



The End of Bullying?

Positive psychologists see that bullying has deep, hidden causes and consequences—and that lasting solutions are on the horizon.

by Chris Libby
illustrations by John Coulter

Her own harrowing experiences in middle school inspired Deborah Temkin, Ph.D., to grow up to become one of the leading researchers in the United States on bullying. She was severely bullied—both verbally and physically—and felt that her school let her down by not preventing the bad things that were happening to her.

Any attempt to address the abuse was met with retaliation and isolation from her peers. Years later, while earning her doctorate in human development and family studies at Pennsylvania State University, she realized that many schools just aren't equipped or have counterproductive policies to address the issue that affects roughly one out of every four students.

Being bullied, she says, gave her purpose in life, and she has made it her mission to help schools create better climates. From 2010 to 2012, she served as the policy coordinator for bullying prevention for the U.S. Department of Education and is now the director of education research for Child Trends, an independent research organization focused on improving the lives of young people.

"Unfortunately, a lot of schools use the approach of just telling kids to stop bullying," she says. "I like to compare

that to the 'Just Say No' campaign in the '80s and '90s." If such a campaign "didn't work for drugs, it's probably not working for bullying. We really need to think through what our approach should be."

Kids who suffer from bullying are more vulnerable to depression, anxiety and internalizing bad experiences. The constant barrage of negative behavior can have long-lasting effects on their self-worth and motivation later in life and can even lead to thoughts of suicide. Those who engage in bullying behavior have a much higher risk of ending up in the juvenile court system and eventually jail. Even the kids who are bystanders can suffer from guilt and regret from not stepping in to protect someone.

Zero-tolerance rules, suspensions and expulsions have proved to be ineffective measures to combat the issue. Traditionally, schools in the United States have been measuring their success based on academics rather than the well-being of the students.

But prominent positive psychologists around the world have been studying the underlying causes of bullying, and their findings are both surprising and encouraging. What's more, their unique intervention techniques have been

highly successful, showing the promise of effective, sustainable solutions for future generations of schoolchildren.

Positive Climate Change

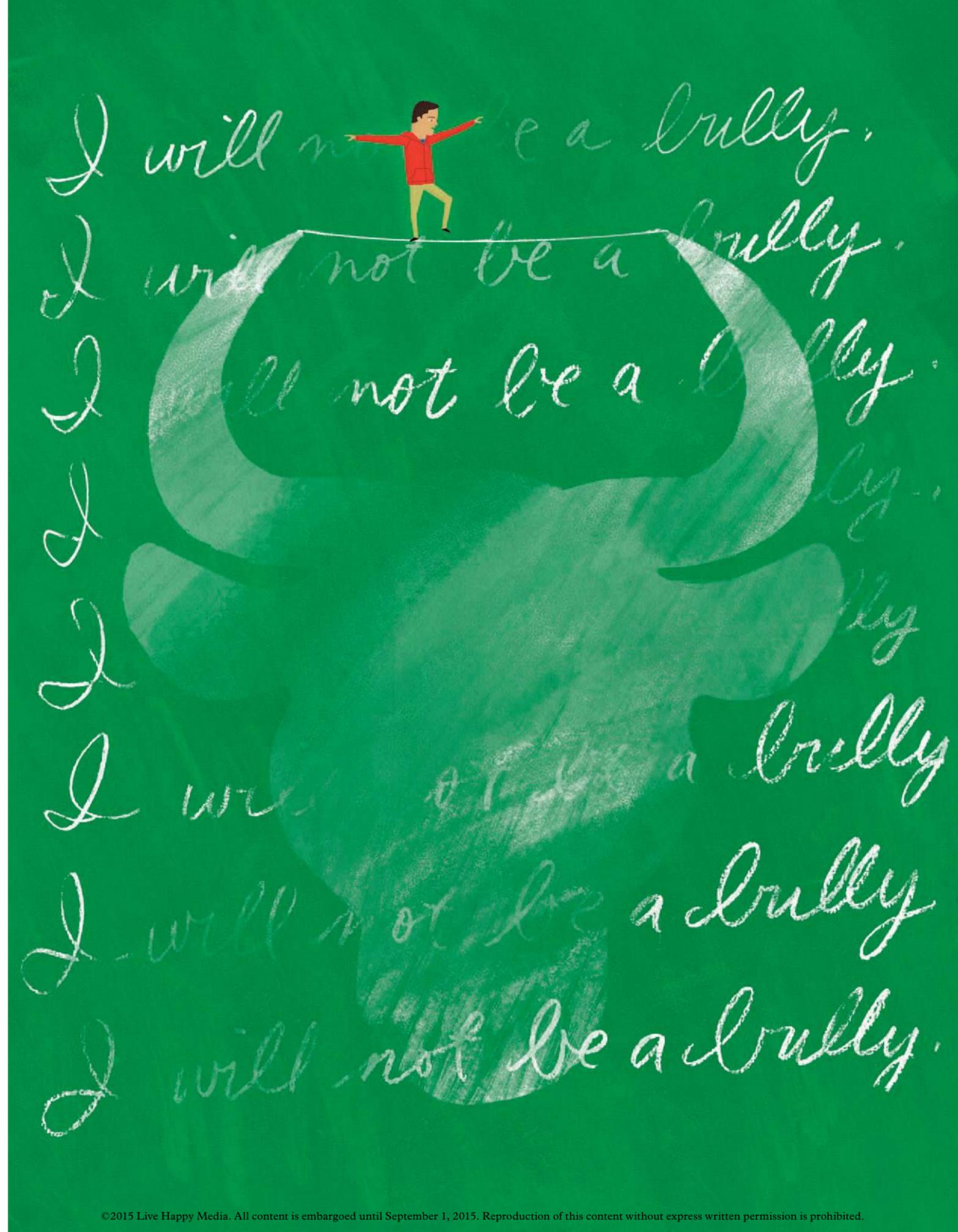
Deborah points out that the United States doesn't necessarily extend its high standards and accountability on reading and math scores to school climate. Her research found that when schools focus on a positive climate—for example, fostering relationships in the classroom—bullying rates go down. Another effective weapon in the arsenal is to build up students' emotional and social skills by teaching them compassion, empathy, conflict resolution and how to express their feelings without turning to aggressive behavior.

"This helps them identify both their own emotions and reaction to certain situations as well as put themselves in other people's shoes and understand how they may be feeling," she says.

Since 2010, there has been more attention to the issue of bullying. The U.S. Department of Education awarded \$38.8 million in grants to 11 states, among them Arizona, Kansas, Louisiana and South Carolina, to bolster bully and drug prevention programs, build character and maintain

"Bullying is really a form of aggression and violence. It may not always be physical, but psychological violence toward others. So we've seen that individuals with higher well-being are more pro-social and less violent, both physically and verbally."

—Alejandro Adler



proper well-being within the student body. While every state now has an anti-bullying law in place, Deborah says that no two laws are alike and a lot of the behavior is open to interpretation.

A 2013 report by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and Bureau of Justice Statistics indicates a recent dip in reported bullying in the U.S. among 12- to 18-year-olds by as much as 6 percent. While this is a significant drop and a positive sign, Deborah urges caution on drawing any conclusions until the 2015 findings are released. A continued decrease could indicate that recent bullying programs may be helping.

“It is hard to attribute the drop to any one thing,” she says. “Both attention and action toward bullying dramatically increased starting in

2010, and some of that drop may be attributed to the ongoing campaigns of many organizations and the federal government.”

Alejandro Adler, a Ph.D. candidate in positive psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, routinely works with governments and international organizations to help incorporate positive education techniques into their respective curricula. He says more countries are starting to adopt a new paradigm in the teaching of youth where well-being and character development are given as much attention as academic success.

“A sustainable solution is creating psychological and emotional assets in the community so that people are able to grow emotionally, psychologically and

socially and get rid of those deficiencies and insecurities,” he says. “Rather than punishing bullying, why not educate people so that they become aware of what is really behind bullying? It’s really a sign of weakness and insecurity, and by attacking the root cause we can sustainably get rid of bullying. We need to not only be educating for numeracy and literacy, but educating for a healthy social and emotional life.”

Throughout his research, Alejandro has found that bullies typically lack psychological and social support, whether that is in the home or in the community. Kids who aren’t in a nourishing environment start to develop insecurities and aggressive behaviors that lead to bullying. When students, including the bullies, are taught life skills, such as leadership, resilience,

empathy and mindfulness, the social environment improves. Individual insecurities will start to decrease and self-esteem and self-efficacy will increase.

“Bullying is really a form of aggression and violence. It may not always be physical, but psychological violence toward others,” he says. “So we’ve seen that individuals with higher well-being are more pro-social and less violent, both physically and verbally.”

Aside from building a pro-social environment, Alejandro says it is also important to take the “cool” factor away from bullies by changing the lens through which they are viewed. When bullies are aware of their sociological and psychological deficiencies, it almost becomes embarrassing for them to continue with their behavior.

By using this approach to the problem, Alejandro says, it can be very effective in diminishing bullying.

A New World View

Alejandro and his adviser, Martin Seligman, Ph.D., the director of the Penn Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania, are working at a policy level with schools in at least 10 countries, including Australia, India, Mexico, Peru and the Philippines, and are starting to see preliminary positive results.

In Australia, leading researcher in educational psychology and Australian Catholic University professor Herb Marsh is finding that bullying behavior diminishes when the whole school approach is used. In his presentation at the Fourth World Conference on Positive Psychology, held in June in Orlando, Florida, he stated that where most bully interventions go wrong is when students are classified into different groups, such as: those who are bullied, those who bully and those who are bystanders. What is more likely is that students can play different roles, switching between all three. He finds that there seems to be

“I encourage kids to take charge of their life and get to a point where they feel free from the bullying, and maybe at that point they will begin to forgive.”

—Aija Mayrock

a mutually reinforcing relationship as well as a reciprocal effect between the bullies and the victims as the two are “surprisingly similar to each other.”

“Consistently, interventions should reinforce students’ high self-concepts, as they are a likely force against being a bully and being a victim. In our intervention, there are no benefits to being a bully,” he says. “It’s important, for students, teachers and parents to reinforce that bullying behavior is unacceptable so the students cannot delude themselves into thinking that socially inappropriate behaviors result in enhanced social status, and positive self-perceptions, real or imagined.”

According to his findings, bullies and victims both share low self-esteem issues, suffer from depression and have trouble controlling anger—bullies externally and victims internally. Victims are more likely to reinforce bullying behavior, actively or passively, instead of empathizing with another victim. The largest group, students who are bystanders, are not as innocent as previously thought and are very important to the intervention for creating a positive school climate.

By not actively taking action against bullying behavior, bystanders are passively encouraging pro-bullying behavior. This group is critical to changing the environment from pro- to anti-bullying behavior.

Herb’s research team successfully implemented an intervention in its study of six schools in Australia. The intervention consisted of training teachers to treat bullying behavior appropriately, having trained consultants dedicated to bullying available at all times, and educating students and their parents.

In 2012, a study conducted on students ages 9 to 11 in Vancouver, British Columbia, found that when pro-social behavior was introduced into the classroom, such as performing random acts of kindness, the students who participated were actually more accepted by their peers and even saw a boost in their popularity. This led to a decrease in bullying and an increase in overall well-being. The study also suggests that having a pro-social school climate can have a ripple effect



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF AIJA MAYROCK



Jaylen Arnold loves getting out and talking to kids and has spoken to roughly 130,000 students about bullying. INSET: Jaylen with actress Anne Hathaway and on his Bullying No Way! national tour.

beyond the kids actually doing the good deeds, affecting the community at large.

While the U.S. has yet to work with educators in the field of positive psychology, Deborah does point out that during her time with the Department of Education, there were at least discussions with international leaders and researchers across borders to better understand the best approaches to bullying behavior. Alejandro adds that with larger governments, it is harder to implement a positive education curriculum due to the bureaucratic process.

“The larger the scale, the lower the impact,” he says. “There are more layers between the students and the people who design the program. The substance and quality gets diluted rather than training the teachers directly.”

Why Me?

Aija Mayrock always thought of herself as a normal, happy kid. She was creative and loved to write poems, draw pictures and act in plays. Her home life was good, and she says she had incredible and supportive parents. So when the bullying started, Aija was baffled as to why she was being singled out. By the time she made it to the third grade, she was being bullied regularly and continued to be throughout middle and high schools.

She became withdrawn and self-conscious about her appearance; she stopped doing the things that made her happy, and her creativity was stifled. After years of struggling to find the answer, Aija realized she was asking the wrong question. The bullying was happening whether she liked it or not. The question now was what was she going to do about it? The answer came to her in the form of helping others, and she

used the one thing that the bullies took from her: creativity.

“I decided I couldn’t be a bystander to my own bullying situation or the bullying that was happening to nearly 13 million kids a year,” Aija says. “I decided the best thing to do to help these kids was to create a book that I never had and always wanted, and so I decided to write this book and kind of give it as a gift for the next generation of kids that would be bullied.”

So at 16 years old she self-published the book *The Survival Guide to Bullying*, only to have it picked up a month later by children’s and educational publishing giant Scholastic. In it she covers topics like communication with parents and teachers, tips on how to conquer your fears, and details her own ups and downs with bullying. She has spoken to numerous schools about the issue of bullying and has been featured in anti-bully campaigns. Many kids know who she is and even credit her with giving them the courage to move beyond their own bullying experiences.

“Sometimes you have to become your own superhero, because sometimes there is no one there to save you,” she says. “I got to a point where the bullying no longer affected me, and I didn’t feel angry or sad or frustrated, I just felt great. I encourage kids to take charge of their life and get to a point where they feel free from the bullying, and maybe at that point they will begin to forgive.”

Sharing Hope

Unlike Aija, Jaylen Arnold knew exactly why he was singled out as a target for bullies. Jaylen suffers from Tourette’s syndrome, Asperger’s syndrome and severe obsessive compulsive disorder, all diagnosed before he was 8 years old. Jaylen says kids started to notice his vocal and motor neurological ticks, and he became an obvious target. With the added stress exacerbating his condition, the decision was made to take Jaylen out of school. This didn’t sit well with Jaylen, and he felt like he was leaving his friends

Tips to Fight Cyberbullying

Social media and the Internet are emerging playgrounds for bullies. With the increasing presence of young people using these platforms, it’s important to know how to handle the problems when they pop up. Aija Mayrock and Jaylen Arnold offer these simple tips:

AIJA: Being online and building a presence but not getting bullied is obviously a huge issue, and I dealt with it a lot. I can’t say that I totally handled it properly, but over time I developed tools to live online and avoid bullying. If you are really getting bullied on social media, and it’s really intense and really hurtful, again become your own superhero and take charge of your life. What I recommend is going dark by deleting all social media accounts and protecting yourself because you are your own No. 1 priority. If you don’t want to do that or the bullying is on and off, I recommend going almost dark, which means only logging off of the social. It doesn’t mean you’ll never be on social media ever again, it is just a temporary vacation. Know your privacy settings so you can make sure that when you create an account you can be safe and private.

JAYLEN: I know we are all addicted to our phones and our social media. If you are being harassed, just turn it off and walk away. Delete anything that invades your space online. It is so easy to turn it off and lock it. Don’t be on so many social media sites if you are constantly being harassed. I have social media, but I would never open myself up to be harassed online.



“A lot of people feel like they will never make it through because it is an intense period of life, but it’s only a temporary thing. If you just go to an adult, if you or someone you know is being bullied, then it can stop.”

—Jaylen Arnold

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF JAYLEN'S CHALLENGE FOUNDATION, INC.; TOP INSET: ©ANDRE BECKLES



'I Was Supposed to Help Others'

At a towering 6 feet 11 inches and 232 pounds, you wouldn't think NBA player Charlie Villanueva would have to worry about being bullied. However, aside from his tall stature, there is another unique characteristic about Charlie that made him an easy target for ridicule: He suffers from alopecia areata, a rare autoimmune skin disease that leaves its victims hairless. While alopecia is not dangerous or even harmful, it can make sufferers incredibly self-conscious and prey to those who single out people for their differences.

"I wasn't necessarily bullied physically. People misconstrue that bullying is only physical," Charlie says. "It was more a mental thing for me, especially on the basketball court. Fans would say negative remarks towards me on the way I looked. I mostly ignored it and I found my true passion...basketball. In between those lines, I heard those jokes, but at the same time it was where I felt most at peace. It honestly helped me to continue to work on my craft. I actually want to thank those guys who bullied me because it helped me get to where I am today."

With hard work and perseverance, "Charlie V." not only made it to the NBA, but he was the seventh pick in the 2005 NBA draft. He found answers on the court and let his

game answer anyone's doubts about his ability to play. Now a 10-year veteran in the league, he credits his success to his "never give up" attitude and never passes up an opportunity to encourage others to find their way despite their adversities.

"I was diagnosed at the age of 10, and it took me six years to accept my condition. I never understood why. I used to ask 'Why me?' No one in my family has it. It took me six years to figure out that it happened because I was supposed to help others."

Being from a single-parent home, Charlie's mom provided much of his inspiration to overcome and succeed, and he knows the importance of being there for someone, especially for a young person. He routinely blogs uplifting messages on believeincharlie.com and meets with kids with alopecia, telling them to "make sure you have alopecia and that alopecia doesn't have you."

"My happy place is helping others...especially the ones that have alopecia, obviously, because I am in their shoes every single day," he says. "Being able to change even one life, especially a kid's life, is unbelievable. It is a gratifying experience."

—Chris Libby

behind, as they were victims of bullying as well.

He finally realized that that if he and so many of his friends could all be bullied, how many other kids around the world were being bullied, too?

"Around that time of my life I realized that I wanted to do something," Jaylen says. "So I went to my mom and we created the Jaylens Challenge Foundation and went around to schools and started speaking and educating kids not only on Tourette's, but on bullying as well."

Jaylen, now 14, tours the country speaking to hundreds of thousands of kids about his life experiences and bullying. He has met countless celebrities and has even been on the *Ellen* show. But more importantly, he has been able to give kids hope that they, too, can survive bullying, and he has even changed some minds. He says bullies have reached out to him to say they have stopped harassing kids after listening to his story. Victims have even told him that they have stopped thinking about suicide, realizing there is hope for a more positive future.

"A lot of people feel like they will never make it through because it is an intense period of life, but it's only a temporary thing," he says. "If you just go to an adult, if you or someone you know is being bullied, then it can stop. All you have to do is speak up. I know it can be hard at times. I was terrified to tell my parents because I thought the bullying would get worse, but I tell kids never to fear that things will get worse."

Communication Is Key

There is only so much a school can do for your children once you drop them off. Parents must also be proactive in their kids' lives by looking for signs, such as changes in behavior, loss of appetite and loss of sleep, and must keep the lines of communication open. A well-informed, confident and resilient

Parents must also be proactive in their kids' lives by looking for signs, such as changes in behavior, loss of appetite and loss of sleep, and must keep the lines of communication open.

child is going to be better equipped to handle a stressful and negative situation. The same goes if you suspect your child may be a bully. Teaching our kids to be less aggressive and more mindful and compassionate can help broaden a young mind to think more inclusively and less hurtfully.

"One of the most preventive steps that parents can take is to start those lines of communication early before something happens," Deborah says. "Establishing that parents are going to listen, not judge their kids and have regular conversations."

She points out the difficulty in trying to pry information out of an adolescent, but communicating consistently makes it easier when issues arise.

Communication is something Aija really stresses when she talks to kids and parents. She frequently hears from parents that they had no idea their kid was being bullied, and she has dedicated a whole chapter in her book about the importance of having one person to confide in.

"I really regret not knowing how to talk to my parents about what was going on, and I really encourage kids to find that place where they are comfortable enough to approach their parents or loved ones or teachers," she says. "You just don't have to go through the bullying alone. It's not healthy, and

to have someone looking out for you and having your best interests at heart will make the complete difference. I didn't communicate properly and I wish I had."

She hopes her book will help spur the conversation that it is OK to talk about it and there is no stigma attached to being bullied.

Parents can help by reinforcing good behavior at home. Mark Dombeck, Ph.D., a cognitive behavioral therapist in Oakland, California, says that any parenting behavior that teaches polite, respectful and compassionate social behavior is going to work against bullying. Conversely, when parents teach their children to be ultra-competitive, aggressive and overly status-conscious then they are paving the way for a potential bully.

"Parents can teach their kids to be more compassionate and thoughtful, correcting them when they take things for granted," he says. "Teaching your kid to say please and thank you, at one level is a simple social lubrication behavior, but is also a social skill. But where it goes, what it points at is the idea that we need to respect the other person because of the Golden Rule." 

PHOTOGRAPHS: ©RONALD MARTINEZ/GETTY IMAGES SPORT; INSET: COURTESY OF CHARLIE VILLANUEVA