



ELIZABETH K. ENGLANDER

**25 MYTHS ABOUT
BULLYING AND
CYBERBULLYING**

WILEY Blackwell

25 Myths About Bullying and Cyberbullying

25 Myths About Bullying and Cyberbullying

Elizabeth K. Englander

WILEY Blackwell

This edition first published 2020
© 2020 John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, except as permitted by law. Advice on how to obtain permission to reuse material from this title is available at <http://www.wiley.com/go/permissions>.

The right of Elizabeth K. Englander to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with law.

Registered Office

John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 111 River Street, Hoboken, NJ 07030, USA

Editorial Office

111 River Street, Hoboken, NJ 07030, USA

For details of our global editorial offices, customer services, and more information about Wiley products visit us at www.wiley.com.

Wiley also publishes its books in a variety of electronic formats and by print-on-demand. Some content that appears in standard print versions of this book may not be available in other formats.

Limit of Liability/Disclaimer of Warranty

While the publisher and authors have used their best efforts in preparing this work, they make no representations or warranties with respect to the accuracy or completeness of the contents of this work and specifically disclaim all warranties, including without limitation any implied warranties of merchantability or fitness for a particular purpose. No warranty may be created or extended by sales representatives, written sales materials or promotional statements for this work. The fact that an organization, website, or product is referred to in this work as a citation and/or potential source of further information does not mean that the publisher and authors endorse the information or services the organization, website, or product may provide or recommendations it may make. This work is sold with the understanding that the publisher is not engaged in rendering professional services. The advice and strategies contained herein may not be suitable for your situation. You should consult with a specialist where appropriate. Further, readers should be aware that websites listed in this work may have changed or disappeared between when this work was written and when it is read. Neither the publisher nor authors shall be liable for any loss of profit or any other commercial damages, including but not limited to special, incidental, consequential, or other damages.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Englander, Elizabeth Kandel, author.

Title: 25 myths about bullying and cyberbullying / Elizabeth K. Englander.

Other titles: Twenty-five myths about bullying and cyberbullying

Description: Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2020. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019052193 (print) | LCCN 2019052194 (ebook) | ISBN 9781118736500 (paperback) | ISBN 9781118736708 (adobe pdf) | ISBN 9781118736562 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Bullying. | Cyberbullying.

Classification: LCC BF637.B85 E54 2020 (print) | LCC BF637.B85 (ebook) | DDC 302.34/3–dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019052193>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019052194>

Cover Design: Wiley

Cover Image: © Erin Lester/Getty Images

Set in 11.5/14pt STIXTwoText by SPi Global, Pondicherry, India

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

About the Author	vii
Preface	ix
Chapter 1	Why Talk About Myths Instead of Facts? 1
Chapter 2	Bullying is usually about a big kid beating up a smaller kid. 11
Chapter 3	Bullying causes suicide and homicide. 21
Chapter 4	Bullying is a normal part of childhood. 31
Chapter 5	Kids who are small and physically weak are targeted for bullying. 41
Chapter 6	The most important thing is what they did to you. 51
Chapter 7	Cyberbullying is just like bullying, only on the computer. 57
Chapter 8	Bullying and cyberbullying are separate problems. 63
Chapter 9	Most adults cannot help kids with computer or Internet issues, since kids typically know more than they do. 69

Chapter 10	Bullying and cyberbullying stop after high school.	75
Chapter 11	Cyberbullying is usually anonymous.	81
Chapter 12	Cyberbullying is the most emotionally devastating form of bullying.	87
Chapter 13	Bullies have emotional problems.	95
Chapter 14	All children all equally vulnerable to bullying.	99
Chapter 15	Bullies are raised in dysfunctional families by parents who are bullies themselves.	105
Chapter 16	Revenge is an effective way to handle bullies.	111
Chapter 17	Bullies don't understand how much they're hurting the target.	117
Chapter 18	Schools don't do anything about bullying.	123
Chapter 19	Schools can't take any action in cyberbullying cases.	129
Chapter 20	Schools could absolutely stop bullying if they wanted to.	135
Chapter 21	When kids shake hands and make up, the bullying stops.	141
Chapter 22	There's no point in forcing kids to be nicer to each other, because they'll just be mean again when the adults aren't there.	145
Chapter 23	If only kids would report to adults, the problem would be solved.	151
Chapter 24	The best way to stop bullying is for bystanders to confront bullies and stop bullying episodes.	155
Chapter 25	The best way to deal with cyberbullying is to keep kids off their phones and computers.	159
Chapter 26	Just ignore them, and they'll leave you alone. That's the best strategy for dealing with bullies.	163
Conclusion		171
Index		177

About the Author

Dr. Elizabeth K. Englander is the founder and executive director of the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center (*MARC*) at Bridgewater State University, delivering programs, resources, and research to more than 400 schools every year nationwide. As a researcher and a professor of psychology for 25 years, she is a nationally recognized expert in the areas of bullying and cyberbullying, childhood causes of aggression and abuse, and children's use of social media and technology. She was named Most Valuable Educator of 2013 by the Boston Red Sox because of her work in technological aggression and how it interacts with peer abusiveness in general. In 2018, she was appointed to the Massachusetts Governor's Juvenile Justice Advisory Council. Dr. Englander is also the chair of the Cyberbullying Workgroup for the Institute of Child Development and Digital Media. Each year, Dr. Englander trains and supervises graduate and undergraduate students and collaborates with multiple agencies around the state of Massachusetts and across the nation.

Preface

Have you ever heard of the Momo Challenge?

If you're lucky enough to have missed it, the *Momo Challenge* was a widely hyped Internet panic. The idea was that an intensely scary character could, unprovoked, pop up on the screen while any child was using any website and urge that user to hurt themselves. The chatter was frightening, but once you stepped back, the assumptions were a little bizarre: sure, maybe the scary character could pop up on any website; but could it really be true that even a healthy, well-adjusted child could take the "challenge" and end up committing suicide?

Despite some media reports that purported to demonstrate the allegedly incredible power of this challenge through real-life examples, it was never verified. A few cases that initially depicted Momo Challenge suicides seemed to have other, more plausible explanations; and in any case, they were far from widespread. Many reports came from social media instead of mainstream news media. The Momo Challenge may have been a hoax, or it may have been true but far less scary or widespread than it was depicted as being.

But the damage that Internet scares can do was already done. The Momo Challenge – true or false – became yet another incident in modern life seemingly designed to scare parents out of their wits.

For all our modern conveniences, it's not an easy time to be a parent. We have age-old problems on a new scale, like bullying. We also have entirely new problems for which we have no history to use as a guide, like cyberbullying (and Internet scares). Parents today aren't indifferent or uncaring; yet when it comes to our efforts to reduce bullying and cyberbullying, it sometimes feels like a case of two steps forward, one step back. We've made some progress in reducing bullying and cyberbullying, but in doing so we've also created other problems. At times, you may feel like you're so focused on protecting your children that they're not able to have a "normal" childhood. Technological innovations have also introduced new complications into the mix – most notably, digital communications and the use of social media. Children today grow up very differently from past generations.

But while these are challenging times, human beings have a pretty good track record when it comes to addressing stubborn problems. Consider: in the last few decades, we've successfully reduced teenage pregnancy, violent crime, illiteracy, school drop-outs, and many other trials in the developed world. Like these, aggression and bullying are stubborn problems; but don't mistake this statement for fatalism. We can improve these troubles as well. The fact is, we've already made some solid progress. Many of us now recognize how serious a problem bullying and cyberbullying can be.

So, why did I write this book? Some of the ways we've addressed bullying and cyberbullying can actually hamper us if we're not careful. While our focus on bullying and cyberbullying has undoubtedly helped children become healthier and less aggressive, that focus has also resulted in a lot of noise, misinformation, myths, and anxiety for parents and children. This book addresses that noise and misinformation. These myths are not only ineffective; they can actively impede our efforts to reduce bullying and cyberbullying. This book is designed to help parents reject myths and become more effective in helping to guide our kids through modern childhood and adolescence.

As with my other books, it took a village to produce this one. I have a great deal of help and support, from my editors at Wiley to my staff at the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center and at Bridgewater State University. Special thanks to Jayne Fagnoli and Melissa Duphily for your support. But the real wind beneath my wings comes from my children – Josh, Nick, and Max – and my steadfastly wonderful husband, Michael, who believes in me and never has a moment's doubt. Love to all of you.

Elizabeth K. Englander
Boston, Massachusetts
2020

Chapter 1

Why Talk About Myths Instead of Facts?

Maybe you're looking for a really satisfying story about bullying: perhaps a story about someone who was viciously bullied, but who stood up fearlessly and made the bully wither in public shame through the use of their razor-sharp wit; or who, surrounded by supportive and admiring friends, felt nothing but supremely self-confident indifference. Those are the stories we all want to hear and the stories we've all dreamed about, although as a teenager I personally only came up with cutting retorts hours or days too late. I think it's common to dream about heroic solutions to bullying; some things never change. On the other hand, certain things about bullying have definitely changed – *a lot*. Twenty years ago, we might have laughed if someone had suggested that by 2010, bullying by *girls* would be just as much of a public health concern as boys' aggression. Bullying in *suburban* schools as a major problem? Bullying in private schools? In religious and parochial schools? *Cyberbullying*?

25 Myths About Bullying and Cyberbullying, First Edition.

Elizabeth K. Englander.

© 2020 John Wiley & Sons, Inc. Published 2020 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Maybe your kids have been bullied, or maybe you worry that they will be. Bullying today still happens, at times, in a more traditional way: for example, a little boy could be bullied on the playground by a slightly older boy. It can also happen in new and confounding ways: perhaps a teenage girl discovers that a topless photo, sent privately to a date, has been distributed around the school, and the result is a social crisis for her. What you read, see, and hear about bullying may feel familiar, or it may feel utterly alien. The fact is, bullying is a social problem that has remained the same, but it's also gone through a monumental metamorphosis. Back in the early 1990s, the violence-prevention focus was almost entirely on boys and gang violence, and with good reason: America was in the midst of a terrible violent crime wave, and Americans were enduring a daily onslaught of bad news about violent males. In 1995, a Princeton professor, John DiIulio, even coined the term *superpredator* to describe what he envisioned as a looming generation of totally callous and aggressive male criminals.¹ Few researchers, if any, anticipated the dramatic drop in traditional violent crime that was about to occur, or the emergence of bullying and cyberbullying as key concerns.

The result is that today, you can scarcely watch a newscast or read a newsfeed without seeing a story about bullying or cyberbullying. The troubles spattered across our media today aren't only new; they're newly confounding. Kids who bully a schoolmate who's disabled, mocking him or her. Schools that ban cell phones, only to find that kids continue to text each other on their Fitbits. New and baffling problems, articles, opinions, and advice abound. Yet even this large (indeed, sometimes overwhelming) flood of information doesn't provide many answers about what to believe (is cyberbullying really rampant?), how to tell when something is truly a problem (my son seems OK with the apparently abusive talk that takes place during online video games), or what parents are supposed to actually *do* (or *not* do, as the case may be). Should you try to force your reluctant child to talk about a bullying situation? Will taking away their cell phone make the situation worse or better? The schools say "Tell us everything," but your child begs for confidentiality – now

what? How do you help your son or daughter learn to properly use digital devices when they're the expert and you're the pupil? How can you make your child less vulnerable – more self-confident, more popular? The school tells you that your child bullied someone, but your child says *they're* the victim. The other kid's parents say it was a fight. Now what?

Ironically, the high level of interest that surrounds these problems could easily raise the sneaking suspicion that bullying is just the currently fashionable psychobabble rather than a genuine predicament. There's a kernel of truth to that. It does seem as though the word *bullying* is applied to almost any situation where someone's feelings are hurt. In a 2018 study of more than 600 teens, I found that 62% of the kids who believed they were "bullied" were actually using the word to describe different problems, such as fights with friends. And like all fashionable disorders, bullying may be less common than we think. For a few years now, a number of surveys have found *reductions* in the rate of bullying, rather than increases. One study of 27 countries in Europe and North America found that most countries are reporting less bullying. England, Norway, Australia, Spain, and the United States have all found that traditional bullying is becoming less common. All this sounds like good news, yet these reassurances can still ring hollow. Even one case is too many if it's causing real misery, and statistics are cold comfort to those who suffer under bullying or who are forced to watch their children suffer.

Furthermore, regardless of the overall trends, contemporary forms of bullying and cyberbullying remain unsettling. You may have been left out of a party back in the third grade, but it's hard to imagine the impact on your daughter when a topless photo of her gets passed around an entire high school. One of the most difficult things about being a parent today isn't social cruelty per se, but the yawning gap in knowledge (particularly around digital issues) and a display of unmistakable human cruelty that is disquieting. Decreasing or increasing, the fact is that bullying and cyberbullying remain among the most commonly cited concerns expressed by parents and educators. A national poll of parents in 2017² found that bullying and cyberbullying were a number-one concern. Let's

be clear: exaggerating dangers is destructive, since it can unnecessarily raise anxiety. But it's equally pointless to ignore real social problems, regardless of whether they are more common, less common, fundamentally new and different, or a rehashing of old conflicts and abuses. The key, I think, is figuring out how to separate the myths from the facts – and thereby identify the real problems.

Internationally, there's no paucity of efforts to prevent bullying and cyberbullying. Significant resources have been mobilized; and as of this writing, Canada, Britain, Australia, and almost every state in the United States have passed laws that seek to address these behaviors.³ The European Commission has been working with social networking companies since 2009 to reduce online bullying risks. A casual search on the Internet reveals a veritable avalanche of resources to prevent bullying and cyberbullying – everything from Assertiveness Training to Zen Buddhism.

Yet even with all this attention, these difficulties stubbornly persist, in large part due to their fast-changing, emotional, and profoundly complex nature. The advice lags far behind the actual knowledge. Understanding what causes, stops, and is important about bullying and cyberbullying hasn't been made much easier by an Internet teeming with well-intentioned guidance. Googling the phrase "bullying because of a nude picture" in an attempt to help your teenage daughter cope yields a mind-bending 12.5 *million* websites. It's the largest library in the world, with heaps and piles of books stacked as high as a building but in no particular order. If you're looking for help with bullying and cyberbullying on the Internet, that's what you're up against. Sometimes new problems are difficult to handle because we don't have enough information; at other times they're difficult because we have *too much* information, and the information is hard to find, inaccessible, or the wrong type. The data are disorganized, and large segments are outdated. And not all bullying is alike. If you're looking for advice on how to handle bullying between middle school boys while playing a video game, you might find yourself reading recommendations about how to handle third-grade boys on the playground, or advice on how to avoid fights in the cafeteria between teenage boys.

Even if you do find information about exactly the type of issue you're concerned about, the sheer volume of opinions and advice can throw up yet another roadblock. Let's imagine a scenario in which your fourth-grade daughter is being targeted at school and online because she didn't invite a popular girl to her birthday party. Different sources of advice might offer wildly contradictory recommendations. Your daughter should tell school personnel so they can support her; or she should not tell, lest they decide she's a whiner and her friends label her a tattler. Her friends should stick by her, but maybe it's a friend who's targeting her. She should ignore the bully, or, alternatively, assertively tell the bully how she feels. How does she react online, and should that be different from how she responds at school? One resource may recommend keeping any messages or postings as evidence; another may suggest that they should be ignored and immediately deleted. And while traditionally most parents would go back to their own father or mother for parenting advice, you can't do that for these new types of problems. That means you've lost a major source of parenting support.

To make things more difficult, your own life experiences may also incline you to adopt solutions that may or may not work in this new and different environment. As an eight-year-old, you probably didn't have to deal with mean comments while playing an online game; but maybe you were in a playground bullying situation, and you hit the bully, who subsequently decided to leave you alone. Can these experiences help your child today? What happened to you was emotionally powerful – you remember it – but will that strategy still apply? It's not likely that any expert or school will recommend hitting back, but it's also undeniably true that *some* bullying situations involve an aggressor who seeks defenseless targets, and when they do hit back, that bully just might – maybe – pursue a different victim.

So maybe it worked for you. Will it work for your child? Even a cursory search will quickly show you that many experts – including myself – don't encourage this as a tactic that's likely to work. The point here isn't whether or not to hit; it's that the advice you read may directly contradict your own (admittedly powerful) experience. Clarifying explanations would be helpful, but they aren't always

there, or aren't always clear. (The reason, by the way, that I personally don't recommend hitting back is that in the current climate, this strategy is likely to backfire. The first thing a bully may do is go tell an authority figure that he's been hit, and now the original target will be the one in trouble. Not only that, the bully can easily take revenge online.)

Faced with all this – the contradictions, the inapplicability of your own experiences, and the lack of traditional parenting support (read: your own parents) – you could easily end up fruitlessly debating the situation in your own mind. Your own experiences matter, but maybe they were more relevant in a bygone world; one expert says one thing, another has entirely different advice. Maybe if your child hits back, it'll just worsen the entire situation. On the other hand, if he succeeds, perhaps the experience will increase his self-confidence immensely. This back-and-forth is all well and good in academic circles; but in real life, faced with a crisis, it can add to the frustration instead of helping resolve the problem.

Bullying and cyberbullying certainly aren't the only areas of parenting that feature a great deal of competing advice, but it's a notable challenge because the problems are often totally unexpected and can feel incomprehensible. Other areas of parenting that invite differing opinions may not be so complex or changeable. Should you make children eat vegetables? Allow them to sleep in your bed? Send them to a private school? Make them clean up the kitchen? Even the most widely agreed-upon issues are sometimes debated. Most people encourage kids to share, but a mom once asked me, "Why should I make my kids share? Grownups never have to share anything."⁴ You may or may not have the answers for all the typical dilemmas like these, but at least you understand the questions. In the case of bullying, though, the quagmire of information makes it unclear what we're actually talking about. What is social cruelty? It can be a problem that will simply pass – but we're also told it can be permanently scarring. A 2015 review of the long-term studies on bullying concluded that bullying had negative effects on a target's emotions, cognitions, and relationships.⁵ And what is the right response? Intervening can be destructive in some

situations but helpful in others. How can you tease apart the serious situations where *not* intervening could lead to serious depression or problems, versus a transient episode where your child (or you!) could learn to stand up and be assertive? If you do intervene, you might be crippling an emerging ability to defend oneself; but if you don't intervene, you might be risking emotional, social, and even academic problems.

The myths that surround bullying and cyberbullying foster all these dilemmas and frustrations, and they're what I'm going to tackle here. I could talk about 25 facts; but instead, I'm going to discuss 25 pieces of misinformation that are common but that also might be hampering your ability to clearly understand and effectively cope with these problems. Generally speaking, these aren't what I would call *senseless* myths, like believing that bullies are possessed by demons. Our modern-day myths about bullying and cyberbullying often were once helpful pieces of information; put simply, bullying and cyberbullying have changed so much in the last 15 years that it's hard for the advice to keep pace. But it's important to have accurate information. As adults, we won't be able to prevent or intervene in bullying and cyberbullying if we can't accurately identify and respond to it. If you don't know, for example, what types of psychological bullying or cyberbullying are the most common types, you won't know what to look for, you might not recognize it when it happens, and you won't be able to help your child form coping strategies.

But just the facts (or just the myths) aren't enough, for a few reasons. First, in real life, while there are always notable exceptions to the rule, sometimes we confuse the exception and the rule. It's hard to know what's common and what's rare. As an example, take the fact that most bullying today is psychological, not physical. This trend is undeniable – even by 2012, 88% of the incidents I studied in my research were psychological in nature. But that doesn't mean *every single case* is only psychological. If you vividly recall being physically bullied as a child, the intensity of that memory makes it hard to accept the idea that bullying today isn't, for the most part, physical. When your own child is being shoved into his locker at