Close to 2,000 English-language books with the term *bullying* as a key word were published in 2012. How can the professional, much less the layperson, separate the wheat from the chaff and find the book that will best meet his or her needs? Of course, this is an unanswerable question. Nevertheless, Emily Bazelon’s *Sticks and Stones: Defeating the Culture of Bullying and Rediscovering the Power of Character and Empathy* is certainly one of the best and most comprehensive books on the topic of bullying in American schools. This is a book from which adults as well as young adults, laypersons as well as educators, and school psychologists as well as academic psychologists can learn a great deal.

Bazelon approaches this topic with the fresh eyes of an investigative journalist who wants to understand the phenomenon of bullying from multiple perspectives. She recognizes that the details of context are crucial in understanding any complex human phenomenon. She
knows that in order to tell this story, she needs to talk to the researchers in the field, such as Dorothy Espelage and Susan Swearer, to Dan Olweus (the recognized pioneer in the formal study of bullying), to social media providers, to educators who struggle with how to respond to bullying in their schools, and to students and parents who become enmeshed in the complex dynamics of bullying and the confusing array of laws and regulations.

Perhaps most important, Bazelon is unafraid to challenge simple-minded explanations and widespread beliefs. She doesn’t get it all right—no one does in this field—but she does ask the right questions and is sure-footed in her analyses. Moreover, her three case studies are varied, informative, thorough, and helpful in shedding light on the nitty-gritty of bullying in schools.

**Bullying: Definitions and Distinctions**

Bazelon adopts the three criteria first proposed by Dan Olweus (Olweus, 1993), and widely adopted by experts in the field, to define bullying: It is verbal or physical abuse or aggression, it has to be repeated, and it entails a power differential between the perpetrator and the victim. Still, Bazelon underemphasizes the critically important component, stressed by Olweus and others, that the perpetrator “intentionally inflicts, or attempts to inflict, injury or discomfort upon another” (Olweus, 1993, p. 9).

In Bazelon’s somewhat unsystematic review of the literature on the consequences of bullying for the perpetrator and the victim, she fails to sufficiently distinguish the effects of occasional bullying from chronic bullying. As Solberg and Olweus’s research clearly demonstrated, the negative impacts of bullying are attributable primarily to bullying victimization that occurs at least biweekly (Solberg & Olweus, 2003). This finding is critically important in interpreting surveys of bullying, in creating antibullying policies, and in the adoption and implementation of bullying prevention programs.

Bazelon devotes a full chapter to cyberbullying, focusing primarily on Facebook. Here she cites the growing literature that, so far, suggests that most kids who are bullied online are also bullied in person; that is, cyberbullying is primarily an extension of in-person bullying. She also acknowledges that no one knows whether the Internet has spawned more bullies. Moreover, she clearly states the key dangers of cyberbullying: Bullying in this sphere is harder to escape for adolescents than is in-person bullying, and cyberbullying events can and often do go viral, maximizing the humiliation felt by the target. I would add that inhibitory responses for those engaging in this behavior are even more limited than in the case of face-to-face bullying.

The author’s discussion of Facebook is both penetrating and fascinating. Having secured access to senior-level staff at Facebook, Bazelon presents the strategies, thinking, and conundrums faced by the company in reducing and inhibiting cyberbullying and in
helping kids who complain to the company about such behavior. The bottom line is that the investment required to effectively investigate and respond to the millions of cyberbullying posts on Facebook is way beyond what the company is willing to do.

That said, Facebook does respond to reports by alleged targets of bullying by assuming that the report is accurate and by suggesting to these individuals that they talk to adults whom they trust about the situation. Although Bazelon has no overarching solution to the problem of cyberbullying, she does make a reasoned recommendation to parents:

The one thing that’s clear is that it’s almost always better to stay away from the far ends of the spectrum—ignoring the challenge technology poses for kids, or trying to control their every move. . . . One way to do that is to present the issue and ask your kid what she thinks a good system would be. You don’t have to do what she says, but in talking it through, you may learn something. (p. 44)

Perhaps most important with respect to distinguishing bullying from other forms of behavior, Bazelon introduces the term *drama*, a term rarely if ever used in the academic literature, to distinguish bullying from the complex back-and-forth, fluid conflictual dynamics among adolescents. The importance of this distinction is particularly well articulated by Bazelon in the two chapters she devotes to the case of Phoebe Prince, the 15-year-old South Hadley, Massachusetts, high school student who committed suicide in 2010.

This story garnered the attention of media outlets throughout the world. Nearly all the media coverage in this case (and in many others), as well as the legal actions by the South Hadley prosecutors, cited “bullying” as the primary, if not exclusive, factor that caused Phoebe to take her own life.

Bazelon’s rigorous investigation of this case reveals two critically important facts that contradict this allegation. First, Phoebe’s psychological problems—including chronic depression, serious difficulties in her peer relationships, and troubling family dynamics—predated her arrival in South Hadley from Ireland. Second, Phoebe violated entrenched social norms, engaging in sexually provocative behavior with two male classmates whom she knew were involved in relatively stable relationships. The response by the former girlfriends and their friends, online and in person, amounted to “slut bashing,” and the drama began to take on a vicious back-and-forth life of its own. In other words, the aggressive behavior by her peers could be understood, in the context of social norms, as provoked by Phoebe’s actions.

Generally speaking, the literature suggests that bullying is a form of aggression that is unprovoked. Although tricky to distinguish on a practical level, I would advocate for including the criterion that bullying is a form of unprovoked aggression (Greene, 2000) to the three universally accepted criteria that define bullying. That said, Bazelon appropriately emphasizes that the character bashing behavior by Phoebe’s peers was unacceptable and that
the school should have done more to address the “bad” social norms that fueled the cruel behavior toward Phoebe. Moreover, she approvingly quotes one student who said in retrospect that the whole situation was a “moral failure of, like, the community” (p. 108).

What Bazelon explains with anger and science is that “bullycide,” the attribution of bullying as the exclusive or primary cause of suicide, is simply wrong and dangerous. Summarizing numerous scientific studies, she notes that suicide is rarely if ever caused by a single factor and that depression is a more potent predictor of suicidal ideation and suicide than is bullying. And she advocates for appropriate, nonshaming sanctions for those who engage in this kind of character bashing and cogently argues against the criminalization of bullying behavior.

Bullying Dynamics, Vulnerability, and Social Status

During the 1980s and 1990s the bullying research literature focused primarily on the bully and the victim without much consideration of the role that bystanders play and the related social and power dynamics that fuel bullying behavior. The more dynamic, or participant role approach to bullying was first described in detail by Salmivalli and her colleagues (Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen, 1996). Although Bazelon does not cite Salmivalli’s work, she does clearly approach bullying as a dynamic process in which bystanders play a critically important role. Bazelon cites the work of Robert Faris on the hierarchy of power and bullying in schools (pp. 53–54):

> He found that kids who’d advanced toward the social hub tended to be the ones who attacked other kids’ reputation. . . . If you attacked someone else’s reputation, you doubled your chances of becoming friends with an elite. And you were also more likely to move up socially if you lashed out at another kid who was close to you on the map . . .

That is, bullying can be understood as aggression in the service of enhancing social status.

This dynamic makes it particularly difficult for kids to intervene on behalf of the targets of bullying, even if they know the bullying is wrong. Often, as Bazelon points out, it takes someone high in the social ladder to intervene, someone whose status is secure and for whom such intervention risks little in status diminution.

Bazelon also tackles head-on the fine line between overprotecting kids with respect to bullying and allowing or facilitating unnecessary suffering. She states, correctly, that children need to learn how to cope with difficult situations or they will never learn how to effectively cope with adversity. Bazelon also recognizes that kids vary in their sensitivity: “Meanness that leaves one kid unscathed in the long run can destroy another one” (p. 12).
Phoebe Prince was certainly in the latter camp, unable for a number of reasons to bear the brunt of the high-stakes drama of which she was a part. And, Bazelon further acknowledges, we know very little about how to distinguish in advance who the most sensitive kids are.

Prevention, Intervention, and School Climate

Bazelon’s chapter on prevention and intervention, misleadingly titled “Solutions,” is, unfortunately, the weakest part of her otherwise fine treatise. In her defense, the science of bullying prevention does not provide a strong evidentiary base. Bazelon is right to point out that certain approaches, such as the use of mediation to resolve bullying situations and one-time talks, are next to useless and possibly iatrogenic in curbing bullying in school. And she’s right to point out that educators must understand the specific bullying situation in their schools, both the prevalence of bullying and types of bullying that are most common. She is also right in suggesting that first and foremost the social climate, as well as the associated norms and behaviors in a school of both students and adults, should be the central focus of any change process.

Bazelon appropriately cites the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program as effective in theory and perhaps effective in practice. Nevertheless, the problem of implementing this program with fidelity, particularly in the United States, has been cited by Olweus and others as an explanation for the absence of positive outcomes here. Of course, if it is so difficult to implement, the program should not be designated effective, as some rankings suggest.

In addition, Bazelon describes two programs as very promising if not effective in preventing bullying: the Steps to Respect Program and the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports Program. Nevertheless, the overall effectiveness of these programs in reducing bullying behavior does not have strong empirical backing. Bazelon ultimately suggests, “The most important thing is for a school to pick one approach that administrators, teachers, and parents buy into and stick with it” (p. 212). Although no program will succeed without such backing, such backing in and of itself is no guarantee of success.

Conclusion

Bazelon suggests that we have to “instill in kids the paramount value of kindness—to show them that it’s more important to come together than to finish first, that other people’s feelings can take precedence over one’s own, and that relationships can matter more than tasks” p. 305). This may be true, but schools need guidance in accomplishing this noble end. She also recognizes the critical role that parents and students can play in making this happen, and she gives some good advice in the form of Q and As at the end of her book. To her
credit, Bazelon is humble about the difficulty of doing this: “My kids are 13 and 10, and I’m never sure I’m getting any of this right” (p. 306).

References


