

Article 3:

Brown, Mark. "Life After Bullying." National PTA. 20 Feb. 2005.

<<http://www.pta.org/bullying/#>>

Emmy-nominated Mark Brown is a youth motivational speaker who, as part of a national outreach program sponsored by QSP, the educational fundraising arm of Reader's Digest, talks to young people about the harmful effects of bullying. To see and hear Brown firsthand, log onto www.rd.com/bully.

¶1 Billy has a thyroid disorder; no matter how fun-loving he is, the other kids cannot see past his being overweight. Liz has been dubbed "trailer trash" by the local kids because she lives on the "wrong side of town." Eleven-year-old Matt came home with black and blue marks, the result of a classmate convincing others to have a punching contest on the "new kid's" arm.

¶2 Bullying is a serious problem today. In a recent Reader's Digest poll, 70 percent of all parents surveyed said their children have been bullied at school. In fact, according to the National Education Association, 160,000 kids stay home from school each day to avoid torment.

¶3 As I travel the country teaching the lesson of tolerance and respect to victims and bullies alike, I have learned something myself. With the proper guidance from family and the school community, children can survive a hurtful experience like bullying and grow in many ways never imagined.

A victim finds her "inner light"

¶4 Sue Stapleton and I met in February 2000 when she was substitute teaching at a middle school in Connecticut. Sue said her daughter Katelyn, then 10 years old, "had always been the child in the classroom who was picked on, teased, even physically abused." It started in kindergarten with taunts about her weight, her glasses, even the size of her nose, and it escalated through the years—from kids throwing rocks at her to locking her in a fenced-in area after gym. It got to the point where Katelyn did not want to go to school.

¶5 On that day four years ago, Sue began her crusade to help rebuild Katelyn's self-esteem. Katelyn became a Girl Scout and lived the Girl Scout promise of being good to other people. She began to expect nothing less for herself. The family's ties to their place of worship also helped nurture Katelyn's inner strength, as did her parent's unending efforts to help their daughter know how loved she was.

¶6 This past fall, 150 students heard Katelyn's message of hope as she shared her story in a special assembly at her high school. As a victim of bullying, Katelyn spoke about her inner light that burns bright and cannot be snuffed out by the mean actions and words of others.

Words as weapons

¶7 Molly was in the 8th grade when we met. She never considered herself a victim, but there were times other kids had picked on her for her disinterest in makeup and fashion, and her passion for athletics. She never considered herself a bully, either, but she could remember having called other kids names.

¶8 I explained to Molly and her schoolmates that words can actually be used as weapons. They were taken aback by this notion. Molly recalls that day, "So many kids were so emotional because it had never occurred to them that their words could be so hurtful to others."

¶9 Molly thought about Emily, a classmate with cerebral palsy, whom most students avoided because of her disability. Molly and her best friend decided to reach out to Emily, thus finding a new friend.

¶10 Today Molly is a college freshman with a far different perspective. She's studying to be a nurse so that she can help people.

¶11 Sue, Katelyn, and Molly personify why it is important that every parent, educator, and child work together to create a safe and caring school.

Creating a Caring School Environment

¶12 Here are some ways parents can help combat bullying and create a more caring school environment for their children:

- Always take bullying seriously and never dismiss it as merely a rite of passage.
- Keep the lines of communication open with your children and reassure them that they are loved and valued.
- Involve your child in character-building activities and be involved in these kinds of activities yourself.
- Establish PTA-sponsored programs in your school that reinforce the importance of tolerance and respect.
- Encourage school special assemblies and bring in outside speakers to raise awareness about this issue.
- If one doesn't already exist, establish a peer mediation program where students can present their grievances with one another in a nonthreatening environment.