

## Introduction

### Why Do We Celebrate Bullying?

BY ELLEN HOPKINS

I know bullying. Personally and through my children. In elementary school, I was smart. Sort of pretty. A talented equestrian, singer, dancer, and creative writer. I was also chubby. Not obese. Not even fat, really. But not a skinny jeans kind of girl. You know, the kid who other kids called "Elsie the cow." Luckily, I was strong—the kid who let insults roll off her because she knew in her heart she was destined to do great things.

That strength came from my parents, who believed in me. In turn, I believe in my children. My oldest son, Jason, is gay. He knew it before I did, and so when the bullying began, he knew why. But I didn't. Never underestimate the power of a mother bear, and I became one. At the time, bullying wasn't new, but confronting it was. School counselors told

me to leave it alone. Things would get better. They didn't. To escape the torment in California, Jason chose to live with his father (my ex) in New Mexico.

My youngest child, Orion, is almost fourteen. He isn't gay, but he is chubby. He was teased some in elementary school, but the real bullying began last year, in seventh grade. One kid was largely at the heart of it. I started hearing his name in September, when he began calling Orion gay. Why does that term, accurate or not, jumpstart abusive behavior? Over the course of the year, this kid and his friends volleyed relentless verbal attacks that eventually became physical. Orion was shoved, pushed to the ground, hit, and once had his head slammed into a locker.

This time the school had no choice but to get involved. Suspending the bully for a day or five didn't really faze him, however. I tried calling his parents. His mother's reaction was, "My child would never do such a thing." But he did, and it continued until one afternoon when Orion was followed off the school bus by a friend of the bully's—a high school senior—who grabbed Orion by the throat with both hands. Fortunately, a passerby prevented what might have been an even worse incident. I'd had enough. I called the sheriff, who sent a deputy to address the issue. The bully's parents brought him over to apologize. This year, everything seems to be in a holding pattern.

Orion is not alone. The statistics, in fact, are staggering. From 2009 surveys we find:

- More than seventy-five percent of our students are subjected to harassment by a bully or cyberbully and experience physical, psychological, and/or emotional abuse.
- More than twenty percent of our kids admit to being a bully or participating in bullylike activities.
- On a daily average 160,000 children miss school because they fear they will be bullied if they attend classes.
- On a monthly average 282,000 students are physically attacked by a bully.

Surprised? Why? Not only do many Americans tolerate bullying, they stand in the wings and cheer it on. In fact, there lately seems to be a real celebration of violent attacks against people who are different. If you don't believe me, spend a little time reading the comments following a news story about, oh, say, a mosque burning on U.S. soil.

Forget the fact that most of these people are citizens of the United States of America—a country founded on the principles of religious freedom. Yet because Muslims are "different," they are bullied, in much the same way a child who is different is bullied at school. Chubby or skinny; geek smart or challenged; gay or perceived that way;

black, brown, yellow, or any color other than the person hurling insults. Any of these things can make someone a target.

Some might argue this is simply the evolutionary byproduct of survival of the fittest. That all animals weed out the weak. But the human animal has a brain capable of compassion. What's lacking is the will to embrace someone who's different. Not only are we reminded daily of those differences by loud-mouthed pundits, but those same political shock jocks encourage fear-based reactions to those who are different. They whip their listeners into frenzied overreactions, with results like the cab driver who was shot for admitting his religious affiliation. Or places of worship being torched.

Picking on others is learned behavior. The kid who manifests violence has learned violence somewhere. Too often, that somewhere is home. Parents should teach their children to respect diversity. But if they won't, others must step in. It *does* take a village to raise a child who embraces all people, regardless of their differences. Which means we must take action whenever we suspect bullying. Does that make you uncomfortable? Consider these statistics:

- Every seven minutes a child is bullied on a school playground, with more than eighty-five percent of those instances occurring without any intervention.

- Surveys from 2009 show that more than 100,000 children carry guns to school as a result of being bullied.

- Twenty-eight percent of students who carry weapons in school have witnessed violence in their homes.

- Forty-six percent of males and twenty-six percent of females admit to having been involved in physical fights as a result of being bullied.

- More than eighty-five percent of our teenagers say that revenge as an aftermath of being bullied is the leading cause for school shootings and homicide.

- A child commits suicide as a direct result of being bullied once every half hour, with 19,000 bullied children attempting to commit suicide over the course of one year.

Despite those sobering stats, more than half of all bullying events are never reported at all. So it is our job, as that village, to stand up and take notice. To care enough about every child—mainstream or somehow different—to ensure his or her safety. That means speaking out boldly against any acts of violence toward those who are different. And

also teaching our children that our unique traits make us special, not something to be feared, taunted, or pushed toward suicide.

The authors whose stories follow have chosen to speak out boldly, to unite in a call to action against bullying. They have been bullied. And they have bullied. Hindsight brings a broad perspective to these acts. By sharing their wider view, they hope you'll choose to join our village. To help us create safe communities, homes, and schools, where everyone is valued for who they are, not in spite of their differences but because of them.

DEAR BULLY