

[Family]



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Girl power

gone wrong

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 Petronski is a sadly familiar character.

She is the new girl at school — having recently moved from Poland to Boggs 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 step 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

The main character in "Purplicious" is shunned by schoolmates for liking the color pink. Books can be a useful tool for parents to address unpleasant topics with children.

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 Petronski."

In "Purplicious," Victoria and Elizabeth Kann's sequel to the wildly popular "Pinkalicious," the main character is shunned by her schoolmates for liking the color pink. "Pink is for babies and little girls. We aren't going to be friends with a baaaby," taunts Tiffany. In Henkes' "Chrysanthemum," the title character's name elicits

teasing throughout class time, naptime and recess. "A chrysanthemum is a flower. It lives in a garden with worms and other dirty things," Victoria teases. Chrysanthemum wilts.

But even as parents of tweens and teens take a closer look at Facebook and other media their kids are consuming, should parents of young girls worry about exposing them to bullies, even fictional ones, during such formative years? Could the stories be shaping behavior as much as reflecting it?

"The question is whether the characters engaging in the bullying behavior are being rewarded or not," Simmons says. "If the girl is being rewarded for what she's done, then the child reading or consuming the media is making that connection in her head."

Simmons, who founded the Girls' Leadership Institute in Santa Cruz, Calif., and travels the world educating girls, parents and teachers about ways to alleviate bullying, sees the rewards play out on kids TV shows.

"The bigger issue is when there's a laugh track put to a nasty remark," she says. "On shows like 'Hannah Montana' and 'Wizards of Waverly Place,' you see one kid rolling her eyes at her parents and everyone laughs. For a child who sees things pretty literally, they're just seeing, 'If I roll my eyes, people think it's funny. If I make fun of my sibling, people will laugh.'"

With a storybook, parents have more opportunity to shape the discussion.

"You can close the book and say, 'What did you think of the way X treated Y? Has that ever happened to you? Have you ever seen anyone do that at school?'" Simmons says. "It's important to develop your child's emotional vocabulary. Kids are able to name their own feelings from age 2 or 3. Have a conversation. Say what you think. Communicate your values as a parent."

Henkes says he never set out to create a teaching tool when he wrote "Chrysanthemum." But as a parent of two, he's aware of the solace a book can provide.

"Perhaps there's a solution in the book that may or may not work for them," Henkes says. "But even the comfort of knowing a kid, albeit a fictional kid, has the experience the reader or listener has is therapeutic and liberating."

Finding and introducing those characters, of course, is the job of an effective parent.

"We have to bring the good stuff to the top and let the dreck sink to the bottom," says Amy Jussel, founder and executive director of Shaping Youth, a nonprofit that studies the impact of media and marketing on children. "You have to give kids an alternative. You can't just say, 'Don't eat junk food.' You have to replace it with equally cool choices. When you take away one toy, you say, 'Try this one instead.'"

"No one's saying take away media," she says. "Just pump out better stuff that's thoughtful and mindful of how it's going to land on kids."

Talking to kids about marketing manipulation

Most children — even preschoolers — are exposed to countless forms of media, and parents won't always be on hand for those all-important debriefings.

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 understood to be the major economic influencers 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

Hardygirlshealthywomen.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.

On Amazon, the editorial review of "The Hundred Dresses" has this to say: "This gentle Newbery Honor Book convincingly captures the deeply felt moral dilemmas of childhood, equally poignant for the teased or the tormentor."

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The Parent 'Hood

Where moms and dads share their expertise

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 Grass Amenta

Tell them to try doing a high-five or "knuckles" 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 our hugs and kisses are very valuable, and we are in charge of whom 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?"



Instead, Braun has these tips:

Educate your kids: "Explain to them that hugs and kisses are something you don't give out willy-nilly. You are the boss of who gets hugs and kisses."

Give them a choice: "Rather than say, 'Give grandma a hug,' you say, 'Do you feel like giving grandma a hug?' There are lots of ways to show affection. Let the child take the lead on that."

Stop the guilt trips: "Sometimes granannies get offended and try guilt-tripping a child. 'You're not going to give me a kiss? Look what I brought you, and you're not even going to give me a hug?' Guilt is not part of a healthy relationship, and adults' feelings should not be hurtful by children."

Talk to your relatives: "Say, 'Oh, I've got to tell you, we're trying to help little Samantha know she's the boss of her hugs and kisses. It's one of the safety measures we're teaching her so when she gets older she will feel powerful if she ever finds herself in an uncomfortable situation.'"

Ask permission: "I always say, 'May I give you a hug or a kiss?' If they say no, I say, 'OK! I'm just going to blow you a kiss.'"

"The surest way to have affection given to you is to let it be spontaneous," Braun says. "When it comes, welcome it. Don't impose or require it."

Compiled by Heidi Stevens, Tribune Newspapers

Got a solution?

Your 4-year-old can turn anything into an argument. ("Good morning!" "It's not morning!") What's a good way to respond? E-mail us your thoughts at parenthood@tribune.com.