Girl power

don't want your child to become a bully, or a victim? Maybe it's time to read her a story.

By Heidi Stevens
TRIBUNE NEWSPAPERS

In "The Hundred Dresses," a 1944 children's book by Eleanor Estes, Wanda Petroski is a sadly familiar character. She is the new girl at school — having recently moved from Poland to Boggins Heights. She travels to and from school alone each day, always wearing the same thing: "a faded blue dress that didn't hang right." Her classmates tease her mercilessly.

In South Hadley, Mass., the real-life Phoebe Prince was the new girl at school — having recently moved from Ireland. Her classmates taunted her mercilessly, calling her "Irish slut," harassing her on Facebook and sending her threatening text messages. Prince, 15, committed suicide to escape the bullying.

When Prince's suicide made headlines last month, experts spent the next few weeks debating whether bullying among girls is truly on the rise. A New York Times op-ed, titled "The Myth of Mean Girls," called the panic "a hoax," saying that by every major crime index, violence among girls has been plummeting for years. A subsequent article in Salon said the op-ed missed the point: "You can't measure rumors, passive-aggressive remarks, alienation and shaming with statistics. But that doesn't mean they aren't damaging or common — or you know mean."

Sixty-six years and a world of technology separate Wanda from Phoebe, but the fictional girl may offer some guidance, while pundits debate the "mean girl" phenomenon and parents grapple with heart-wrenching questions.

Why are children bullying one another? What is at the root of the aggression? And what can we do to stop it?

The answers are complex and varied, but a common theme runs throughout: Parents need to step in, and they need to do it in early.

"Relational aggression shows up in girls as young as 2," says Rachel Simmons, author of "Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls" (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt).

While storybooks seem an odd place to turn, with their sing-songy prose and whimsical illustrations, they can launch discussions that may prove critical in a child's life. And many of the books, even those aimed at preschoolers, tackle such weighty issues as cliques and bullying.

"It's wonderful for a kid to find a book in which they can see themselves or a problem they may have had," says Kevin Henkes, author of dozens of children's classics, including "Owen" and "Chrysanthemum."

In "The Hundred Dresses," Wanda's classmates don't give their behavior much thought until she stops showing up for school and the teacher receives a note from her father: "Dear teacher: My Wanda will not come to your school any more. Jake also. Now we move away to big city. No more holler Polack. No more ask why funny name. Plenty of funny names in the big city. Yours truly, Jan Petroski."

In "Purplingus," Victoria and Elizabeth Kann's sequel to the wildly popular "Pinkalicious," the main character is shunned by her schoolmates for liking the color pink. Books can be a useful tool for parents to address unpleasant topics with children.
Talking to kids about marketing manipulation

Most children — even preschoolers — are exposed to some form of media, and parents won’t always be on hand for those all-important conversations.

That’s why Amy Jussel, founder and executive director of Shaping Youth, says teaching our kids to be media literate is so important.

“You can tamp down and lock down and filter as much as you possibly can, but it’s coming at them 24/7,” Jussel says. “We have to teach them to use the filter between their ears, to ask, ‘Why are they wanting me to act this way? Why are they wanting me to buy this? What are they selling me?’”

Young girls are a marketer’s dream. And that, experts say, is as important for parents to watch for as bullying references.

“IT’s important for parents to understand that this generation has no resemblance to how you grew up,” says Rachel Simmons, author of “Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls” (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt).

“Girls are underexposed to economic influences in the family, to play a powerful role in the consumption choices of parents, and marketers know it. Parents need to be as educated about what’s changed in media and how it’s marketed as they are about what’s in it.”

— H.S.

Resources for parents

Hardgirlswithhealthywomen.org offers resources, news and events dedicated to empowering girls and women.

Rachelsimmons.com is where the author offers tips, tweets, video and blog posts about timely issues related to parenting girls.

Shapingyouth.org is an online forum about the influence of media and marketing on kids’ lives.

And if you’re looking for thoughtful, it’s tough to beat storybooks.

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Should children be forced to show affection?

Your little ones aren’t big huggers, which some family members take as a slight. Should you force your kids to show affection?

**Parent advice**

I would suggest teaching them to shake hands. It’s charming when little kids do it, and they may get over their reluctance to show affection to family.

— Marie Gross Amana

Tell them to try doing a high-five or a “knuckle” with family members so that they acknowledge them and know they’re important to them. At the same time, just comment to your family that, “We’re doing high-fives these days!” If you make it a big deal, then it will become one.

— Julie Williams

It sends a mixed message to children when we tell them not to let people touch them in ways that make them feel uncomfortable, but then we force them into physical contact with people they don’t necessarily know or feel affection for. If I ever want to hug a child, I always ask, “May I hug you?” If the child shrinks away, I simply say, “That’s OK. You never have to hug anyone unless you want to.” If the child smiles and embraces me, we can both enjoy it.

— Leslie Abrahamson

**Expert advice**

“Hugs and kisses are spontaneous displays of affection that come directly from a child and should be just that,” says Betsy Brown Braun, author of “You’re Not the Boss of Me” (Harper). “It’s important that our children know that hugs and kisses are very valuable, and we are in charge of who we give them to. When people impose themselves on children, we want children to pay attention to how they feel and recognize that ‘uh-oh’ feeling, knowing when it feels OK and when it doesn’t.”

Unfortunately, parents don’t always see it that way. “When a child gives grandma a kiss or greets his little friend with a hug, parents sometimes look at that as a feather in their own cap — ‘Look how warm and friendly my child is,’” Braun says. “It becomes a reflection on their good parenting, without considering how the child might process the request.

“Every parent knows how gross it is to kiss someone you don’t want to kiss, so why would we put our kids in that position?”