

## **The Power of the Bystander Family**

**By Kayla Taylor**

Nobody believes bullying is good, yet it pervades schools everywhere. And to date, most intervention programs are only marginally successful. So what can we do?

Well-meaning adults often advise the aggressor to be kinder and the target on ways to become less vulnerable. While these efforts are well-intended, they often don't garner ideal results. Why?

As most of us have experienced, children who attack others regularly deny culpability to avoid punishment. They might be forced to offer apologies anyway, but the words can feel hollow, especially without any sincere attempt at repair. And a limited number of school administrators are trained in child development, trauma, or restorative justice, so it's difficult for them to address the deep-seated needs of those who victimize others.

Aggressors' parents also tend to resist accountability. It's just so hard to consider that our children might have intentionally harmed others.

So we often turn to the targets. We suggest they be "less sensitive" or "toughen up," as if denying pain eradicates it. In extreme cases, we might even coach targets to retaliate verbally or physically. Unfortunately, this advice can do more damage than good. Targets are chosen specifically because they have less power, so their ability to influence outcomes is minimal by design. We also need to realize that when we tell targets to behave differently...when we assign to them the onus of repair...we essentially victim-shame them. We tell them that *they* need to change, not the aggressor. And that *they*, the targets, are perhaps even at fault for their own abuse.

So, what else can be done? Fortunately, there are powerful alternatives. Research shows *bystanders* hold crucial roles for upsetting the dynamics of abuse and enabling cultures of inclusion.

Unfortunately, bystanders are often given unhelpful, or even dangerous, advice, like “Stand up to the bully.” This can work for people with social power, but the tactic might make others vulnerable to attack. Interestingly, the opposite reaction might be more effective. Bullying is often mitigated when bystanders walk away unimpressed, perhaps with a scoff. Dwindling audiences can be less compelling to those who seek attention through power displays. Research also finds that when bystanders reach out to targets, even after the fact, the traumatic *impact* of the bullying is lessened. Acts of compassion tell targets they are worthy of kindness and belonging—that peers don’t believe they deserve mistreatment—and this can make a huge difference.

Through experience, I’ve come to believe that another role might be even more pivotal than that of the bystander: the *bystander’s parents*.

When I tried to advocate for my own child, I was dismissed reflexively, and not just by officials who appeared more concerned with reputation than child well-being. My peers, parents themselves, also didn’t want to be associated with problems. I soon began to notice how most adults who advocated for their mistreated children were regularly regarded as indulgent “helicopters” who just needed “to chill out.” And the parental community seemed to assume that if kids were bullied for being “weird,” then the target’s parents were “weird”...and unworthy of common decency...as well. Thus, entire families were stripped of power and dignity.

But if parents of bystander children instead offer solidarity, rather than dismissiveness, the entire dynamic can change. They not only build a “village” around those most in need, but they also role model compassion for *all* kids.

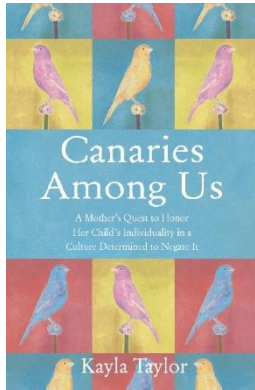
While many tools can promote caring, inclusive communities, I found one simple tactic to be life-changing: avoid calling people “weird,” “strange” or “crazy.” I’m embarrassed to admit that I used these terms in the past, but I now understand how crushing they are...how they “other” and marginalize. And when we use them, we teach our kids that it’s okay for them to demean others as well. I can’t tell you how often I overhear teenagers around town using these labels to describe classmates. So, now, when I hear my elementary-aged kids use them, I seize the opportunity to teach them about the implications. I hope that by appreciating—and even celebrating!—people’s differences, we can honor the wide variety of our humanity. I believe we can even elevate *joy*.

If you’re interested in this prospect, I ask you to take a moment to contemplate: Is there a parent in your community who reported bullying or another form of assault? Can you picture this person? Now consider this: *How did you respond?* Did you assume the targeted child is “odd” and the parent an oversensitive “helicopter”? Did you believe the wrongdoing is someone else’s problem?

Or, did say something like, “What you’re reporting sounds awful. Can you tell me more? How can I support you best right now?”

This kind of allyship changes communities...and the world.

[Kayla Taylor\\*](#) is a best-selling writer, advocate, and parent. She detailed her family's experience with bullying in *Canaries Among Us*. More information can be found at [www.KaylaTaylorWrites.com](http://www.KaylaTaylorWrites.com).



\*Identities have been altered to protect children's privacy, an important element of victim-centered approaches.