

A Call to Action: Bystanders in Children’s Literature

“Walking home from school, I knew how lonely he must be. Maybe I should have said something to those mean kids.”

— from *Wings*

Educators are more aware than ever of the critical role that bystanders play in the cycle of bullying in their school communities. The challenge is to share this awareness with students and empower them to become part of the solution, rather than part of the problem.

Talking with students about any aspect of bullying can be difficult because of the complex and deeply personal nature of the topic. One way to raise students’ awareness of the critical role of the bystander is to discuss it within the objective context of fiction.

Consider this scenario: a popular girl repeatedly taunts a student who is “different”. . . classmates watch and laugh . . . no one takes action.

This could be a description of an incident that has become all too common in today’s schools, but it is actually the plot outline of *The Hundred Dresses*, a story about bullying, first published in 1944. The story is told from the point of view of Maddie, who witnesses, and sometimes participates in a cruel “game” that targets Wanda Petronski, a girl from the poor part of town. The leader of the bullying behavior is Peggy, Maddie’s friend. Maddie feels

ashamed when she realizes that she has contributed to Wanda’s suffering.

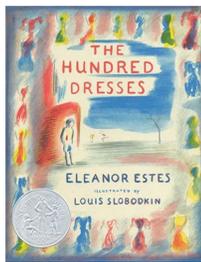
“(Maddie) had a very sick feeling in the bottom of her stomach. True, she had not enjoyed listening to Peggy ask Wanda how many dresses she had in her closet, but she had said nothing. She had stood by silently, and that was just as bad as what Peggy had done. Worse. She was a coward.”

— from *The Hundred Dresses*

The negative effects of bullying behavior are not limited to the target of destructive words and/or actions. Individuals or groups who lead the bullying, as well as those who watch, encourage, or walk away from the incident suffer emotional consequences, as well. Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, and fear are examples of the serious fallout resulting from being part of a bullying episode.

Many bystanders report that they want to say something but they don’t because they are afraid they will be the next targets. Maddie wrestles with these conflicting emotions:

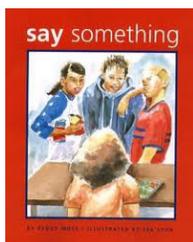
“Suppose Peggy and all the others started in on her next! She wasn’t as poor as Wanda, perhaps, but she was poor . . . she did wish Peggy would stop teasing Wanda Petronski.”—
from *The Hundred Dresses*



***The Hundred Dresses*, by Eleanor Estes**

Being able to talk about characters and situations in a story such as *The Hundred Dresses* lends some distance to the discussion about bystanders and bullying, and can feel less threatening to children. Discussions give children a chance to air their opinions, beliefs, and concerns in a neutral atmosphere.

The following books feature characters in the role of bystander. These stories reinforce the concept that bystanders can make a positive difference.



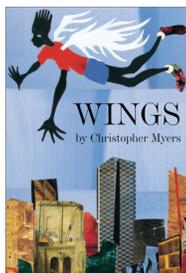
***Say Something*, Peggy Moss**

After witnessing her classmates engaging in hurtful behaviors towards other students, a student makes the simple, but powerful gesture of sitting with a target on the bus.



***Teammates*, Peter Golenbock**

Pee Wee Reese, a member of the 1940s Brooklyn Dodgers, shows his support of teammate, Jackie Robinson, by putting his arm around Jackie during a game.



***Wings*, Christopher Meyers**

This story is told in the form of an allegory in which a boy endures taunts and teasing from his peers. One person has the courage to say “Stop!”

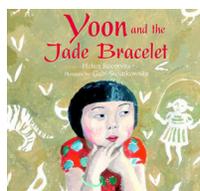


***One*, Kathryn Otoshi**

Colors and numbers illustrate the power that groups can have when they stand up for targets of bullying.

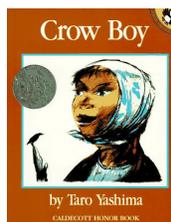
In stories such as *Yoon and the Jade Bracelet*, the focus is on the target of bullying behavior. Asking guiding questions such as, “Who else was around? What did they do? What would you do?” can shift children’s attention to the role of the bystander, and give them a new way to look at incidents that happen on the playground, the hallways, or on the bus. By helping children think through, and rehearse what they would do if they were different characters in books, adults can prepare students for their roles as bystanders in their school communities.

The following books feature characters in the role of the target.



***Yoon and the Jade Bracelet*, by Helen Recorvits**

A student pressures another into giving up her valuable jade bracelet.



***Crow Boy*, Taro Yashima**

Students repeatedly tease a boy whose different appearance makes him a target. Later, they regret their cruel behavior.



***Our Friendship Rules*, Peggy Moss**

Alexandra betrays her best friend in order to be accepted by the new girl in school.

Finding one's voice is the first step in becoming a bystander who takes positive action. Willow in *Willow's Whispers* and Lilly in *Chester's Way* are examples of characters who find the courage to speak up on behalf of themselves or others.

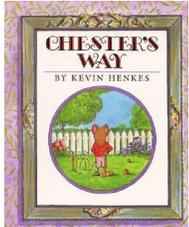
Willow's Whispers

Written by Lana Button. Illustrated by Terrie Howell.



Willow's Whispers, Lana Button

Willow has trouble speaking up in school, but ultimately, she finds the courage to make herself heard.



Chester's Way, Kevin Henkes

Lilly comes to the rescue of her new friends with an inventive disguise.

Fictional characters can serve as positive role models for children as they consider how to deal with problems, such as bullying. Whether it's putting your arm around a teammate, sitting next to someone on the bus, or jumping out of the bushes to protect a friend, taking action on behalf of a target is a courageous way to make a difference.

"(Maddie) was never going to stand by and say nothing again. If she heard anybody picking on someone because they were funny looking or because they had funny names, she'd speak up. Even if it meant losing Peggy's friendship." — from The Hundred Dresses