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Bibliotherapy: A Strategy to Help Students With Bullying

Katherine E. Gregory, RN, MSN, and Judith A. Vessey, RN, MBA, PhD, FAAN

ABSTRACT: Use of bibliotherapy to address childhood teasing and bullying is an innovative approach school nurses should consider as they work to promote a healthy school environment. Children's books serve as a unique conduit of exchange between parents, teachers, and children. Bibliotherapy, using books to help people solve problems, involves three stages: identification, catharsis, and insight. These stages lend themselves well to coping with the sensitivities related to teasing and bullying. Salient research findings pertinent to teasing and bullying have made their way into the children's literature and have been well received by children and their families over the course of the Child Adolescent Teasing in Schools (CATS) book review project and web site development. After exposure to a fictional story about teasing and bullying, children have shared their own nonfictional account of this often devastating experience and have come to develop successful coping strategies for dealing with the teasing and bullying that takes place in schools nationwide.

KEY WORDS: bibliotherapy, bullying, school nursing, teasing, violence intervention

INTRODUCTION

Teasing and bullying among school-age children are not new behaviors. Since the inception of the one-room schoolhouse, teachers have been mediating conflicts between students. When school nursing was introduced as part of Lillian Wald's community health crusade over 100 years ago, one can be certain that these first school nurses cared for the victims of school yard bullying. What is new is that peer teasing and bullying are no longer seen as an annoying but otherwise harmless rite of passage, but rather as a challenging problem with the potential for long-term psychological sequelae. It has become a leading concern among health care providers, educators, and parents of school-age children.

Multidisciplinary research on childhood teasing and bullying is leading to a better understanding of these issues and the development of primary and secondary interventions. School nurses are uniquely po-

sitioned to help the school community detect teasing and bullying among youth as well as implement interventions aimed to curtail these problematic behaviors and their resulting health and academic consequences. The use of children's books is one such intervention. Broadly defined as bibliotherapy, this method is useful for communicating information about teasing and bullying, helping children learn empathy for one another, and providing them with strategies for deflecting or minimizing bullying attempts. To help school nurses use this valuable approach, a brief overview of teasing and bullying is presented, followed by a discussion of bibliotherapy and concluding with school nursing interventions and information about available bibliographic resources.

OVERVIEW OF NASTY TEASING AND BULLYING

All children tease and are teased. Generally, their intent is good-natured. However, nasty teasing occurs when the instigator seeks to intimidate the recipient. When done repeatedly and in the presence of a power differential, nasty teasing becomes bullying (Olweus, 1994). It is estimated that nasty teasing or bullying is a significant problem for 8–14% of school students and is deleterious to their mental health and general

Katherine E. Gregory, RN, MSN, is a PhD student at the William F. Connell School of Nursing, Boston College, Chestnut Hill, MA.

Judith A. Vessey, RN, MBA, PhD, FAAN, is the Lelia Holden Carroll Endowed Professor in Nursing at the William F. Connell School of Nursing, Boston College, Chestnut Hill, MA.

well-being (Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Olweus, 1997). In a recent study by Nansel et al. (2001), nearly one in three (29.9%) children reported moderate or frequent involvement in bullying: 13% as a bully, 10.6% as one who was bullied, and 6.3% as both bully and bullied. Nasty teasing and bullying behaviors may begin as early as preschool and continue through high school, but peaks in these behaviors occur during the early elementary school years and then again during the middle school years (Berg, 1999; Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Loeber & Hay, 1997; Nansel et al., 2001; Vermande, van den Oord, Goudena, & Rispens, 2000).

Bullying and related behaviors can be problematic for youth of either gender, from any racial/ethnic background, and from all walks of life (Loeber & Hay, 1997; Nansel et al., 2001; Schuster, 1999; Sweeting & West, 2001). No one trait or set of traits predisposes a child for nasty teasing or bullying; rather, any differences that a child displays from group norms makes them less popular and increases their risk of being targeted by peers (Sweeting & West, 2001). Examples of physical traits include being smaller, weaker, uncoordinated, less attractive, or obese. Children with chronic conditions and associated symptomatology, such as physical immaturity, or dysmorphologies, especially in conjunction with untoward behaviors, are at a significant risk of being chronically teased or bullied (Gerard, 1991; Rickert, Hased, Hendon, & Cunniff, 1996). Other examples include children who over or under achieve academically compared with school norms, represent a visible racial/ethnic minority within the school community, or whose families are in some way "different," such as those with gay parents (Neumark-Sztainer, Story, & Faibisch, 1998; Sweeting & West, 2001).

Researchers have documented the association between bullying and psychosocial problems, health symptoms, and academic performance in students of all ages. Psychosocial problems of victims include internalizing disorders such as poor self-esteem, insecurity, increased submissiveness, and loneliness; in the most severe instances, clinical depression and suicide ideation may occur (Craig, 1998; Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Kaltiala-Heino, Rimpela, Marttunen, Rimpela, & Rantanen, 1999; Kaltiala-Heino, Rimpela, Rantanen, & Rimpela, 2000; Salmon, James, & Smith, 1998). Externalizing problems of bullies and victim-bullies, such as inappropriate self-esteem or conduct disorders, are also prevalent (Craig, 1998; DuRant et al., 2000; DuRant, Kreiter, Sinal, & Woods, 1999; Vossekuil, Reddy, Fein, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2000). Poor childhood peer relations are strong predictors for difficulties in adolescence or later life (Bond, Carlin, Thomas, Rubin, & Patton, 2001).

Victims may report increased psychosomatic complaints including headaches, stomachaches, other nonspecific aches and pains, loss of appetite, sleep disorders, and even secondary nocturnal enuresis (Rigby,

1999; Williams, Chambers, Logan & Robinson, 1996). The psychosocial and physical sequelae associated with bullying set the stage for worsening school attendance and academic performance. In summary, what is often brushed off by adults as routine banter between youths and a normal part of childhood development can have a significant long-term impact on the health and well-being of today's youth.

BIBLIOTHERAPY

School nurses' unique position in the school community and professional commitment to the health and well-being of children requires that they take a leadership role in developing and implementing teasing and bullying prevention initiatives. Use of children's literature that deals with teasing and bullying serves as an effective intervention strategy when dealing with these complex issues.

Researchers have documented the association between bullying and psychosocial problems, health symptoms, and academic performance in students of all ages.

Bibliotherapy is using books to help people solve problems. More specifically, it is defined as an approach or family of techniques for structuring interaction between a facilitator and a participant based on the mutual sharing of literature (Pardeck & Pardeck, 1989, 1990). Bibliotherapy is not necessarily a new therapeutic intervention; however, using it as a creative approach to discuss difficult issues such as childhood teasing and bullying is an innovative strategy for school nurses to consider. In order for bibliotherapy to be successful, the child should experience three important stages over the course of interacting with the book: identification, catharsis, and insight (Afolayan, 1992).

Identification

When working through difficult issues, many people want to identify with others who are coping with similar problems. This is, in part, the theory underpinning bibliotherapy. Children first need to identify with fictional characters or situations similar to what they are experiencing in order for bibliotherapy to be therapeutic. Experts in bibliotherapy suggest that "the most important step when using bibliotherapy with students is to match appropriate books with the student and his or her various problems" (Sridhar & Vaughn, 2000, p. 75). Determining which book to use with a student is critical in ensuring that the child is able to identify with the main character and events in the story. To ensure that a book is a good match for a

child, a book needs to be selected with characters who are about the same age as the child, display similar behaviors, and who face events with which the child can identify (Sridhar & Vaughn, 2000). The book should also be at an appropriate reading and developmental level for the child (Pardeck, 1995). School nurses who are conscious of the importance of identification in the process of bibliotherapy and ensure that children are interacting with age and situationally appropriate books will find greater therapeutic effects from bibliotherapy.

Catharsis

If a child is able to identify with the main character and relate to events that unfold in the book, he or she is likely to become emotionally involved in the story. When children are emotionally involved, they develop meaningful ties to the main character, and in doing so the literature facilitates a release of pent-up emotions. During this second stage of bibliotherapy, the child should be encouraged to express these feelings under safe conditions. Many practitioners who have implemented successful bibliotherapy programs encourage follow-up guided discussion sessions. This may work for children who are articulate and comfortable with verbalizing their feelings. Many children, however, will find talking about their feelings uncomfortable. When discussion seems difficult for a child, journaling or written responses might be effective in helping the child work through their emotions. Other strategies that will prove cathartic for children, especially younger students who are still developing verbal skills, include painting, drawing, and dramatization that might include puppets, pantomiming, or role playing (McCarty & Chalmers, 1997). Nurses who use bibliotherapy in their schools will have the opportunity to devote their creative energy toward developing unique experiences for children to process their feelings after identifying with a book. In doing so, the literature will have the effect of mitigating their potentially troubled emotional status.

Insight

The final stage of bibliotherapy is insight. Insight is a "realization that occurs when readers become aware that the problem they are experiencing, like that of the characters in the story, need not remain static" (Sridhar & Vaughn, 2000, p. 75). After the child has identified with the story and experienced a catharsis of emotions, he or she develops awareness that his or her problems might be solved in a similar manner to the characters in the book. It is in the insight stage of bibliotherapy where school nurses can intervene by helping children analyze the decisions and actions that the main characters in the book displayed. Through this analysis, insights are gained into how the child might develop his or her own problem-solv-

ing techniques. Children learn to model the specific coping mechanisms they see the characters in the book using in a way that exceeds most classroom instruction. School nurses implementing a bibliotherapy intervention are well suited to help children explore effective alternative behaviors that can substitute current inappropriate behaviors.

Bibliotherapy is a process that school nurses will find innovative and enriching. It is a therapeutic intervention that can be used to approach any number of topics, but one that is especially effective in working with interpersonal issues such as childhood teasing and bullying. To successfully develop and implement a bibliotherapy program in their schools, nurses must take the time to select appropriate children's literature, create a safe environment for the bibliotherapy to take place, and design sensitive follow-up activities that guide students through the fundamental process of identification, catharsis, and insight (Ouzts, 1991).

BIBLIOTHERAPY AS A SCHOOL NURSING INTERVENTION

Identify Children at Risk

Identification and assessment of children at risk for harmful teasing and bullying is the responsibility of all members of the education team, including bus drivers, administrative assistants, teachers, school counselors, and nurses. Identifying children at risk is the first step in implementing a focused bibliotherapy program that seeks to address this problematic behavior. School nurses have expert assessment skills and the acute ability to pick up on the subtle cues of children who are at highest risk of being bothered by teasing and bullying.

The target child of nasty teasing and bullying is usually a passive recipient, but a small minority are provocative recipients.

No child is immune to some teasing and bullying. As noted earlier, children with traits that set them apart from their peers should be considered at risk. Other children who may be targeted—even if they do not appear to meet the above criterion—include those who present at the health room with repeated non-specific complaints. For example, the child who frequently has headaches because he forgot his lunch money might be a victim of bullying. Children with poorly explained injuries also are often victims.

The target child of nasty teasing and bullying is usually a passive recipient, but a small minority are provocative recipients. Passive recipients, when compared with their peers, have lower self-esteem, initiate

Table 1. Children's Responses From Child Adolescent Teasing in Schools (CATS) Project

- "If you are a bully, you won't make any friends." *Loud Mouth George and the Sixth Grade Bully*, reviewed by Andie, age 7, Montana
- "To fight with your wits instead of your fists." *King of the Kooties*, reviewed by Emmett, age 10, Missouri
- "When you see someone fall or look different that you shouldn't laugh at them." *Don't Laugh at Me*, reviewed by Suzana, age 7, Maine
- "I learned that bullies aren't really the mean person that you think they are inside." *How to Handle Bullies, Teasers and Other Meanies: A Book that Takes the Nuisance Out of Name Calling and Other Nonsense*, reviewed by Melissa, age 10, New Hampshire
- "People and animals come in all different shapes, sizes, and looks, and that no matter your skin color, everyone has feelings." *Nothing Wrong With a Three Legged Dog*, reviewed by Bryan, age 11, New York
- "Not to bully around other people just because they are different." *Robbie and Ronnie*, reviewed by Kienan, age 8, Missouri
- "I learned that being cool isn't about the clothes. It matters about how you treat people and how people like you." *Pinky and Rex and the Bully*, reviewed by Sydney, age 9, Montana

Note. For more children's responses, visit: www.bc.edu/cats.

prosocial behaviors less frequently, and socially withdraw more readily, even before experiencing teasing or bullying (Olweus, 1997). Provocative recipients, or victim-bullies, are often highly disliked by other children (Schuster, 1999). This group is highly aggressive, may have deficient or deviant interpretations of social situations, and tend to provoke their attackers (Martlew & Hodson, 1991; Whitesell & Harter, 1996). Youth from adverse family backgrounds or those with neuro-developmental disorders, such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or certain learning disorders associated with learning/information-processing deficits, are overrepresented in this group (Halperin, et al., 1995; Martlew & Hodson, 1991; Nabuzoka & Smith, 1993). Youth displaying either set of behaviors should be on the school nurse's radar when identifying children at risk for teasing and bullying.

Explore Available Teasing and Bullying Resources

Numerous resources pertinent to teasing and bullying are available and include children's books, multimedia videos, and web sites, with the preponderance being books. These resources are suited to a wide range of age groups and cover a wide breadth of content.

Although most books offer sound advice, the school nurse must critically evaluate the specific suggestions a book offers and consider the appropriateness of the coping strategy proposed based on the specific situation. . .

School nurses who wish to move forward with teasing and bullying primary or secondary prevention initiatives should take the time to thoroughly investigate the books and other resources available to them and select those appropriate for their school. Two specific web sites that provide information about children's literature in addition to other related resources are described below.

The CATS Web Site. The Child Adolescent Teasing in Schools (CATS) web site project, www.bc.edu/cats, has been developed to disseminate information about peer teasing and bullying. As part of the CATS project,

children nationwide were asked to review books on teasing and bullying and describe what they learned from the story. The quotes listed in Table 1 are just a few of the children's responses obtained from recent review of children's literature that validate bibliotherapy as an effective strategy for addressing the topic of teasing and bullying.

Health Resources Services Administration's (HRSA) Prevention Campaign. The HRSA's Maternal-Child Bureau is sponsoring a multiyear public awareness and prevention effort as part of the National Youth Media Campaign. It is specifically designed for "tweens," or middle school students, parents, and others who work with them. A variety of resources, including fact sheets, public service announcements, books, and other materials, are featured. Lists of resources may be accessed through www.stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov. The National Association of School Nurses has contributed to the development of this campaign.

These web sites serve not only as resources for children's book reviews that school nurses may want to investigate, but as appealing electronic venues for children and families to explore. The web sites are user-friendly and oriented toward children seeking information and suggestions on age- and content-appropriate books. Children will see that they are not alone in their experiences related to teasing and bullying. Furthermore, they will come to understand how the books reviewed have helped children in similar situations.

Using Children's Literature on Teasing and Bullying in Bibliotherapy

When school nurses plan to use bibliotherapy, it is important to select appropriate books based on a child's age, developmental level, and situation, and to verify that the suggestions the author is making through the story are reasonable and consistent with current research findings (Table 2). For the most part, current children's literature that portrays the issues of teasing and bullying use poignant examples that echo the research findings reported in the professional literature. For example, Muscari (2002) notes that children who become bullies are often forced to deal with difficult situations at home and bully others in response to their own experiences of prior or current

Table 2. Children's Books on Teasing and Bullying

Book Title	Author	Year	Publisher	ISBN#	Grade
<i>Being Bullied</i>	K. Petty & C. Firmin	1991	Aladdin Books	0-8120-4661-7	K-1st
<i>Benny Gets a Bully-Ache</i>	J. Bomberger & R. Hall	1997	Freedom	0-9638152-4-5	K-2nd
<i>Bullies Are a Pain in the Brain</i>	T. Romain	1997	Free Spirit	1-57542-023-6	4th-5th
<i>Bully on the Bus</i>	C. W. Bosch	1988	Parenting Press	0-94390-42-4	3rd-4th
<i>Bye-Bye, Bully</i>	J. S. Jackson	2003	One Caring Place	0-87029-369-9	K-2nd
<i>Dealing With Bullying</i>	M. Johnston	1998	Hazelden	0-8239-2374-6	2nd-4th
<i>Don't Laugh at Me</i>	S. Seskin & A. Chamblin	2002	Tricycle Press	1-58246-058-2	K-1st
<i>Frankenbug</i>	S. Cousins	2000	Holiday House	0-8234-1496-5	3rd-5th
<i>Hooway for Wodney Wat</i>	H. Lester	1999	Houghton Mifflin	0-395-92392-1	preschool-K
<i>How to Be Cool in the Third Grade</i>	B. Duffey	1993	Puffin Books	0-14-130466-9	2nd-4th
<i>Hugo and the Bully Frogs</i>	F. Simon	1999	David & Charles	1-86223-093-X	2nd-4th
<i>How to Handle Bullies, Teasers, and Other Meanies: A Book that Takes the Nuisance Out of Name Calling and Other Nonsense</i>	K. Cohen-Posey	1995	Rainbow Books	1-56825-029-0	4th-5th
<i>Jag</i>	L. Rhimes	2003	Dutton Children's Books	0-525-47155-3	K-2nd
<i>Jake Drake: Bully Buster</i>	A. Clements	2001	Simon & Schuster	0-689-83917-0	2nd-4th
<i>Just a Bully</i>	G. & M. Mayer	1999	Golden Books	0-307-13200-5	preschool-K
<i>King of the Kooties</i>	D. Dadey	1999	Walker & Co.	0-8027-7622-1	3rd-4th
<i>King of the Playground</i>	P. R. Naylor	1991	Aladdin Paperbacks	0-689-71802-0	1st
<i>Libby Meets the Bully</i>	E. Connor & M. Kinzler	1997	Adbeth Press	0-96584680-6	4th-6th
<i>Loud Mouth George and the Sixth Grade Bully</i>	N. Carlson	2003	Carolrhoda Books	1-57505-218-0	1st
<i>Martha Walks the Dog</i>	S. Meddaugh	1998	Houghton Mifflin	0-395-90494-3	preschool-K
<i>Mean Mean Maureen Green</i>	J. Cox & C. Fisher	2000	Holiday House	0-8234-1502-3	3rd-5th
<i>Mr. Lincoln's Way</i>	P. Polacco	2001	Philomel	0-399-23754-2	1st-3rd
<i>Monster Mama</i>	L. Rosenberg	1993	Philomel	0-399-21989-7	3rd-4th
<i>My Name Is Not Dummy</i>	E. Crary	1983	Parenting Press	1-884734-16-2	K-2nd
<i>Nobody Knew What to Do: A Story About Bullying</i>	B. R. McCain	2001	Albert Whitman & Co.	0-8075-5711-0	K-2nd
<i>Nothing Wrong With a Three Legged Dog</i>	G. McNamee	2000	Dell Yearling	0-440-41687-6	3rd-5th
<i>Patrick and the Big Bully</i>	G. Hayes	2001	Hyperion	0-7868-0717-2	K-1st
<i>Pinky and Rex and the Bully</i>	J. Howe	1996	Aladdin Paperbacks	0-689-80834-8	K-1st
<i>Reluctantly Alice</i>	P. R. Naylor	1991	Aladdin Paperbacks	0-689-31681-X	4th-6th
<i>Robbie and Ronnie</i>	C. Kilphius	2002	North-South Books	0-7358-1626-3	K-2nd
<i>Simon's Hook: A Story About Teases and Put-downs</i>	K. G. Burnett	1999	GR Publishing	0-9668530-1-6	1st-2nd
<i>Stand Tall Molly Lou Melon</i>	P. Lovell	2001	G. P. Putnam's Sons	0-399-23416-0	preschool-2nd
<i>Star Girl</i>	J. Spinelli	2000	Knopf	0-375-82233-X	5th-8th
<i>Stick up for Yourself: Every Kid's Guide to Personal Power and Positive Self-Esteem</i>	G. Kaufman & L. Raphael	1999	Free Spirit	1-57542-068-6	4th-8th
<i>Stop Picking on Me: A First Look at Bullying</i>	P. Thomas	2000	Barron's Educational Series, Inc.	0-7641-1461-1	K-2nd
<i>Talking About Bullying</i>	J. Powell	1999	Raintree Steck-Vaughn	0-8172-5535-4	K-2nd
<i>Telling Isn't Tatting</i>	K. Hammerseng	1995	Parenting Press	1-884734-06-5	2nd-4th
<i>The Ant Bully</i>	J. Nichol	1999	Scholastic Trade	0-590-39591-2	K-2nd
<i>The Berenstain Bears and the Bully</i>	S. & J. Berenstain	1993	Random House	0-679-84805-3	preschool-K
<i>The Berenstain Bears and Too Much Teasing</i>	S. & J. Berenstain	1995	Random House	0-679-87706-1	preschool-K
<i>The Big Bad Bully Bear</i>	G. Hofman	1996	Random House	0-679-87882-3	preschool-K
<i>The Bully Buster Book</i>	J. W. Yee	1997	Outgoing Press	1-896212-03-4	5th-6th
<i>The Bully of Barkham Street</i>	M. Stolz	1985	Harper Trophy	0-06-440159-6	4th-6th
<i>The Meanest Thing to Say</i>	B. Cosby & V. Honeywood	1997	Scholastic, Inc.	0-590-95616-7	2nd-4th
<i>The Recess Queen</i>	A. O'Neil	2002	Scholastic Press	0-439-20637-5	K-1st
<i>The Saturday Kid</i>	E. Sorel	2000	Simon & Schuster	0-689-82399-1	K-4th
<i>The Secret Life of Hubie Hartzel</i>	S. Rowan-Masters	2000	iUniverse.com	0-595-08893-7	4th-7th
<i>Too Smart for Bullies</i>	R. Kahn & S. Chandler	2001	Future Horizons	1-885477-76-7	1st-2nd
<i>Wendy and the Bullies</i>	N. Robinson	1983	Scholastic, Inc.	0-590-44899-4	4th-6th
<i>What Do You Know About Bullying?</i>	P. Sanders	1996	Aladdin	0-7613-0537-8	5th-6th
<i>Why Is Everyone Always Picking on Me?: A Guide to Understanding Bullying for Young People</i>	T. Webster-Doyle	1991	Weatherhill	0-8348-0467-0	4th-6th with an adult
<i>Wonder Kid Meets the Evil Lunch Snatcher</i>	L. Duncan	1990	Springboard Books	0-316-19561-8	5th-7th

abuse and rejection. This is characterized in *The Berenstain Bears and the Bully* (Berenstain & Berenstain, 1993) when Sister Bear realizes that Tuffy, the school yard bully, might be “. . . a cub who maybe gets hit a lot at home. Maybe that’s why she likes to hit other cubs at school” (p. 28).

Although most books offer sound advice, the school nurse must critically evaluate the specific suggestions a book offers and consider the appropriateness of the coping strategy proposed based on the specific situation and student she or he is working with. For example, a common suggestion made by the authors of children’s books is to “tell an adult,” without much attention given to related and often complex contextual issues. Rigby (2002), a childhood bullying expert, notes that approximately 10% of children in schools report that “telling” about being teased or bullied led to matters getting worse. If such a situation is likely, adults working with a child on this issue should provide a range of alternatives of how a child can convey that he or she is being bullied without the risk of being labeled a tattletale.

Reading children’s books in a safe environment can be an effective way to lure difficult stories out of school-age children, as they are often reluctant to share their experiences of being teased or bullied “either from a sense of pride or a sense of fear” (Rigby, 2002, p. 250). In addition, bibliotherapy is useful in promoting discussion with small groups of students with a common condition, such as asthma or obesity. Ideally, the discussion will help children see that they are not alone and stimulate ideas as to how they might handle nasty teasing or bullying. Even in the absence of specific incidents, school nurses should consider strategically placing books on teasing and bullying in the school health office as well as ensuring their availability throughout the school.

Educate Parents and Teachers

School nurses should take the initiative to educate parents and teachers about the issues of teasing and bullying in school and the related health consequences. School nurses might begin by creating a fact sheet for parents on teasing and bullying or select one from the U.S. HRSA Bullying Prevention Campaign web site (www.stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov). In addition, the school newsletter sent to teachers and/or parents is an appropriate place to publish the list of books on teasing and bullying and identify where they are available in the school. The school nurse might consider leading a discussion group with teachers and parents or helping lead a staff in-service or parent meeting. Facilitating this type of exchange in the context of child mental health and well-being is an important leadership role for the school nurse in the school and greater community.

CONCLUSION

Students find the school health room a safe and comforting place where they can talk about difficult issues such as teasing and bullying. School nurses are in an ideal position to identify students who are victims of chronic teasing or bullying. Bibliotherapy is one method that can be readily used when intervening with these youth. Through the exchange that takes place while reading a book or exploring a new resource on the Internet, children can express their feelings to adults and learn new coping mechanisms to deal with difficult issues such as teasing and bullying. School nurses can play an instrumental role in facilitating this process not only in the safe haven of the school health room but also in the greater school community.

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