

Book Review

Be Bully Free, A Hands-On Guide to How You Can Take Control. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2017. 160p. ISBN: 978-1785922824

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This is a short and easy to navigate book that aims to talk directly to children and young people affected by bullying. It takes the reader through a range of scenarios and suggests ways to respond and ways to think about what is happening to them. The Introduction to this book tells its reader to get ready for 'their world and the world around them to become a much better, much happier place'.

The definition of bullying used in this book is a common one used in many places but it is out of step with the definition and approach taken in Scotland. Rather than focus on bullying as a combination of behaviour and impact, the book takes a different approach and focuses on types of bullying, such as Covert, Overt or Cyberbullying.

Over the years, children and young people have told me they find this information of little use. Bullying is about what someone does and the impact it has and young people are less concerned if it is covert or overt. This information does not help them. Also, cyberbullying is where behaviours take place, it is not seen by young people as a whole other type of bullying. It is where things like name calling and rumours can also happen.

The main strength of this book is that it recognises that there is never one simple answer to bullying and that each situation is unique. The research I carried out in 2014 showed children value choice and the opportunity to consider options when responding to bullying. This book offers up 26 scenarios and covers a range of incidents including some, but not all of the protected characteristics. It is pleasing to see race, homophobia and transphobia covered. Twenty-six scenarios is probably too many for your average teenager and they

may prefer to engage with this level of choice via a different medium such as a video.

The challenge the scenarios have in this book is that they play heavily to stereotypes. Those who bully are characterised as 'lacking intelligence' and are more likely to end up 'abusing substances or engage in criminal behaviour'. While for some who bully this may be the case, it is not the case for all and this only serves to reinforce stereotypes. The problem with this approach is that those who do not fit the stereotype might not see their behaviour as bullying when it is. Crucially adults may also not see their behaviour as bullying because the person accused is not a stereotypical 'bully'.

Some of the advice offered to readers includes 'Be your own best friend' and to 'write down your accomplishments'. I know from my own work that this kind of advice is not what young people find useful or realistic. A great deal of the advice offered is quite practical, such as 'stay out of their way'. The authors also suggest that readers 'evaluate your friendship groups, are these people really your friends?' This is very difficult for young people to do as it can lead to further isolation which can compound the impact of what they are experiencing.

The scenarios could benefit from being more solution focused and speak to readers about dealing with the impact of bullying more realistically rather than just steps to avoid where it might happen. Like many publications, the standard advice for online bullying is to 'Block' someone. This appears to be sensible advice and adults can see the logic in taking this step. Our young people have a different experience of this. It can be very socially damaging to Block someone, there can be social consequences and this act can be derided by many peers,

not just those involved in bullying. It is a norm that has emerged in recent years, blocking is not cool, even if someone is being horrible to you. Children and young people shared with me that they don't like this advice and it tells them the adults don't fully appreciate how hard this is.

The book does attempt to talk to children who are bullying others but it does not afford this issue much space and it is done towards the end of the book. The advice it offers for those who are bullying is not realistic or something young people would relate to. There is a missed opportunity here.

The latter parts of the book focus on things like developing school polices. The advice here is good but as the rest of the book is written directly to young people, this section is far more suited to a professional reader so feels a little out of place.

The book offers advice on sleeping, breathing, physical activity and a surprisingly high amount of advice on nutrition for an anti-bullying book.

The section on 'Self-Talk' is welcomed and offers a realistic and solution focussed approach to how young people can improve their mind-set and outlook on what is happening and what to do.

In conclusion, the best way to describe this book is that it is 'out of step' with how we approach bullying in Scotland. The advice and guidance we offer for our young people in Scotland and those who play a role in their lives is, in my view, more realistic and reflects what young people themselves have said works.

As I mentioned earlier, children and young people value choice when it comes to bullying, they need help to explore what their options are and to consider the impact or consequences for the choices they make.

The approach the book takes, recognising that situations are unique, is to be welcomed. Sadly, some of the language and advice used in the book would, in my view, fail to effectively engage the intended reader. As such, I am not convinced it will achieve the ambitious claim made in the Introduction.

About the author

Brian is International Projects Coordinator at CELCIS. He was the Director of Scotland's Anti-bullying service respectme for 10 years and still works with adults, young people and organisations on anti-bullying. He carried out the largest research on bullying undertaken to date in Scotland in 2014, over 8,500 children from across Scotland shared their views and experiences.