate into long-term bullying if left unchecked. The text and illustrations depict Liz as a vulnerable character struggling with first-day issues of her own. Through Liz, young readers can see the possible *why* behind mean words and behaviors. They can think about how they respond when feeling vulnerable or hurt. And they can better understand the actions of others. My hope is that by examining, from a child's perspective, some of the potential causes for early-stage mean behavior, we can prevent bullying down the road.

## Discussing the book

When I visit schools, I begin by reading the book. Then I lead children in a discussion about Polka-dot's feelings throughout the day, the possible causes of Liz's meanness, and the resolution of the problem. For example:

- What made it hard for Polka-dot to be at kindergarten?
- Why was it hard for Liz to be at kindergarten?
- How are Polka-dot and Liz alike?
- How are they different?
- Why did Liz become upset about the pencils?
- What happened later that made her more upset?
- What could she have done differently?
- Do you think it was easy or hard for Polka-dot to help Liz?
- If Liz had kept being mean, what could Polka-dot have done?
- What can you do if someone is being mean?
- Can you think of a time you were mean to someone else?
- What might have happened that made you feel like being mean?

What might you have done instead?

What can you do if you see someone being mean to someone else?

## The activities

Several tie-in activities are available, depending on the size of the group and the time allotted.

### ❖ Friendship Quilt

For this activity, I give each child a six-inch square of white tag board. I then encourage children to use two or three of their favorite marker colors to decorate the square. Children can draw dots, stripes, checks, hearts, geographic shapes – whatever they like best. The class works together to arrange the squares into a quilt-like piece of art, using a large sheet of paper as backing. The teacher uses strips of colored duct tape to stick the squares together and create colorful borders.

**Goal:** To create a visible reminder of how things that are different can come together to create something beautiful.

### ❖ Classification activity

This activity involves patterned squares that I bring to the classroom. I divide students into groups of two, three or four and give each group 10 to 20 squares. Each group decides how to classify the squares into piles. For example, one group could put all the polka-dot pieces in one pile and all the striped pieces in the other pile. Another group could classify the squares based on their predominant colors or whether they feature small or large prints.

**Goal:** To help students understand that even when two things are different, they can be alike in many ways.

### ❖ How are we alike?

This activity is appropriate for large, as well as small groups.

I begin by holding up larger patterned squares and asking children how they are alike. I repeat this with several pairs of squares.

Then I progress to the stand up/sit down game—an activity aimed at showing how children are alike in ways we **cannot** see. Tell the group: *Stand up if you...*

*Have a dog.*

*Have a cat.*

*Have a pet rabbit, hamster, fish or turtle.*

*Have a brother or brothers.*

*Have a sister or sisters.*

*Ate cereal for breakfast this morning.*

*Are wearing blue today.*

*Are wearing red today.*

*Like spaghetti and meatballs.*

*Like to read stories about monsters.*

*Have ever been really scared by an animal.*

*Have ever been called a mean name.*

*Have ever gotten angry and said something mean to someone else.*

*Sometimes wish you could stay home (instead of coming to school)*

*Have ever felt scared someone might laugh at you.*

*Have ever felt lonely, even when there are lots of people around.*

I will work with schools to customize these prompts, being sensitive about cultural differences or issues specific to the group.

**Goal:** To help students understand that even when we are different, we are still alike in many ways.

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