Dear Reader,

If you’ve ever been bullied, or know someone who has, you have a good idea how awful it feels. You probably also know that bullies pick on others for all sorts of reasons. Maybe they don’t like the way the person dresses, or they think someone is too timid. Maybe they don’t like the person’s race, or religion, or sexual orientation. Anyone can be a target; in fact, bullies often pick on kids who did nothing to provoke them.

Some bullies attack their targets physically, by tripping or punching or hitting. Others say mean things or spread rumors about their victims, sometimes on the Internet. A lot of times, parents and teachers don’t see the bullying so they may not understand how bad it can get. Being bullied over and over can put a person in a state of constant fear. Psychologists who study bullying say that people who have been abused may suffer from low self-esteem, depression, or anxiety. They may even think about suicide.

The people you’re about to meet were bullied by other kids at school. In some cases, the kids were teased so badly they didn’t want to go to school anymore. Some were not direct targets but saw a friend being bullied. Some were even bullies themselves.

It’s hard to know how to handle bullies, but most experts agree that it’s best to tell an adult—a teacher, a guidance counselor, or a parent. Some kids are afraid of being called snitches and worry that the bullies will retaliate. But NOT telling someone and NOT stopping the bully can be dangerous.

Along with the stories you’re about to read, you’ll hear from our expert, Dr. Dorothy. Her full name is Dorothy Espelage and she’s a professor of educational psychology at the University of Illinois. She specializes in adolescent bullying. We asked her to read the stories and help you to think about them.

Keep in mind that for many people in this book—even the adults—it took courage to tell their stories. They had a hard time reliving their experiences. But they wanted to speak up—to let you know that bullying is not new and that it can happen to anyone. It’s important to remember that if you are bullied, you’re not alone. And it’s not your fault.
Andrew

In seventh grade a group of five boys bullied me. No one else but me. The bullies made my whole school year a nightmare.

They’d surround me in the hall, get in my face, and make loud screeching noises. They’d chase me after school. They even found out my address and said they were going to come to my house, though they never did.

At first I wasn’t dealing with it well. I got upset easily, and these kids took advantage of that. I’d scream and threaten them. But they knew I really wasn’t going to do anything to them. The more I yelled, the more they enjoyed bullying me. One kid even said he liked it so much he wasn’t going to stop.

After a while I talked to my parents about it. They said that I should try to wait it out.

The teachers tried to help. We talked about when it’s a good time to get mad and when it’s time to let it go. They suggested that I leave class before everyone else so I wouldn’t have to be in the hall with the bullies. They also said when the bullies bothered me during class, I should take a lap around the hallway to cool off. The teachers even talked to the bullies. That helped for a little while, but then they went back to bullying me again.

My mom tried to show that some of the bullies’ behavior wasn’t worth getting upset about. So when I complained about something, we’d try to decide if it was annoying behavior or full-fledged bullying. If a kid made squawking noises at me, it was just annoying. If someone ripped the homework assignment out of my binder, it was definitely bullying.

At least this helped me from getting upset all the time.

Eighth grade was definitely better. I didn’t have problems with bullies. Then in ninth grade, where I am now, things got even better. I’m at a specialized school for math, science, and engineering, and I’ve found other kids like me.

I’m glad I talked to my parents even though the bullying didn’t stop. They made me feel I wasn’t alone.

Dr. Dorothy says: Hard as it may be, try to ignore the bullies and keep them from having power over you.
"If you choose not to hang out with someone, don’t be mean about it."

Katie

Middle school is where most of the girl bullying happens. That’s when cliques start forming, and girls exclude other girls because of their looks. When I was thirteen, I was in a clique with three other girls. One day they saw me talking to a boy they didn’t like. They ditched me. They went online and IMed each other about me. They went on My Space and wrote sarcastic things. They called me a whore and made up a code name for me by reversing the initials of my first and last name. They wanted me to know it was me they were writing about.

Then when I was sixteen, I was the mean girl. I’d been friends with Celeste since kindergarten. But I started hanging out with other girls, and I didn’t want to be friends with her anymore. She tried too hard to look cool and ended up looking goofy. She was clingy and always telling me she wanted to be like me. She even bought the same clothes as me. It was embarrassing, and it was a burden to be her friend.

So one day I just stopped talking to her. She called my house every day for a month. I had my brother answer the phone and make up excuses for why I couldn’t come to the phone. She’d scream at him and say he was lying. When she tried to confront me in school, I avoided her. I knew I shouldn’t be so mean, but I’d made such a big deal about not hanging out with her anymore that I couldn’t apologize. So I kept ignoring her until finally she gave up.

I think what I did was mean. I feel bad about it now. If I had it to do again, I’d probably let the friendship drift apart slowly rather than cut my friend off all at once.

Dr. Dorothy says: Remember there are many different kinds of friendships. Some friends you shop with, others you study with, and still others you talk to about everything. If a friendship isn’t working out, you can still be friendly with someone and not cut her out of your life entirely.
Bradley was the bully in my class. He stayed back a grade, and he was bigger than most of the boys our age. He called people mean names. He tripped people in the hallways and said things like, “I’ll run over you” and “I’ll kick you in the nuts.”

In math class Bradley made spitballs and threw them around the room. The teacher told him to calm down and take a break. Sometimes she called the principal, and he got put in detention. I thought he should have been expelled.

One time I stepped on Bradley’s coat by mistake, and I tried to apologize. He got so mad, he pushed me. He wouldn’t accept my apology.

My teachers say that bullying should be stopped. They encourage kids to tell an adult if someone is bullying them. But sometimes when kids get bullied they don’t want to tell the teachers because they don’t want to be called a snitch. I told Bradley to go away and to stop being a bully. If that didn’t work, I said I’d tell the teacher. I did tell her because I wasn’t afraid of being called a snitch.

I got so tired of being bullied that one day I stood up to Bradley. I was a little scared, but I told him, “You’ll have more friends if you’re friendlier to people.” He thought about it and he said, “Okay.”

Now he has a new personality! He tells about funny things that happened, like the time his brother put lots of disks into his Xbox and they all came shooting out. Maybe Bradley was tired of not having friends. We hang out together at recess and after school. Now he’s nice and he’s funny. And he’s my friend.

Donovan

Dr. Dorothy says: Donovan approached the bully in a positive way. He told Bradley that if he were friendlier, he would have friends. It might have been risky, but in Donovan’s case it worked! Sometimes bullies are looking for a way to be liked.
Bullies pick on me all the time. I’m the oddball in class. I fidget with things on my desk, and I make loud tapping sounds with my feet. When I developed seizures, my fidgeting got worse. The bullies hit me and spit on me and called me “seizure boy” and “mental.”

I used to make up illnesses so I wouldn’t have to go to school. My parents were worried about me so they went to the principal, who said if the teachers saw any bullying, they wouldn’t tolerate it. But the teachers didn’t see it, and so nothing changed.

It’s hard being different. I don’t react to things the way other kids do. And I don’t socialize. I like to be by myself. I like to stay home, hang out with my brothers and my sister, and play video games. And I love to read. My favorite books are mangas, the Japanese comics that I get at the library. My mom says I’m not your average thirteen-year-old because I’m not interested in looking cool and I don’t care about stuff like cell phones. My parents got me a phone but I hardly ever use it. My mom thinks if I find other kids like me, I’ll be happier. She wants me to join the student council.

I’m not an aggressive kid but sometimes I fight back. I only do it to defend myself. I got into three fights last year. But the teachers are not hard on me ‘cause they know I don’t like to fight. I thought the bullying would end by now and it hasn’t. Some people tell me it only gets worse in the higher grades.

Even though I think bullying is wrong, I don’t agree that suspension is the best way to handle it. I’m not one for punishment. I think rewards work better. I would make bullies jealous by giving out rewards for being good.

This year is going great for me. I was promoted to the honors class, and I met kids who like to do the things I do.

Dr. Dorothy says: Bullies often pick on kids who are different in some way. If this happens to you, try to remember: IT’S NOT YOUR FAULT. THE BULLIES ARE WRONG.
Mariah

There’s physical bullying, and there’s emotional bullying. When I was in fifth grade, my family moved here. I had a hard time making new friends. Kids started bullying me. They called me names and made fun of my clothes. And they said I was fat. I didn’t talk to anybody. I hated school so much I didn’t want to go. Finally I went to see the guidance counselor. He suggested I try to find kids I had things in common with, but he didn’t really help because I didn’t know how to make new friends.

Then I got involved in sports. I played soccer and softball and volleyball, and I was on the cheerleading squad. I started hanging out with different kids, and I made lots of friends. My mom was proud of me. She always said if I joined clubs I’d make new friends. She was right, and I didn’t have any more bullying problems.

Last year, when I was in sixth grade, our class watched a video about a boy who was bullied because of his disabilities. A girl at his school went on the Internet and told everyone she wanted to have a relationship with him. Once she put it out there, she couldn’t take it back. When the boy found out it was just a joke, he wrote on the Web, “People like you make me want to kill myself.” And then he did; he hanged himself.

After we saw the video, a bunch of us decided to form an anti-bullying committee. We read books about bullying. We wrote sketches and acted them out in front of the fifth graders. In one sketch, a kid stands at his locker surrounded by a bunch of bullies. There’s a bystander watching, and she decides to tell an adult.

We also wrote and performed a rap song that goes like this:

**Bullying’s bad, it makes people sad.**
Bullying can hurt, it makes you feel like dirt.
You can find it in school and that’s not cool.
So listen to us sing and do the right thing.

Our school was proud of us, and the fifth graders really liked our presentation. I think we helped a lot of kids because they got to see what it’s like to be bullied and what they could do about it.

Dr. Dorothy says: Sometimes, if kids wait for grownups to intervene, things may never change. That’s why it’s important for kids themselves to take action—to let bullies and grownups know bullying is NOT OKAY. The anti-bullying committee did a great job of this.

*Older kids can help protect younger kids and teach them to do the right thing. If everyone in a school works together, there will be fewer bullying problems because the bullies won’t feel so powerful.*
I’m on the same anti-bullying committee as Mariah. I like the projects we did—putting on skits about bullying and performing a rap song about it. I used to get picked on for stupid stuff. If I wore a sweatshirt with a hood, kids would make fun of me. One kid bothered me all the time. I was the butt of every joke. Sometimes the joke would snowball and other kids would join in. They thought they were being funny, but it was hurtful. The more I was bullied, the less confident I felt and the lower my self-esteem was.

Kids are sneaky when it comes to bullying. They don’t want to get caught, so they make sure to do it when there are no teachers around. Sometimes they use the Internet or text messaging. They’ll send a text from an unknown number that might say something like, “If you don’t stop hanging around with this kid, I’ll hurt you.”

Some kids who are bullied go to the guidance counselor or take part in peer mediation. That’s where an eighth-grader is assigned to meet with the bully and the kid being bullied to talk about the situation. They ask the bully why he was picking on the other kid and try to work out a solution. When I was bullied, I never told anyone about it. I just kept it to myself and shrugged it off as best I could. I would have been better off telling someone what was happening. It’s too hard to handle on your own.

I like knowing that I’m helping the fifth-graders, teaching them about bullying and showing them the effect it can have on someone. They’re new to middle school and they don’t know how to handle bullies. Our motto is “do the right thing.” It means don’t be a bully, but it also means if you see someone being bullied, tell an adult. I think it’s a good motto to stick by.

Dr. Dorothy says: Bullies can eat away at your confidence. Pretty soon you feel as if YOU are the one who has done something wrong instead of the bullies! Not true!

Talking to someone can help with these feelings. Look for a grownup whom you like and trust. If that person doesn’t help, talk to someone else.

Kid's are sneaky about bullying.
I didn't do anything to stop the bullying, but I should have.

I was never susceptible to bullies. I didn't care what other people thought about me. I had a great babysitter who told me I could do anything I wanted to and that I shouldn't give in to things that blocked my way.

But my friend Sam was different. He used to get teased a lot, and it bothered him. In seventh grade we went on a school trip. Sam and I stayed in a room with two other kids, Adam and Kyle. One night we stayed up late watching a TV show on exorcisms. It showed rituals where people do all kinds of weird stuff to drive the devil out of a person.

Adam and Kyle saw how scared Sam was getting, so they decided to scare him even more. They turned out the lights and pretended to be possessed. They said they were the devil, and they were going to get him. They made eerie noises and acted crazy. Sam kept telling them to stop, but they wouldn't. I kinda laughed along with the teasing and wasn't sensitive to how Sam was feeling. Finally he ran out of the room and called his parents.

After the trip the principal punished Adam and Kyle, but he said that because I felt bad about not doing anything, that was punishment enough. But if I were the principal, I would have given me detention or a punishment of some sort. I should have told those kids to stop bullying Sam or at least told Sam that they were being jerks and he shouldn’t stand for it.

Sam said he wasn't angry with me for not doing anything, but I still feel bad about it. On the other hand, I also think that kids need to toughen up and put bullies in their place. Bullies are as successful as you let them be. At some point you have to choose between stepping around things and facing things head on.

Dr. Dorothy says: Looking back, Doug wishes he'd acted differently when his friend was bullied. He shouldn't be too hard on himself, he didn't quite understand just how upset his friend was. But if it's possible, kids shouldn't just stand by when someone is being bullied. If the bullying can't be stopped or if the situation is scary, get a grownup.