

# **LET’S BULLY ON PURPOSE IN SCHOOLS!**

**– Guidelines for transforming difficult situations**

**by Liliane Grace,**

**Author and Founder of The Mastery Club® Books and Programs for Youth**



Photo credit: Ava R. via Visualhunt.com / CC BY-ND

## **Introduction**

Bullying is a troubling issue affecting more and more families, schools and organisations, but most approaches miss some of the critical elements that hold the key to change.

Dr John Demartini, an Internationally renowned Behavioural Specialist, and Ken Pierce, a Canadian Psychologist and co-author of *The Dance of Bullying – a breakthrough tool for teachers and parents*, offer powerful ways of viewing and dealing with this dynamic.

Inspired by their perspective, I incorporated the key messages into my personal development novels for youth, *The Mastery Club* and sequel *The Hidden Order*. I’ve focused on them in an article I wrote called, ‘Let’s Bully on Purpose in Schools’. That confrontational title was not just written to catch your attention! It’s part of a deliberate proposal and strategy to drill communication skills, resilience, and self-esteem as diligently as we drill multiplication tables.

Children who do not develop these skills when they are young carry playground and classroom problems with them into adult life: they become bullies or find themselves at the effect of bullying. Escalating rates of domestic violence are just one example of this but the list goes go on and on. For instance...

## **Why Communication Skills Matter**

- Have you ever felt afraid of asking for what you wanted because you might be rejected?
- Have you ever unintentionally hurt someone because of something you said (or texted/emailed), but you couldn’t ‘call back’ those words/delete/undo?
- Have you ever stood by at work, feeling frustrated as you watched someone else do something badly that you knew you could do better?
- Have you ever sat in a classroom or a meeting steaming over the time that was being wasted because the leaders couldn’t manage the room?
- Have you ever been bullied?
- Have you found yourself face-to-face with someone in the sandpit and you just didn’t know what to say?
- Have you ever come across someone bullying someone else and you just didn’t know what to say to help or stop the aggression?
- Have you ever bullied someone else, and perhaps didn’t realise what you’d done till

later?

- Have you ever manipulated someone to get what you wanted because you knew you’d never get it if you asked outright?
- Have you ever swallowed the truth in a relationship because you were afraid the other would feel rejected if you shared how you were really feeling?
- Have you ever just given up on communicating because it was all too hard?
- Have you ever dumbed down your efforts because working at your best would create too many waves?
- Have you ever genuinely, hand-on-heart, done your best only to find you’d screwed everything up?
- Have you ever read about or witnessed the suppression of truth at a corporate or national or global level and wondered how they got away with it?
- Have you ever read about or witnessed or experienced corruption and felt outraged that they got away with it?

These are just some of the many traps for the unwary when it comes to communication, and too often we slip into the knee-jerk (primal brain) options of Fight, Flight or Freeze. If we are to evolve beyond these reactions, we must deliberately educate ourselves and deliberately practise new behaviours.

I am not preaching this from the position of communication mastery! I completely own my need to master these skills. After all, we teach what we most need to learn...

Being a female born in the 60s, I was brought up to be a ‘good girl’ – that ‘code’ has often translated into timidity: not asking for what I want or standing up for myself. I have too often surrendered to keep the peace or because I wasn’t sure of my value in the situation and assumed ‘they’ knew better or deserved more.

It seems to me that if we aren’t guided toward effective communication skills when we’re young, we soon form habits that lock us into unhealthy ways of relating. This is why I’m proposing that communication skills be drilled from primary school age as diligently as we drill times tables and spelling skills. If we want to see a change in society we must apply ourselves to that end consistently.

But what kind of change exactly? In the article I stated that we are not going to do away with bullying any time soon. It is *always* going to be part of life because of the way this universe is set up, but it’s here for a purpose and if we learn what that

© Liliane Grace 2016 • <https://lilianegrace.com> • Program renamed ‘Talk. Listen. Resolve. Repeat.’ 3

purpose is we can adapt more quickly.

### **Why Bullying Is Here Forever**

The universal laws that will prevent the elimination of bullying include the following:

**i) The Law of Polarity**, by which everything exists in a state of polarity (oppositeness), and it is physically (i.e. by the laws of physics) impossible to achieve a one-sided anything. We can’t have male without female, with can’t have light without dark, we can’t have up without down, we can’t have in without out, we can’t have fast without slow, etc. Also, each of these apparent opposites is actually a point on a continuum rather than a discrete ‘opposite’. (What is darkness but a state of no or minimal light?)

How does this apply to bullying? It means that we can’t (ever) just have peace. We will always have some sort of war. Sorry, folks, but that’s just how it is by the laws of the universe. However, as I mentioned above, conflict exists for an important purpose! I’ll come back to that.

**ii) The Law of Conservation** is another law ensuring that we will always experience some form of bullying. This law states that nothing is created or destroyed; it just changes form. In other words, we won’t eradicate bullying – it will just change form. It might take the form of slavery or verbal abuse or physical abuse or sexual abuse or cyber abuse or something else. The forms will keep changing but the practice will remain.

**iii) The Law of Symmetry** declares that the universe is always aiming to achieve a state of balance, and so opposites are drawn together in order to achieve that balance. We see this principle at work from the subatomic to the cosmic level. This state of balance is known in chemistry and biology as ‘homeostasis’. At the level of bullying, it simply means that the bully and the bullied are literally attracted together for the purpose of balancing each other.

We could say that the bully is ‘positively charged’ and the bullied is ‘negatively charged’: the bully is full of him or herself and the bullied is lacking in self-confidence or self-worth. What the bully needs is a little dose of self-doubt, a prick of conscience; what the bullied needs is a dose of self-worth, a spark of anger.

You will note that I don’t use the term ‘victim’ because really there are no victims here: there is simply one person who is over-charged and one person who is under-charged, and both need to come to balance. The bullied needs to stop being a doormat, and this is where anger plays a positive role because we need some frustration, some outrage, to step up and decide that we are valuable and do not deserve to be treated poorly! The bully, on the other hand, needs to develop respect for others, and sometimes it takes the pain he or she causes to plant that seed— perhaps the bullied’s despair will pop the bully’s overly-confident ego; sometimes the community’s solidarity with the bullied plays an important role in giving the bully pause for thought.

### **How Bullying Serves Us**

Much as I believe that bullying is not going to be eliminated, I don’t take that position in a defeatist sort of way. I truly believe that this trait serves an evolutionary purpose, so before I lay out the strategy I have in mind for transforming this situation, I’d like to address the purpose and value of conflict.

If you are anything like me, you have probably believed/wished/hoped that you could develop character strengths ‘just like that’ – magically – because you want to.

Most of us want to be strong, brave, kind, patient, spiritual, smart, selfless, resilient, modest, forgiving, outgoing... etc. But the harsh fact is that none of these traits just lands in our lap – as with anything of value, we have to work to earn it.

Strength and resilience don’t emerge out of a vacuum – these traits develop when we are overwhelmed or overcome with challenges and we pull ourselves together to deal with them. In the beginning we might deal with them badly, but gradually we develop more resilience, more strength; we persist, we pick ourselves up again, we get back into the ring because something inside us drives us on. Perhaps the cost of failure is too great to allow us to give up; perhaps the lure of success is too great to allow us to abandon the attempt.

Kindness, patience, spirituality, selflessness, forgiveness... Likewise these traits might emerge when we glimpse the other’s sheer inability to behave better and so we moderate our expectations, or perhaps when we have been hurt and others have demonstrated these traits to us, or when we have been unkind or impatient and have felt the pang of regret.

If we are shy and want to be more outgoing we usually develop that trait by ‘having a go’, not by sitting in our attic wishing for a visit from our fairy godmother. Modesty and humility might develop because we were caught out being vain or arrogant, and the shame of it has curbed our self-importance.

Whatever the trait we seek, its seed lies within its opposite.

We can put the issue of war under the same microscope and discover that the fear and sorrow and devastation of conflict harbour the seeds of many great traits and rewards: friendship, courage, kindness, independence, resourcefulness, persistence, inventiveness, etc. Those war-hating doctors in \*MASH\* develop a whole plethora of inspiring traits including a dedication to service and healing that goes way beyond the call of duty, deep friendships and loyalties, and a stubborn sense of humour that enables them to lift themselves and others out of the misery in which they find themselves.

As annoying or disturbing as it might be, our richest and most valuable traits have usually taken root in dark times, literally growing out of that seam of difficulty.

So now to the activity I am proposing for transforming unhelpful communication patterns.

### **My Proposal for Schools**

I’m going to speak about this exercise as if it were being implemented at a primary school level because I believe the earlier and younger the better, but obviously it’s applicable at secondary school level also, to say nothing of within organisations.

If you haven’t been to a primary school for a while, cast your mind back to the big assembly halls, their crammed classrooms where every wall and window displays artwork and posters, their long corridors with the inevitable food wrapping or banana peel on the floor, their carpeted libraries and asphalt yards and green ovals...

Now imagine a group of students being ushered into a space, ideally a large classroom rather than a booming hall, and everyone sitting together for a conversation about feelings. Perhaps some of the students will volunteer feelings they have experienced that day, and these can be noted on the whiteboard, and perhaps they can share the story that accompanies the feeling.

‘I felt sad this morning because I ruined my favourite picture.’

‘I felt happy at lunchtime because I was playing with my friends.’

‘I feel tired today. I want to go home.’

Perhaps someone will share something a little more vulnerable:

‘I felt left out at lunchtime because no-one would play with me.’

‘I felt cross when Tom pushed me.’

Perhaps a frank conversation, in which the teacher also shares some feelings – ‘I feel ashamed that I didn’t keep my word about reading you the story I promised yesterday’; ‘I felt happy watching and listening to your music performances’; ‘I feel tired because I was up late reading and marking your math tests’ – perhaps that kind of sharing will create an openness to feelings, and to listening to and respecting others’ feelings, and to observing how feelings are hurt.

Imagine raising the topic of bullying and of positive and negative charge, and how these opposite polarities are drawn together. Imagine drawing pictures and giving examples from science to illustrate this dynamic so that the students understand. Imagine explaining to the children the concept of universal laws. They will all immediately recognise the law of gravity and from there it is easy to introduce the other laws and generate an interesting discussion about how these principles show up in our lives.

They’ve been sitting still for a while, and that’s never a good thing with young children, so it’s time for a new activity! Invite three children up to the front to do a role play of a short scenario in which two children clash. Give them each scripts – pick good readers for this demonstration! The third child reads the description of the scene while the other two act out an argument. The scene should just present a problem – no solutions yet. For example,

Susie: You took my pen.

Hannah: I did not!

Susie: Yes, you did. She did, didn’t she, Maxine? Look, you’ve been writing with it there! (*pointing to Hannah’s book*)

Hannah: No, I didn’t. (*snatching her book away*) That’s not yours.

Susie: It is so!

Hannah: It’s not. That was Henry’s pen.

Susie: Then where’s my pen?



Hannah: I don’t know. How should I know!

etc.

After this scene, or one like this, ask the children for their feedback to what they’ve observed and/or what they believe is happening. They might say, ‘Susie was pushy. She didn’t ask, she just blamed.’ Or ‘Hannah wasn’t telling the truth. She really did take the pen but she was pretending.’

Debrief the scene by asking them how much they know and how much they are assuming or guessing. Ask them what they think each character should do to remedy the situation. Have them suggest better ways of asking or saying what needed to be communicated.

When this mini-scene and debrief are complete, have the rest of the students gather together in groups of threes, and hand out scripts for them to act. Each script should feature common classroom and playground clashes. Two children will play speaking roles, ideally a bully role and a bullied role, while the third reads the setting aloud and then observes. The scenes can be quite short and several groups can play out the same scene but there should be enough scripts for each child to have a go at each role.

For example,

Aaron (*boldly*): You can’t sit there!

Michael (*nervously*): Why not?

Aaron: Because Harry is.

Michael (*looking around*): He’s not even here.

Aaron: But he’s coming and that’s his seat so GO AWAY! (*with starey eyes, loud voice, shooing hands*)

*Michael backs away and sits somewhere else.*

Once each threesome has acted out a scene, gather everyone together again to debrief the various scenarios. If different groups played out the same scene, what were their different observations? (The scenes can be played one after the other to the whole-group audience or simultaneously in threesomes. If the children are not responsible with their independence, the teacher might provide a scene in which one of the children plays the frustrated teacher role and the other children play their unruly selves...)



The idea here is to refine the children’s ability to observe, to feel and name feelings, and to identify a range of behaviours. There are many studies linking these abilities with greater depth of thought, patience, compassion and resourcefulness in ‘real life’. Ideally the teacher will have an abundance of scenarios that can be acted out regularly, perhaps daily for a while, or at least weekly. Encourage the students to write some scenarios themselves that can go into the mix.

So far, the scenes might just have presented problems and the students might simply have discussed possible solutions, but once your group is ready, bring out some scenes in which solutions are offered – a child who is being bullied stands his or her ground... a child who is being unpleasant pauses to think... Perhaps the scene brings in other characters, children who step in to support or challenge. The idea now is to put words into their mouths: to give them ways of communicating that are both strong and respectful, caring of ‘self *and* other’ rather than careless or overly careful.

If there is anything that we all need, it is practise communicating in appropriately assertive ways, and practise listening to others non-defensively. We stand little chance of being able to manage conflict or negotiate difficult situations if we don’t have those basic skills in place.

As the children practise expressing themselves in these appropriately assertive ways, they are laying down patterns in their brains; they are giving themselves examples and ways of dealing with difficult situations. They are discovering what it’s like to ‘walk in another man’s moccasins’, as the Native Indian saying goes – and the moccasins of a wise person to boot. (If you’ll excuse the pun...) They are finding out what it feels like to pause and respond thoughtfully and caringly rather than reacting emotionally.

But if we are struggling to communicate well ourselves, how can we provide that level of guidance? How can we write those scripts?

## **Resources**

Fortunately, the world abounds with wonderful resources and services aimed at assisting us in improving our communication skills and maximising our potential. One tool that I highly admire is the Effectiveness Training programs established by Dr. Thomas Gordon. When my children were little I taught his Parent Effectiveness Training and I recently decided to teach it again in order to refresh my skills. My goodness, what a wake-up it was when I reviewed the content! I could see how

dramatically I had lost track of those skills. I was not communicating nearly as responsibly as I could; I was beating around the bush out of fear of confronting issues directly; I was damaging relationships due to my hesitance in asking for what I wanted up front and then making a hash of things when I did ask...

I believe that Dr Gordon’s communication principles and strategies are second to none and would make a perfect adjunct to the proposal I’ve unfolded here. The Parent Effectiveness Training makes us conscious of the places where we bomb in the communication department, and specifically how to correct. It’s very simple when you know how.

I also highly recommend the education provided by the Conflict Resolution Network, which is a United Nations Peace Project created by Helena Cornelius and Dr Stella Cornelius. This is another program I taught many years ago and intend to offer again. Many of the principles and practices overlap with Effectiveness Training.

Decay happens effortlessly. Things just gradually die and fall apart if they are not tended. Change, on the other hand, takes effort. We must deliberately take the time to learn and practise new response. We must be rocked out of our comfort zones and made to think creatively if we are going to avoid unpleasant real life situations.

The more that we ‘bully on purpose’ in schools, the more quickly we will develop the skills and sensitivity to derail difficulties and manage our relationships more successfully.

**I hope you are inspired to introduce some ‘deliberate bullying’, aka communication skills practice, in your school. Do contact me if you would like any extra support.**

*Liliane Grace is an award-winning author who specialises in teaching through story. Her ‘personal development novel’ for youth, The Mastery Club®, was an Australian bestseller in its year of release. Both The Mastery Club and its sequel, The Hidden Order, touch upon this fresh approach to bullying. You can reach her at [liliane@lilianegrace.com](mailto:liliane@lilianegrace.com) or on 613 (0) 407 901 008.*