

WHY THE ANITBULLYING MOVEMENT IN AMERICA IS FAILING

Educator offers new approach to help children cope with conflict and develop resilience

BULLY NATION: Why America's Approach to Childhood Aggression is bad for Everyone

Anti-bullying programs in our nation's schools have grown exponentially in the past decade. Since the tragedy of Columbine sparked a national debate over bullying, schools have ramped up new anti-bullying rules and "zero-tolerance" policies. Some of these policies have led to serious unintended consequences, according to Dr. Susan Eva Porter, who has worked in schools as a health educator, counselor, and consultant for over two decades.

"Unfortunately we've redefined all childhood aggression as bullying," says Dr. Porter. "Labeling kids as bullies or victims creates a divide in situations where one person's story is right and the other's is wrong, or even irrelevant. State mandates have forced schools to develop zero tolerance for what are often normal childhood conflicts; conflicts that we need to teach children how to work through rather than shielding them."

In her new book, *BULLY NATION*, Dr. Porter points out that contrary to popular opinion, the Columbine shootings had nothing to do with bullying. "Psychopathology and easy access to guns and ammunition was the cause not bullying," says Dr. Porter.

Bully Nation explains how in our efforts to protect kids from emotional pain, we have expanded our definition of bullying to include almost any behavior that has the potential to make a kid feel bad: being unfriendly, social exclusion, and name-calling are just a few of the behaviors that have recently found their way into the bully ring.

In *BULLY NATION*, Dr. Porter shares real-life stories from her work in schools that shows how anti-bullying policies intensify hostilities, hurt children's emotional development, and often turn parents against one another. She offers a new approach to help kids develop the coping skills and resilience they need by dropping the labels, and using intervention, teaching, and discipline to help children change behaviors and develop coping skills.



BULLY NATION is an overdue call for society to throw out the detrimental Bully Language and instead help children develop the resilience needed to handle the social challenges of life. It is essential reading for all parents, educators and mental health professionals.

BULLY NATION: WHY AMERICA'S APPROACH TO CHILDHOOD AGGRESSION IS BAD FOR EVERYONE

BY DR. SUSAN PORTER

208 PAGES, PAPERBACK, \$19.95, KINDLE, \$9.95

PUBLISHED BY PARAGON HOUSE

Available on [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) and [barnesandnoble.com](https://www.barnesandnoble.com)



Q&A with Dr. Susan Eva Porter

Author of

BULLY NATION

Why America's Approach to Childhood Aggression is bad for Everyone

Q. What is the definition of bullying?

A. Well, it depends who you ask, and this is one of our current problems. A generation ago, a bully was the big kid who pummeled the smaller kid on the playground; back then we thought of bullying in mostly physical terms. Things have changed. Now bullying includes social exclusion, teasing, name-calling and other emotional behaviors. Most experts will tell you that bullying is a repeated pattern of behavior, but this is not the message that's necessarily getting through to the public. Often children and parents will claim bullying has occurred after one painful incident between children. Because we as a culture are on heightened bully alert, we must take any claim of bullying seriously, even if it doesn't meet this definition. This is why I think the term bullying is no longer useful as a way to help children manage conflict and deal with pain.

Q. Why do we associate the Columbine tragedy with bullying?

A. In his wonderful book *Columbine*, journalist Dave Cullen charts the aftermath of the tragedy that riveted the nation in 1999. Soon after the event, the media searched for answers as to why two seemingly normal boys would want to obliterate their school community. The first answer that emerged, and the one that remains etched on our national psyche, is bullying. But Cullen effectively refutes this explanation for the boys' behavior and convincingly demonstrates that, in fact, Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris were not bullied. Bullying, it turns out, had nothing to do with Columbine. Nevertheless, the explanation stuck, and as a nation we became focused on and terrified of bullying.

Q. Why are parents and schools so focused on anti-bullying policies?

Because they are terrified about what could happen to children and incensed by children they view as threats. Of course, parents and school personnel should always be attentive and concerned, but the degree of fear and overreaction these days goes far beyond the threat that actually exists. Children haven't changed in the past generation, but our reaction to them has, and we can see this in our intense focus on policies and legislation aimed at punishing kids and criminalizing their behavior.



Q. What's been your experience with these policies in the schools you've worked in?

Many of these policies have the unintended effect of limiting our ability to help children. For instance, I worked with a mother whose 5 year-old daughter was "written up" for bullying a classmate during recess. The event in question? The girl shoved a handful of sand into another girl's mouth. Once. If we take into consideration childhood development, then we know this is what occasionally happens between 5 year-olds in the sandbox. But these days, once the term bullying had been introduced, most schools are required to perform a formal investigation, and in this particular case the offending girl was left with a "record." As this situation demonstrates, sometimes our policies stand in the way of us using our common sense to help everyone involved.

Q. What's your advice for parents when their child is involved in a conflict with another child?

A generation ago, it was rare for adults to get involved in children's conflicts. Now it is extremely common, but this doesn't mean it's always helpful. Before they intervene, parents should consider the following questions:

1. Does my child really need me to intervene? Sometimes what children need most from parents is emotional support; often children can and *want* to manage conflict by themselves.
2. Depending on the age of the child, parents should ask him/her how they can be helpful, and really listen to the response. Children may have a better sense than their parents of what needs to happen to resolve a situation, so parents should pay attention to what children say and help them to problem solve before intervening on their behalf.
3. Parents should consider how their own childhood experiences might influence their feelings about their child's situation. I often hear parents say they wish their own parents had been more attentive, but when I ask them if dealing with conflicts without their parents' help had a negative impact on them, they say no. These days, parents often believe that to be effective they must be omnipresent. This isn't necessarily the case. Sometimes doing nothing is doing something.
4. Parents should consider how their child contributes to the problematic situation and think of ways to support the child to reflect upon his/her behavior.
5. If parents decide to intervene, they should consider the Golden Rule. How would they want others to intervene if their child were the problem (and one day they will be)?
6. Finally, parents should consider their motivation for intervening. Is it to express anger or to solve a problem? Little will be gained by expressing anger; much will be gained by being open-minded and willing to work with others to seek solutions that benefit everyone involved.



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