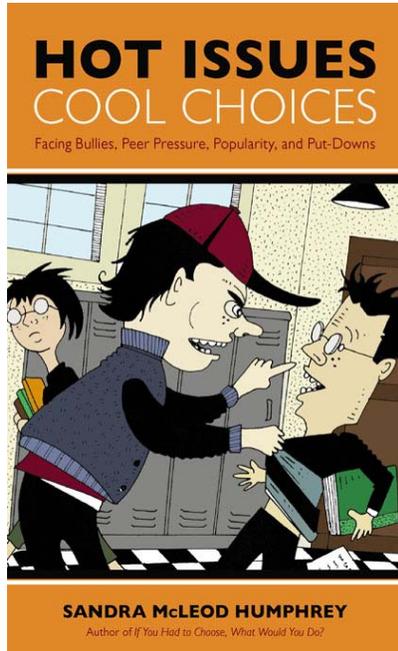


Interview with Sandra McLeod Humphrey



NCPC: You've written a number of books about a variety of different topics. What inspired you to begin writing this book particularly, and for children's issues in general? What do you hope to accomplish?

SANDRA: *Over the years, I've visited a great many classrooms to talk about my books, and no matter what our discussions initially focused on, the students invariably brought up the topic of bullying. What always amazed me was the candor with which the students described their bullying experiences (many of which were really horrendous).*

After hearing so many stories about bullying, I felt the need to share these stories and get kids of all ages thinking and talking about this important issue and its social and emotional ramifications.

Since the publication of my book in 2007, I have received e-mails and snail mails from all over our country, Canada, Australia, Japan, and even the Ukraine.

Unfortunately, bullying is alive and well in contemporary societies all over the world, and some of these letters are heartrending. Some students tell me how they have been bullied to the point that they no longer want to live.

School bullying is nothing new and was once considered a character-building rite of passage for our children. But now it is seen for what it is—a form of victimization and abuse.

And kids bullying their peers is nothing new, but modern technologies have introduced a new twist: cyberbullying. Phoebe Prince's suicide this year is yet another tragic outcome of bullying in general and cyberbullying in particular.

Students today have the tech savvy but not the emotional maturity to realize the potential and sometimes irreparable psychological damage that can result from their cyberbullying behavior, which can include texting, sexting, social networking, etc.

National Crime Prevention Council
2001 Jefferson Davis Hwy * Suite 901 * Arlington, VA 22202
202-466-6272 (phone) * 202-296-1356 (fax) * www.ncpc.org

The current issue of People (cover story October 2010) devoted an entire section to bullying. It was titled "Deadly Bullying" and reflects the severity of the problem and the need for all of us as parents and educators to recognize and address the problem.

NCPC: How did you come up with the various stories in the book? Are they based on shared stories, personal experiences?

SANDRA: *Although the stories in my book have been fictionalized to some extent, each story is based on very real-life experiences related to me by students during my school visits, and the book is dedicated to a 12-year-old Minnesota boy who took his own life after being relentlessly bullied for almost two years.*

As a children's author, I get to work with kids—all kinds of kids—pretty much 24/7. During my school visits, I had the opportunity to have some wonderful discussions with the students, and through the ongoing essay contest on my Web site, I have the opportunity to share some very personal (and many times painful) experiences through the personal essays and notes they write.

One of the best (and sometimes one of the saddest) parts of my job is reading the letters I receive from my readers. I want to share just a few of these notes with you.

"Thank you so much for your contest! School was not going well for me, and I was feeling like a real loser. Ever since I entered your writing contest, I have had more confidence than ever! I have submitted my writing to many different websites and magazines, and my poem is even going to be published by a real magazine! Now I believe I can do anything as long as I work hard and do my best. Thank You." Christina

"I just finished reading *Hot Issues, Cool Choices* and it's like you wrote that book just for me. I was feeling so down and I was so much like some of the girls in the book and now I know I'm not alone. Thank You, Thank You, Thank You!" Linda

"I am Ruhee from India. I am 6 years old and love to write poems and stories. They make me feel better when I am sad. Can I send them to you? Thank You!" Ruhee

We children's authors write to hopefully touch the life of a child, and if we're truly blessed, perhaps we'll touch more than one child. I believe that each of us in our own way can touch the life of a child and make the world just a little better for everyone!

NCPC: One of the best and most unique things about *Hot Issues, Cool Choices* is that the stories are left open-ended/unfinished. What are some of the best ways that schools and/or parents can or have used this to their advantage to engage youth in discussions?

SANDRA: *When I visited schools, I always role-played different bullying scenarios with the students, so that they could actually “feel” the same situation from the perspective of the bully, the bully’s victim, and the bystander. I also always emphasized the importance of the role of the bystander in bullying situations because the bystander can unintentionally (or sometimes intentionally) frequently stop or facilitate the bullying situation.*

When I talk to students or parents, these are some of the suggestions I give them.

Some Parental Tips:

- 1) Listen: Encourage your children to talk about school, friends, activities, etc.*
- 2) Take your children’s complaints of bullying seriously: Remember that children are often afraid or ashamed to tell parents that they have been bullied and a simple bullying incident may turn out to be quite significant.*
- 3) Watch for symptoms of victimization: social withdrawal, drop in grades, personality changes, etc.*
- 4) Use bibliotherapy to help teach empathy in general and facilitate discussions about bullying in particular: Margaret Atwood, Judy Blume, Sharon Flake, Trudy Ludwig, Rachel Simmons, and Rosalind Wiseman are just a few of the many wonderful authors who have relevant books.*

Some Student Tips (Remember, bullying is all about power, so try not to give the bully that power):

- 1) Ignore the bully when possible: The bully is waiting for you to react, so stay calm and try not to react.*
- 2) There’s strength in numbers: Bullies generally don’t pick on groups, so hang with your friends.*
- 3) Don’t retaliate in kind: This will usually just escalate the situation. Violence usually leads to more violence.*
- 4) Tell an adult you trust: If the bullying continues, tell a parent or teacher or some other adult you trust.*

5) Don't underestimate your role as bystander: Bystanders can unintentionally (or sometimes intentionally) facilitate or stop the bullying situation.

Remember, no one deserves to be bullied, so don't suffer in silence. Do something or tell someone!

NCPC: At the end of each story, there is a "Trading Places" follow-up. Why did you include this? What, in your opinion, is the importance of developing empathy among our youth and how does that impact the choices that they make?

SANDRA: *I included "Trading Places" with each story because I wanted my readers to actually put themselves in the storyteller's situation and think seriously about how they would feel and what they would do in that situation.*

I think our society has become somewhat desensitized to violence in general and personal cruelty in particular to some extent over the last decade through the entertainment media: TV shows, films, video games, etc. And I think this is reflected in decreased empathy in our young people.

We know how prevalent social aggression is in middle school and high school, but now we are learning that it is also evident as early as preschool.

I volunteer as a preschool teacher, and I can attest to these findings. I have been amazed to see that relational aggression (cliques, social exclusion, gossip, secrets, the silent treatment, humiliation, etc.) can be seen as early as three, four, and five years of age.

And as our kids enter their tweens and teens, now they encounter cyberbullying, an extension of old-fashioned schoolyard bullying. Nine in ten teens now have cell phones with video and text capabilities, and many have joined social networking sites that can spread rumors, insults, and images in seconds.

Students report that the distance of email makes it easier to be cruel because they don't actually see the reactions of the kids they're targeting.

I think we have to begin in preschool to educate our children about the harmful effects of bullying if we are to make any major headway in reducing bullying in their social world.

One young woman wrote in her letter to me, "When brokenness is real, a single light can make all the difference in the world."

May each of us in our own way bring a light into the darkness!

NCPC: What's next for you?

SANDRA: *I currently have my book The No-Name Club's Not-So-Official Guide to Solving Your Problems making the rounds. The premise of this book is that how we respond to a situation is more important than the situation itself and that our attitude determines how we respond. Through their weekly meetings, the six members of the No-Name Club not only learn some problem-solving strategies, they also learn that by working together for the common good, each of them can become stronger in the process. The book has received some really wonderful prepublication endorsements from nationally recognized educators.*

I just finished my book They Stood Alone: 25 Men and Women Who Made a Difference!, which is a collection of brief bios of 25 men and women who had the courage to step out away from the crowd and take a risk and their revolutionary breakthroughs changed their world and ours. The intent of this book is to inspire my young readers to have their own dreams and then to follow their hearts until they attain their dreams.

The book I'm currently working on is a middle-grade novel about bullying and about loss titled In the Beginning. As the protagonist deals with her problems at school, she learns things like real friends can come in all sizes, shapes, and ages; that sometimes it's more important to be kind than to be right; that it's okay to cry; and that being different can be a strength rather than a liability. And, most importantly, she goes from seeing herself as a victim to discovering that she is not only a survivor but a leader as well.