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Combat Bullying with Children’s Books

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Educators work hard to be sure that bullying is no longer a rite of passage that school children endure. We recognize that sticks and stones may break bones and words CAN really hurt. Put-downs, name calling, excluding or picking on someone because they look, sound or act differently is met with zero tolerance in most schools today. Teachers are constantly searching for resources, activities and literature that they can use to help combat bullying and to help students feel safe and accepted in their classrooms. Sharing books with characters who bully, reading books that contain elements of diversity and acceptance, making available books about friendship and cooperation can help teachers build “bully free” classrooms.

Children’s books that portray bullies and bullying behavior provide teachers with an avenue for discussion of behaviors, feelings and coping skills for difficult situations. Teachers can use literature as a springboard for classroom discussions, beginning with reading simple stories of anthropomorphized colors and animals who suffer from bullies to sharing early chapter books and realistic novels with issues of isolation and intolerance. Reading aloud The Recess Queen may cause classroom perpetrators to recognize their own behavior and think about changing. Victims may find the courage to stand up for themselves, like Pinky did in James Howe’s Pinky and Rex and the Bully, Bystanders, who do nothing to stop a bully or stick up for a victim, help to perpetuate bullying situations. James Preller’s intermediate grade novel, Bystander, portrays characters dealing with touchy middle school issues of trying to fit in, even when it means standing with a bully. Teachers of young children may want to use One by Kathryn Otoshi, a story about colors where blue is bullied by red, as the other colors sit by, too afraid to stand up to the number one arrives. This can be a good beginning point to discuss all three character types: bully, victim, and bystander. You’re Mean, Lily Jean! offers teachers a chance to explore standing up to a bully’s behavior. Students might also enjoy Leslie Kimmelman’s new twist to a classic tale, The Three BULLY Goats. There are many books that can be used in classrooms for good discussions about character behavior and consequences of actions, but as a caution, know your audience and allow time to really debrief about the characters and plot in a shared “bully” story. A classroom favorite, Hooray for Wodney Wat, while enjoyed by many, purely due to the bully running off and never being heard from again, also has a speech challenged rodent, Wodney, who is ridiculed by his classmates. They don’t even seem to recognize it until the big bully, Camilla Capybara is on the scene. While many have chuckled at this story, teachers need to be sensitive to the hurt feelings that can be invoked from the teasing in this book.

Books that address diversity and uniqueness are also important to read in classrooms to set a climate of trust and openness. Reading old favorites like Dr. Seuss’ The Sneetches to newer books like The Sandwich Swap by Queen Rania of Jordan, to books for older readers like Jerry Spinelli’s Star Girl, help promote understanding; respect for one another and the acceptance of differences. The Sneetches has long been read to students of all ages and used as a starting point for discussing uniqueness. The Sandwich Swap, written along with Michigan author Kelly DiPucchio, is a classroom story that addresses the need to understand the differences we enjoy, whether it’s a peanut butter sandwich or hummus on pita bread. Older students will find Stargirl and its sequel, Love, Stargirl, addressing high school challenges of fitting in and belonging to a group. Todd Parr’s celebration of differences, It’s Okay to be Different, is another title to introduce. Young children love Parr books with his brightly (and differently) colored characters and simply shared messages. Stand Tall, Molly Lou Melon depicts a pint size heroine who, with her grandmother’s good advice, sticks up for herself, despite being picked on for being different. Jacqueline Woodson’s metaphorically written, The Other Side, helps to promote cultural understanding despite the fence in-between. When considering books to share with a positive message and acceptance of differences, teachers should carefully preview books to avoid stereotypical representations and cultural inaccuracies.

From the earliest grades, teachers have been sharing books about friendship and cooperation to help build caring classroom communities. Leo Lionni’s book Swanny and Arnold Lobel’s Frog and Toad have long been found on teacher’s shelves. Teammates, by Peter Golenbock is the true story of baseball legend Jackie Robinson and his friend PeeWee Reese. New picture book Bug and Bear: A Story of True Friendship is a simple message to share with young students. A new beginning chapter book from the “I Am A Reader!” series is Tugg and Teeny by J. Patrick Lewis. With a baboon and a monkey as supportive best friends, these characters explore music, art and poetry. Several books are being published with unlikely animal friendships, starting with Owen and Max: The True Story of a Remarkable Friendship. Promoting friendship and creating a spirit of cooperation can help teachers create a positive classroom community.

Building classroom libraries with books rich in promoting diversity and acceptance can help bridge differences, promote understanding, and create a positive classroom environment. Designing lessons that include open-ended discussions about character’s behaviors and story plot lines might help students find the courage to deal with bullying situations. As with all use of literature in the classroom, teachers should carefully read and evaluate books they plan to use. The best books to use are books that you personally connect with and feel strongly about. Books on their own will probably not cause a bully to alter his/her behavior; it is what the teacher does with the book, the discussion that ensues, that can call students to action.

Available on ColleaguesPlus.com is a list of other recommended books on bullying. What are your favorite books to share in the classroom that help promote “bully free” environments and acceptance of differences? Send your suggestion, along with your grade level to pmurj@gsu.edu and we will add them to our list.