

the shape of a girl

By Joan MacLeod

Recommended for
grade 7 and up

Synopsis

Braidie is a normal 15-year old girl. Growing up she liked to play and pretend, and she loved horses. Her group of friends were inseparable. Every day was fun and filled with laughter, until the day Adrienne decided it was “penalty day.” At first the penalty was supposed to rotate from girl to girl, but eventually it stuck and Sofie was the only one who got punished.

As Braidie and her friends grow older the punishments they doled out become more and more cruel. After reading about a girl who is killed by her bullying peers, Braidie realizes that she could easily have been in that situation too—not the victim but the victimizer. But after years of silence Braidie finds it impossible to say or do anything to stop the torment—until Adrienne goes too far. Then Braidie must decide if she can live with herself if she says nothing and how she can live with her friends if she does speak up.

Taking us back and forth through her life, Braidie shows us when things started to go wrong, when her peer group decided that it was time to punish each other, and when that punishment turned to violence.

Loosely based on the real-life case of the Canadian girl, Reena Virk, who was murdered by her peers, *The Shape of a Girl* tackles the complex issue of teen violence and the responsibility we all share in it; a good reminder that the actions of one person can make all the difference in a life.

Resource List

For Teens

Speak

Laurie Hale Anderson

The Chocolate War

Robert Cormier

Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes

Chris Crutcher

On the Fringe

Donald Gallo

Hole in My Life

Jack Gantos

Monster

Walter Dean Myers

Safe Teen: Powerful Alternatives to Violence

Anita Roberts

★ Spotlight

Ophelia Speaks: Adolescent Girls Write About Their Search for Self

Sara Shandler

Responding to the national bestseller *Reviving Ophelia*, sixteen-year-old Sara Shandler wanted her voice and the voices of other teenage girls to be heard.

Selected from over eight hundred contributions, this book provides insight into the hearts and minds of teenage girls of various races, religions, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

For Parents and Educators

The Bully, the Bullied, and the Bystanders: From Preschool to High School, How Parents and Teachers Can Help Break the Cycle of Violence

Barbara Coloroso

And Words Can Hurt Forever: How to Protect Adolescents from Bullying, Harassment, and Emotional Violence

James Garbarino and Ellen Delara

A Tribe Apart: A Journey into the Heart of American Adolescence

Patricia Hersch

Odd Girl Out

Rachel Simmons

Meeting at the Crossroads: Women's Psychology and Girls' Development

Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan

★ Spotlight

Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls

Mary Bray Pipher

Through powerful narrative, teenage girls share their struggle with eating disorders, depression, and the underlying reasons driving too many girls to self-hatred, destructive behavior, and attempted suicide.

Booklist prepared by Sally Porter, King County Library System

BULLYING BY ANY OTHER NAME IS STILL BULLYING

It seems impossible to refute the fact that bullying among girls is an ever-present, insidious problem in our culture, one that acts as a gauge of the general attitude towards violence in our society. Things that are tolerated or ignored in male/male or even male/female relationships seem untenable when occurring between girls. Yet, any woman who grew up around other girls, any girl who goes to any school in America, and any man or boy who cares to look honestly at the females in his life can see and hear bullying or its effects. The term "bullying" may not fit into your idea of the interactions of girls; Joan MacLeod points out to us in *The Shape of a Girl* that girls are seen as sweet and kind, never aggressive or cruel. However, her play and the real-life incident that inspired it demonstrate that girls can be very cruel indeed.



This polarity of behavior in girls often leads to confusion and denial among adults. Usually the types of aggression that girls engage in aren't physical and, therefore, are harder to both observe and prove. Rachel Simmons, in her informative book *Odd Girl Out*, tells us about the three alternative types of aggression most commonly used among girls:

Relational—acts that harm others through damage (or the threat of damage) to relationships or feelings of acceptance, friendship, or group inclusion. For example: ignoring, excluding, negative body language, and sabotaging are all acts of relational aggression.

Indirect—allows the perpetrator to avoid confronting her target by using covert behavior to make it seem as though there has been no intent to hurt at all, i.e. starting rumors.

Social—intended to damage self-esteem or social status within a group.

As Simmons also points out, a girl's relationships are the keys to her existence; therefore the above types of aggression, those that threaten relationships, are the most frightening and damaging to a girl. Because girls are expected to have "perfect relationships" and always act nice and sweet, any minor conflict can "call an entire relationship into question," according to Simmons. It is this very supremacy of relationships that makes the alternative aggressions so effective.

How can you prove a girl is being bullied by what appears to be her group of friends, when they do nothing more than "accidentally" bump into her, roll their eyes at her, or pass notes to each other that may or may not even be about her, especially if the victim herself doesn't say anything? On the outside it would appear that nothing is being done to the girl and there should be no cause for alarm. When asked about their thoughts and experiences with bullying, a group of Seattle-area high school girls agreed that enduring that kind of aggression is just a part of life. Many of them thought it necessary in order to gain the social skills and thick skin needed in the "real world."

But if this aggression is merely a part of life, a part of growing up, then should we be alarmed and try to stop it, or should we allow our girls to be the victors in these situations? The very fact that more and more fatal violence can be attributed to kids trying to get revenge against a bully makes it an issue worth addressing. According to the U.S. Secret Service's Threat Assessment Center October 2000 report on school safety, "more than two-thirds of incidents [of school shootings] are motivated by revenge against bullies." Of course, not every, not even most, incidents of bullying result in such drastic violent measures, but they can cause the kind of psychological trauma that propels a child into shooting at his/her peers, which seems irrefutable proof that something needs to be done. It's time for society to stop telling itself, and our children, that it's okay, that it's a part of life, to be bullied.

WHOSE RESPONSIBILITY IS IT ANYWAY?

We've addressed bullying and some different kinds of aggression like the relational aggression demonstrated in *The Shape of a Girl*, but now we should touch on another issue raised in the play—the ethical responsibility of those involved in situations like this. Before we can address that, however, we must decide who exactly is involved. Obviously, the perpetrator and victim, and the bystanders; but then we also have the parents and teachers of these children—those adults who see the kids on a daily basis. Additionally, society as a whole must take its share of the responsibility to end violence, of every kind, among our youth.

When talking about aggression between kids and whose responsibility it is, one of the more difficult places to look, yet one of the most populated areas, is that of bystander. As Braidie finally realizes in the play, the act of watching someone hurt someone else is an endorsement and complicit participation in that act. All children must be made to believe that it is not okay, ever, to hurt someone else, and if they see it happening they should do something about it. Doing something does not necessarily mean stepping in at that moment; that can often be too frightening or unsafe. But it can mean talking to the bullies individually later on, or telling an adult.

The perpetrator's responsibility is clear. They are the ones inflicting the pain on someone else. The reasons for someone using aggression on others are varied: often it is seen as a means of expression, manipulation, or retaliation. And often the child is exposed to that behavior at home, and therefore thinks it is normal and acceptable. If somehow we gave these youths the sense that cruelty is wrong, aggression is weak, and violence is bad, then perhaps the inclination to dominate or humiliate would be alleviated. So much of the power lies with the perpetrator—they must be made to feel that the exploitation of that power is unnecessary.

What, then, can the victim do? Being meek, shy, or afraid does not mean you are asking for others to pick on you. Being different or "strange" is not an invitation for ridicule or cruelty. It is never okay to blame the victim. That being said, victims should try to protect themselves while not turning themselves into perpetrators. Standing up to a bully can be very effective, but is not always wise. If the victim cannot, or should not, confront the bully directly, he or she should seek help from a trusted adult.



Everyone involved, bully to bystander, has a share in the responsibility when someone is being picked on. Photo by Chris Bennion.

Of course this is only possible if the child feels that she'll be listened to or taken seriously by the adult. What is equally important is that the child needs to feel that telling the adult won't do more harm than good. Parents should be aware of their children's behavior. If the child's grades or attendance drop or they start becoming more introverted, these are some warning signs that they may be experiencing bullying. Parents should try to make their child feel that they aren't alone, that they can depend on their parents for love and protection. If the parent has a child who is a bully, it is that parent's responsibility to instill in that child the belief that it is stronger to be kind than cruel. Parents should also support the anti-bullying efforts of their child's school.

Educators often spend more time with a child than the child's own parents. This, by default, places a huge amount of responsibility on the shoulders of teachers and schools, perhaps unfairly. If a child is afraid for her physical safety, learning algebra seems inconsequential; if a child is so demeaned by her peers that getting out of bed each day is a triumph, then diagramming a sentence is meaningless. So, to create a safe zone at school is of utmost importance. Schools should not tolerate aggression in any form, and educators should be clear and consistent in the positive reinforcement of good behavior.

This reinforcement also needs to be carried one step further. Society as a whole has a duty to stop glamorizing violence, aggression, and cruelty. We all must hold ourselves, and others, accountable for actions taken. How we treat others affects them, just as how others treat us affects us. There is something to that old saying, "do unto others as you would have them do unto you," and we should stand for nothing less.

How Can I Talk to My Students About Harassment & Bullying?

With the passage of the Bullying Bill, teachers are legally and ethically mandated to do whatever is necessary to stop harassment against all students. What can you do?

One easy tool is called **STEM**, which stands for **S**top, **T**each, **E**mploy/**E**nforce and **M**onitor.

Stop:

- *Cut that out.*
- *That is an unacceptable remark.*
- *We do not treat people like that here at (name of school).*
- *That behavior is out of line.*

Teach:

- *Your remark was a stereotype. Stereotypes are a type of lie that hurts people's feelings.*
- *That was a put down.*
- *What you are doing is bullying. It is against school rules.*
- *You may not mean to hurt someone but that gesture is offensive.*

Employ:

- Let the targeted student talk openly and tell their side of the story.
- Let him or her know that you are on their side.
- Discuss some ways he or she can protect him or herself in the future.

Enforce:

- Investigate, discipline and educate the harasser.
- Encourage the targeted student to report retribution to staff.
- Arrange for staff to be present wherever harassment has been occurring.

Monitor:

- Check in with the targeted student.
- Check in with the harasser.
- Keep a record.
- Continue to educate yourself, your co-workers and your students on bullying and bias-based harassment.

When students are safe, teachers can teach and students can learn.

For more information on resources to help reduce violence in your school, call KCSARC's Education Department at (425) 226-5062, or KCSARC's 24-hour Sexual Assault Resource Line at **1-800-825-7273** is available for information, referrals, or immediate assistance.



ACTIVITIES

ACTIVITY:

Continuum of Violence from www.discoveryschool.com

Have your students rank the behaviors listed below from the least to the most violent. This demonstrates the "Continuum of Violence," showing how it can begin with a simple non-violent act that can quickly build to very violent outcomes. Now, as a class, compare lists and discuss ways the students are affected by each behavior on a daily basis.

- Pushing or slapping
- Name-calling
- Teasing
- Shooting someone with a gun
- Eye-rolling
- Stabbing

- Taunting by consistently challenging someone
- Challenging someone by threatening them with a gun
- Putting rude stickers on someone's back
- Hitting with an object, like a book or backpack
- Practical jokes that cause a person harm
- Punching

EALRS: Social Studies—Civics 4.1, 4.2

ACTIVITY:

The Student Survey on Bullying and Violence from www.Discoveryschool.com.

Ask your class to write down their answers to the following questions. After everyone is done, tally the results and discuss them with the class.

1. Have you ever seen bullying at your school?

- Never
- Sometimes (1 or 2 times per month)
- Often (1 or 2 times per week)
- Every day

2. What do you do when you see someone being bullied at school?

- I have never seen bullying at school
- Ignore it. It's none of my business
- Nothing—just watch
- Tried to stop the bully or help the victims
- Get help from adults or other students

3. What do adults do when they see bullying at school?

- Nothing, they ignore it
- Stop it and tell observers to leave
- Stop it and help to solve the problem
- Other:

4. What can adults do to help stop bullying at school?

- Supervise the school better
- Start student patrol programs
- Punish bullies by making rules against bullying
- Talk about bully prevention in class
- Help students work together and make friends

5. What can you or your friends do to stop the bullying?

- Don't join in the taunting, teasing, or bullying
- Stay away from fights and violence
- Talk to adults about what you see and what you know
- Get help if you're scared or are angry
- Don't become friends with bullies
- Other suggestions:

6. Are you now or have you ever been bullied at school?

- Never
- Sometimes (1 or 2 times per month)
- Often (1 or 2 times per week)
- Every day

EALRS: Communication 2.1, 2.5, 3.1, 3.2