

A photograph of five children sitting on a wide set of concrete steps, viewed from behind. From left to right: a girl with braided hair in a white shirt, a boy in a striped shirt with a backpack, a boy in an orange shirt, a girl with curly hair in a yellow shirt with a pink backpack, and a girl with a ponytail wearing large white headphones in a grey shirt. The steps lead up towards a wall on the left. The title text is overlaid on the top half of the image.

KEEPING SCHOOL CHILDREN SAFE AND ALIVE

*Strategies to Stop Bullying
and Prevent Suicide*

Phyllis E. Gillians
Bruce S. Cooper

Keeping School Children Safe and Alive

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*Strategies to Stop Bullying
and Prevent Suicide*

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INFORMATION AGE PUBLISHING, INC.
Charlotte, NC • www.infoagepub.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A CIP record for this book is available from the Library of Congress
<http://www.loc.gov>

ISBN: 978-1-64802-503-7 (Paperback)
978-1-64802-504-4 (Hardcover)
978-1-64802-505-1 (E-Book)

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Printed in the United States of America

*I dedicate this book to my loving mother and my life's inspiration,
Dr. Jacquelyn Hazel Washington-Gillians, PhD, and to the loving memory
of Dominique Noelle Thompson (April 7, 1994–May 29, 2009).
Dominique's death encouraged us to focus our research on bullying,
a serious problem that affects so many youth.*
—Phyllis E. Gillians

*I dedicate this book to my love, my three beautiful children, and my six
precious grandchildren. May they never suffer from abuse at school,
especially by bullies, and may God bless, protect, and keep them.*
—Bruce S. Cooper

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Foreword

Bullying is a serious problem in schools across the nation, and its effects can be long-lasting, dangerous, and detrimental to youth, their families, and their larger communities. As I recount my own childhood, I do not remember my parents asking me about any of the countless instances where kids in school said hurtful things to or about me. I do not recall my church pastor delivering impassioned sermons on the ills of abusive, bullying behavior between kids, and I don't remember principals, teachers, or counselors holding public assemblies to define the behavior or discuss its seriousness. I do remember, however, walking to and from school with my childhood friends discussing the mean things kids said to us. I remember when they would recite the myriad names and insults that passed between them and the other kids as the pendulum swung between victim and victimizer. I also remember our school principals, teachers, and counselors intervening in arguments and fistfights between kids as we moved from the classrooms to the hallways and the playground. After such occasions, the school administrators would inform parents of the incidents via handwritten notes that students had to deliver to their parents. Ultimately, the incidents were resolved in one way or another.

Personally, I experienced this process twice between kindergarten and 12th grade; perhaps I was one of the lucky ones. Of course, bullies called my friends and me names, often behind our backs, but I never had an actual fight or received any admonishment for serious behavioral problems. Some of my classmates, though, did have physical altercations with other

kids, and they were reprimanded accordingly. If I ever told my parents that another kid insulted or disrespected me, they never took the incident seriously enough to address it with school administrators. Instead, they would offer as a reasonable retort to my bullies, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never harm me.” I believe that my friends’ parents may have taken a similar stance. Although adults didn’t particularly label the behavior as *bullying* back then, it was bullying, nonetheless.

As a former teacher and administrator at the junior high and high school levels, I didn’t consider this behavior bullying either, as disagreements between students regularly occurred in the classroom, gymnasium, cafeteria, and other spaces on and off campus. Honestly, these incidents just seemed like a typical feature of the secondary educational experience, and with my own earlier conditioning, I did not challenge this viewpoint. Depending on the magnitude of the infraction, kids were either sent to detention or home, or their parents were called in for a conference. In the old days of schooling, adults simply dismissed most conflicts between students. No one considered the inward injury to children or any lasting memories or harm they may have suffered. Most adults just got over it, and I believe we assumed that kids did, too.

Despite the apathy of earlier generations, bullying between children is a much bigger deal today. The general public views bullying as such a cruel injustice and a betrayal of our social contract that parents, advocates, legislators at the federal and state levels, and school system officials across the country have lobbied for and enacted laws to address the issue. Education stakeholders know the laws on bullying; it is a national concern. The U.S. government established a website to provide the public with extensive information on bullying (www.stopbullying.gov). It is a must-read for parents, teachers, students, and other stakeholders who do not know who or what to ask about bullying. It is deliberate, thoughtful, careful, cautious, and methodical in clearly defining the behaviors, types, typical settings, timing, and frequency of bullying.

Bullying must be a concern for all stakeholders. Educational authorities have written journal articles that discuss school climate, parents’ responsibilities, in-school behavior, and teaching social responsibility to students. Their work has helped me to understand bullying. I can appreciate the extent to which schools try to ensure students’ safety, and I welcome their assertion that schools should be involved in the work-groups and research to address the problem. Furthermore, scholars have engaged in discussions about minimizing school suspensions, how school administrators talk about safety and the role that race plays in schools, and students’ mental health and behavior.

What would you think if your own children or students in your school made the following comment? “A sixth grader stated, I get picked on because I walk funny . . . one kid calls me ‘duck’ and ‘waddle’ and he ‘quacks’ at me. My Mom called the school and they told him not to do it anymore, but he still does when teachers aren’t watching. He bullies everybody when teachers aren’t looking.” His recommendation was to “involve students in collaborative action research and by doing so, school leaders gain vital information to guide school improvement.” (Preble & Taylor, 2009, p. 35)

Perhaps principals can provide additional training and resources to assist in bullying prevention. Schools might consider holding regular assemblies to raise awareness of “hot topics,” such as bullying, by having experts speak to children about bullying. We will discuss recommendations further in Chapter 8.

Stoltzfus (2018) urged educators and school leaders to move beyond their gut reactions to tragedies and toward a more comprehensive approach to safeguard students. In the 2017–2018 school year, several high-profile tragedies struck school communities across the nation (the shootings in Parkland, Florida, and Santa Fe, Texas). Armstrong (2019) asked, “Should mindfulness be a part of your school’s safety plan?” (p. 52). “Mindfulness isn’t a panacea, but schools are increasingly recognizing its potential to improve student well-being and safety” (p. 52). Tomlinson (2019) stated, “After 50 years in schools, I know racism is not a “distant memory” (p. 91). Tomlinson’s assertion gives Dr. Gillians the insight that the issue of in-school bullying could be further compounded by the targeted harassment of students based on their specific marginalized identities, such as *racist bullying*, creating more problems for education stakeholders to address as thoughtfully and thoroughly as they have tried to address bullying.

Furthermore, we must look at how American society bullies our children. Without drifting too far off the course, I implore you to ask how we can expect children to disengage from bullying when it’s built into the systems and society surrounding them. Adults, and society as a whole, should not dismiss bullying as a part of life and interpersonal relationships of any age, as bullying behavior typically persists well into adulthood, even extending into the realm of policymaking. According to Tomlinson (2019), through racist and segregationist policies—those overtly enacted in the past and those covertly instituted in recent decades—many American schools remain both separate and unequal, albeit not legally, because racist housing policies and practices render segregated schools and disproportionate fund allocations. As an educator with 50 years of experience, I wonder whether we—the adults, Americans, society—actually *grow* bullies and, even further, whether we have the courage and fortitude to reverse