

## INTRODUCTION

I moved to Los Angeles, California, from Montreal, Canada, when I was ten years old. My parents had divorced, and my mother wanted to start over and create a better life for her two sons. It was a very destabilizing period for my brother and me.

Our first home was a motel on the west side of Los Angeles. From this unfamiliar and transitory setting I entered the fifth grade. I was the new kid, from a divorced family, a foreigner with a Canadian accent. I might as well have had a “ hit me ” sign on my back. I was teased, punched, and made to feel that I didn ’ t belong.

Over the next few years, my family moved around a lot. By the time I entered junior high, I was attending my third new school in three years, still trying to figure out how to fit in but not having much success. The rejection and harassment I was experiencing were taking their toll. I was a pretty troubled kid, anxious about being a target, and longing for a safe place to belong. I tried to fit in by being really friendly, hoping the other kids would accept me, and that way I could avoid being their next victim. Unfortunately, this strategy wasn ’ t successful.

During the second week of school, I got off the bus with an “ uh - oh ” feeling in my gut. Walking toward my first class, I noticed some boys pointing and snickering. Following my plan of trying to get on their good side, I went up to them and sheepishly said, “ Hi. ”

They were all wearing stickers on their shirts, with the letters “ A.R.A. ” written on them. They began laughing, and soon other kids circled around me, chanting “ A — R — A, A — R — A . . . ” One of the ringleaders said, “ How does it feel to know there is an Anti - Rick - Association at this school and that nobody likes you or wants you here? ” His words were like bullets, piercing my sense of self and wounding me deeply. I pushed my way through the crowd, and I ran all the way home, some five miles away.

Exhausted and feeling sick to my stomach, I made it to my bedroom, collapsed, and stayed there for four days — four days of living in my own private hell — wondering, “ Why me? Why did they do that? Why didn ’ t anyone stop them? ” I was so miserable and afraid that my mother couldn ’ t get me to go back to school that whole week.

On Saturday, some neighborhood kids stopped by. They asked if I wanted to play football with them at the local park. It was just what I needed: a reason to get back in the game and back to school.

So, on Monday morning, with sweaty hands and a rapidly beating heart, I returned to school. I was relieved to discover that my tormentors had lost interest in me as a target. For them, it was all a big joke. But for me, it was a traumatic and defining moment in my early adolescence.

— RICK PHILLIPS

WHILE THIS IS THE STORY OF MY JOURNEY AS A YOUNG PERSON, it is also the reality for countless young people today. It is an archetypal tale of being mistreated by one's peers: excluded, teased, insulted, harassed, hit, punched, or worse.

## Why This Book Is Needed

Despite the best efforts of educators and policymakers, mistreatment, bullying, and cruelty are far too commonplace in schools. Seventy-five percent of high school graduates report that they were bullied at school. <sup>1</sup> Every day, an estimated 160,000 young people stay home from school not because they have a doctor's appointment or are ill, but because they are afraid of how other students will treat them. <sup>2</sup> Every day millions more come to school with a knot in their gut, waiting for the next insult, intimidating look, or shove to happen to them or their friends. In schools and in pop culture as a whole, being cool has become closely linked to being cruel. Consequently a pervasive climate of unease and tension permeates schools.

There is no shortage of books addressing the problem of bullying and violence in our schools and communities. Most of these books focus on educating adults about bullying— its characteristics, its causes, and its effects. Some of these books suggest ways the school can address the problem through staff training or parent education. Others are designed to help adults teach an anti-bullying curriculum in a classroom setting. Some include a series of lessons to create awareness, empathy, and understanding among students, and others contain strategies that targets can use to defend themselves against bullying.

However, as we reviewed the literature and assessed the schools' responses to the conditions they face, we observed a troubling trend: students are too often overlooked as a resource for solving the problem. Consider the following:

- Students see, hear, and know things about their peers that adults don't.
- Students can intervene in ways adults can't.
- Students are often on the scene of an incident of student-on-student mistreatment before any adults arrive.
- Students shape and set the norms that govern how other students treat each other.

In spite of these realities, many adults don't see or tap into students' power. The remedies most books prescribe are primarily adult driven. They focus on doing things to, for, and at students rather than with them.

*Safe School Ambassadors* offers a student-centered departure from those tactics, an approach grounded in our experience as practitioners and our deep belief in young people as allies, contributors, and agents of positive change.

## A Shared Vision

Coming from very different backgrounds, we three authors have joined together to write *Safe School Ambassadors* because we share in common:

- A concern that too many young people experience far too much bullying and cruelty at the hands of their peers and that their pain must be stopped
- A belief that young people are powerful and uniquely positioned to effectively solve this problem, breaking the cycle of mistreatment and stopping the pain
- A vision that all students, no matter who they are or where they come from, can attend a school free of cruelty, bullying, and violence; a school where they feel welcome, included, and physically and emotionally safe

*Safe School Ambassadors* is not about “fixing” students. On the contrary, this book is about believing in young people’s ability to contribute to and be part of the solution. This book derives from our core belief that students are, as former dean of students at Indiana University Robert Schaffer put it, “not empty bottles to be filled but candles to be lit.”<sup>3</sup> Youth development theory combined with our years of practice have shown us that when young people are provided with training, support, and opportunities, they can courageously and competently reduce violence and improve school climate.

Most schools address the problem of student-on-student mistreatment as adults see it: overt bullying and physical violence. They respond with what we characterize as an outside-in approach — one that is heavily focused on security, driven by adults, and based on rules. Although this approach appears to have reduced gun violence at school, it is not a complete solution to the problem. The outside-in approach does not effectively address the mistreatment that bubbles beneath the surface, which is out of sight of adults until it erupts in a form of visible violence.

*Safe School Ambassadors* takes a different view and looks at what students see: a vast universe of peer-on-peer mistreatment that includes rumors and relational aggression, teasing and taunting, exclusion, harassment, and more. The vast majority of this mistreatment goes unnoticed by adults. However, it has significant costs, not only for the targets but for the aggressors, the bystanders, and the school as a whole. For these reasons, this book presents a complementary inside-out approach: one that is based on current research on bullying and social norms change. This approach focuses on relationships, students, and norms.

Why go beyond security? While security can stop guns at the school entrance, it can’t stop students from bringing in the prejudices, grudges, and attitudes that fuel the bullying and cruelty that students experience. Focusing on the importance of relationships builds and strengthens trust and connections among

students and adults. Why can't adults address school violence effectively by themselves? Because young people know more about their peers' feelings and plans and are in a better position to address the mistreatment in their midst. Why aren't rules enough? Because young people's behavior is governed by social norms more than it is by rules. Our inside-out approach is based on the most recent research on bullying and social norms change.

## **The Safe School Ambassadors Program**

We have used this inside-out approach as a basis to develop the Safe School Ambassadors program. Safe School Ambassadors (SSA) was developed in 1999 to help prevent and stop mistreatment and cruelty among students in fourth through twelfth grades.

As of December 2007, the program has been implemented in more than 550 schools in North America. SSA is a research-based and field-tested model that has involved more than twenty-five thousand young people and taught them how to break the cycle of mistreatment. The program engages, equips, and empowers adolescents with the skills, support, and opportunities they need to intervene with their peers and effectively reduce incidents of bullying and violence — in the halls, on the playground, in the lunch area, and wherever else mistreatment occurs.

Research shows that 70 to 85 percent of students have been passive bystanders to peer mistreatment. Most often, they do not intervene because they fear retaliation or don't know what to do or say. Their silence amounts to tacit consent, which reinforces an environment of cruelty and mistreatment. SSA training mobilizes the bystanders, but not just any bystanders. Socially influential opinion leaders (the students who shape the school's norms) from the diverse groups and cliques on campus are carefully identified and chosen by both the school faculty and their peers. SSA then trains these social leaders and some key adults in nonviolent communication and intervention skills to prevent, deescalate, and stop mistreatment among their peers.

The SSA program is sustained through regularly scheduled small group meetings under the supportive leadership of the key adults who were trained alongside the students. These group meetings have several purposes: the ambassadors strengthen their skills to become increasingly effective; they share their experiences and exchange encouragement and support for their efforts; and they record their interventions and observations, providing important data for the school.

Schools that have implemented the SSA program report a reduction in violence, mistreatment, and tension among students. The SSA program also fosters

increased tolerance and acceptance of diversity, as well as an environment that encourages higher grades and better attendance.

As Chapter Nine describes in detail, the feedback from hundreds of schools has demonstrated that students use these skills to intervene with their peers when they witness mistreatment. As a result, the behavioral norms that guide students' behavior change, and the school's social and emotional climate improves. Discipline incidents decrease, while attendance and academic achievement increase.

## **Making the Most of This Book**

This book is written primarily for a school-based audience: school counselors, administrators, classroom teachers, teacher aides, district personnel, school board members, parents, parent-teacher associations, social workers, school resource officers, coaches, and after-school program providers. Nevertheless, the issues and strategies described in the book are equally important to all adults who offer programs and services to children and adolescents — those in parks and recreation settings, Boys & Girls Clubs, YMCAs, religious and faith-based programs, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, 4-H groups, summer camps, and all the other places where young people gather. In each of these settings, adults must implement effective strategies to reduce mistreatment and create environments that are physically and emotionally safe.

*Safe School Ambassadors* provides new research and ideas for reexamining how we see and respond to bullying and violence in schools. The book looks at how to improve school climate and provides strategies for tapping into, nurturing, and harnessing the power of young people. Although it wasn't written as a guide for implementing the complete Safe School Ambassadors program, it will help adults to connect with students as allies to help reduce bullying and violence, and it will provide key strategies for creating safer schools. We also believe the book can help you inspire your colleagues in schools and youth-serving agencies to join you in these efforts.

The book is divided into four parts. Part One focuses on the climate in schools today. It highlights the latest research and statistics about bullying, categorizes and defines the types of mistreatment, examines the costs to students and adults, and evaluates existing efforts to address the problem. Even if you are somewhat familiar with the problem of bullying and cruelty in schools, Part One will give you a solid overview and new information that will help you be an articulate and effective advocate for the strategies and approaches presented in Parts Two through Four.

Part Two provides an in-depth look at the inside - out approach, a complement to rather than a replacement for the existing outside - in approach that has been implemented in most schools. It also examines school climate, five main factors or determinants that shape it, and the role of climate in school safety, and it sets out ten keys to creating safer schools.

Part Three describes a different way of working with and being with young people, one that is based on empowerment and seeing them not as consumers but as contributors, not as problems but as solutions. The chapters in this part offer our formula for youth development and explore the role of bystanders in the dynamics of mistreatment. We also explain how to mobilize the bystanders and break the code of silence that permeates so much of today's youth culture. Finally, it presents an overview of the SSA model. It explains how SSA can be implemented in both school and after-school settings and gives examples of ambassadors who have diffused, de-escalated, and prevented violence.

Part Four guides readers in how to be informed and effective advocates for the inside-out approach to creating safer school climates. Chapter Ten can help readers gain the support and buy-in of key decision makers in their school and the community. It can help those new to this way of thinking see the wisdom of empowering youth to reduce bullying and violence and to improve the social and emotional climate of all the places where young people gather. Regardless of your role or relationship to students, you can use the material to make a clear and convincing case for successfully initiating youth involvement.

Throughout the book, we present the stories and observations of students we have worked with around the country. These examples of actions by and voices from students show the problem from that student's perspective. Some of the students' names have been changed for privacy reasons. However, the statements are true, and we have tried to use the students' own words wherever possible. We also share some of our own stories, and though they are the experiences of three separate individuals, we have just written them in the first person as if there were a single author.

We invite you to join us in making our vision a reality for the young people in your life, your school, and your community. Together we can engage, equip, and empower young people to transform their schools from institutions into communities characterized by acceptance, compassion, and respect.