CONFESSIONS
OF A
SOCIAL BULLY

Lisa E. Cohen, MSW, LSWAIC

Discussion Guide

Natasha as a middle-schooler.

For too long, we have failed to recognize that youth who bully others are in need of intervention just as much as their targets, and until we understand the motives undergirding perpetrators' actions, the efficacy of our interventions will always be limited. *The Confessions of a Social Bully* program refreshingly and effectively addresses this gap. Its message will resonate with school youth.

— *Dorothy L. Espelage, PhD*

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International Expert in Bullying and Youth Aggression, and Teen Dating Violence

Confessions of a Social Bully

Discussion Guide

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There are countless reasons why some students engage in bullying behaviors, most of which have nothing to do with those they target.

Introduction

About the Program

Confessions of a Social Bully is the first film dedicated to humanizing a perpetrator of school bullying. Most films about bullying examine the issue from the perspective of the target and/or the bystander. As a society, we tend to show more compassion for the targets of bullying, but all students involved in this complicated dynamic need support and guidance from the adults in their lives. Targets need our compassion and advocacy for being the focus of unwanted and unnecessary aggression. Bystanders need our encouragement because they are key to creating an environment of care and respect. And perpetrators need our attention because their actions often indicate deeper problems that have little to do with those they target.

To help students develop a broader, more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of bullying, this Discussion Guide asks students to consider the experiences of everyone caught in the bullying cycle, including the target, the bystander, and the perpetrator.

In addition to encouraging your students' curiosity about what influences others' behavior, it is important to reflect upon how your school's broader social environment affects student responses to bullying. Sample considerations:

- **What action does your school take to prevent aggression and promote pro-social behavior?**
- **What efforts do teachers make to promote the emotional well-being of their students?**
- **Do students feel comfortable reporting bullying incidents to teachers and other staff members?**
- **What types of disciplinary action does your school take when students engage in bullying, aggression, or violence?**

At schools in which teachers and staff members demonstrate a commitment to preventing bullying and establishing supportive, caring relationships with their students, students report fewer incidents of bullying and are more likely to seek help when bullying occurs.[1] As you watch the film and discuss key issues, consider the role your school's social culture plays in the experiences of students involved in dynamics similar to those between Natasha and Jane, or for students who may be involved in more direct forms of aggression. Ask yourself how you can help students continue building awareness beyond this exercise. How can you become a trusted resource for students both in and outside the classroom?

I hope this guide inspires students' curiosity and reflection as they analyze the film, themselves, and your school's social environment.

Jane asks Natasha for permission to buy the same shoes Natasha has.

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[1] Eliot et al.

About the Film

Synopsis

Natasha and Jane became fast friends before sixth grade started, but things quickly changed within the first few weeks of school. Jane proved to be a good student and a talented actor, the only sixth-grader to earn a major role in the school play. Natasha grew intensely jealous of Jane and increasingly insecure about her own abilities.

The only area in which Natasha was more successful than Jane was in her social savvy. As Natasha climbed the social ladder, she decided to use her power against Jane in an effort to boost her own self-esteem. By the middle of sixth grade, Natasha had embarked upon a campaign to punish Jane socially while still basking in her own popularity. Natasha's powerful position in the popular group enabled her to control Jane's status as class outcast for most of her time in middle school.

Things changed at the end of eighth grade, when Jane bravely confronted her entire cohort about their cruelty, forcing Natasha to begin a years-long journey of self-examination. Along the way, Natasha grew to understand her actions and the motivations behind them, and she discovered the true meaning of compassion.

Running Time
15:30

Natasha used her social power to exclude Jane.

Director's Statement

Confessions of a Social Bully is the first film about bullying told solely from the perspective of the perpetrator. Most media portray kids who engage in bullying behaviors as cruel, one-dimensional monsters. But kids who bully bring a complex range of personal, family, and social experiences to every social encounter, and those experiences contribute to the ways in which they behave toward others.

I made *Confessions of a Social Bully* to bring the perpetrator's voice into the public discussion on bullying. Without this "missing voice," how can we have truly meaningful discussions about the dynamics of bullying, and especially about bullying prevention?

Understanding what causes some kids to bully others is essential to our ability to recognize the signs of potential or building aggression so that we can intervene in bullying incidents armed with knowledge and empathy for all parties involved. Only when we learn to address the needs of all kids in the bullying cycle will we be able to provide effective and comprehensive bullying-prevention efforts.

I have played every role in the bullying cycle—the target, the bystander, and for one regrettable summer between Grades 7 and 8, I joined a group of girls in bullying a peer. When I first envisioned this film, I had forgotten the details of that summer. But as soon as I began my research, memories of what I had done came flooding back, and I felt deeply ashamed of my role in harming a girl who did not deserve to be treated so cruelly. I realized that with some help from a perceptive adult, I might have learned to reflect on the circumstances that fed my motivation to bully, and perhaps this awareness would have empowered me to walk away from my co-perpetrators—or better yet—to influence them to stop the bullying along with me.

But that did not happen, and the shame of those memories are part of what prompted me to create a film meant to speak directly to kids who have bullied or are contemplating bullying others, in order to encourage them to evaluate the reasons behind their actions.

Photo: Kim Preston

There have been two unexpected outcomes of making *Confessions.* The first is that the film has played to more young audience members than I had ever imagined, reaching students in film festivals and classrooms around the world. After a two-year festival run, *Confessions* has enjoyed repeat screenings throughout the US, in Greece, and in classrooms all across India.

The second unexpected outcome of making *Confessions* is that I became so inspired by the prospect of bringing its message to young audiences that I decided to deepen my knowledge about bullying, child development, and psychology. The year I completed the film, I enrolled in the University of Washington School of Social Work master's program, where I focused my studies on school bullying and social emotional learning (SEL). After earning my MSW, I began using *Confessions* to conduct anti-bullying workshops in middle schools. I am pleased to have found a way to combine my love of filmmaking and my passion for SEL!

With Special Thanks to Natasha

When I met Natasha, she was 20 years old and had had several years to reflect on her time in middle school. I was immediately impressed by her willingness to take an honest look at why she had bullied Jane for nearly three years. I wanted our film to shed light on Natasha's insecurities so that audiences would see her as an adolescent who was trying to make sense of her life and give herself what she needed emotionally, but who lacked the proper tools to do so in a healthier and more responsible way. Fortunately, both for me as the filmmaker, and for the film's viewers, Natasha agreed.

It is not easy to admit to having purposely hurt another person. It is even harder to go in front of a camera and talk about how and why you did so. But Natasha had done enough soul searching to know that telling her story could help others in similar situations. To date, over 10,000 audience members around the world have seen *Confessions of a Social Bully*, and I hope that with the addition of this Discussion Guide, countless more will be inspired by Natasha to examine their own social environments and the roles they play in them. Thank you, Natasha, for your candor, vulnerability, and bravery!

By the time she was 20, Natasha had spent years reflecting on her middle school experience.

Information About Bullying

Definitions

Bullying is unwanted aggressive behavior among school-aged children that involves a real or perceived power imbalance. The behavior is repeated, or has the potential to be repeated, over time. Both kids who are bullied and who bully others may have serious lasting problems.[2]

Three defining characteristics of bullying are:

- **Intention:** one party chooses to target another
- **Imbalance of power:** one party has more physical or social power than another
- **Repeated over time:** the behavior persists, with the more powerful party always in the role of the aggressor

Conflict is a disagreement, an argument, or a struggle between opposing parties. It is common for students to engage in conflict. Most of the time, conflicts between students can be resolved by the students coming to mutual understanding on their own or with the help of an intermediary (student or adult) in a process known as *relationship repair* or *restorative conversation*.

The chart below illustrates important distinctions between *bullying* and *conflict*.

Roles People Play in the Bullying Cycle

Bullying roles include:

- **Perpetrator:** a person who engages in bullying behaviors
- **Target:** a person toward whom bullying behaviors are directed
- **Bystander:** a person who witnesses bullying and does not stand up to stop it
- **Upstander:** a person who witnesses bullying and does something to stop it, either in the moment or after a bullying incident has occurred

Categories of Bullying

The four primary categories of bullying are:

- **Physical:** hurting a person's body or possessions
- **Verbal:** saying cruel things directly to a person
- **Cyber:** using any digital means to harm a person (social media, texting, emailing)
- **Social/relational aggression:** harming a person's reputation or relationships with others

	BULLYING	**CONFLICT**
INTENTION	one-sided intent to harm on the part of the aggressor	intention focuses on emphasizing one's agenda rather than harming one another
POWER	an imbalance of power (social and/or physical), with the aggressor holding more power than the target	both parties have equal social or physical power
FREQUENCY	behavior is repeated, or has the potential to be repeated, over time	can happen one time or more than once

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[2] StopBullying.gov

BULLYING-FACTS & STATISTICS

Kids who bully fall into two categories:[3]

• Well connected, have social power, are overly concerned about popularity.

• Socially isolated, may be depressed or anxious, have low self-esteem, are less involved in school.

Risk factors for bullying victimization:[4]

"different" annoying low self-esteem depressed anxious uncool less weak popular

Approximately 20% of students ages 12–18 nationwide report being bullied at school.[7]

Involvement in bullying peaks in middle school.[5]

Only 20% of school bullying incidents are reported.[6]

LGBTQ youth are at increased risk of being bullied.[8]

Risk factors for bullying perpetration:[9]

easily frustrated view violence aggressive think badly of others in a positive way difficulty following rules less parental involvement have friends who bully others issues at home

Students who perceive teachers and school staff as supportive are more likely to seek help for bullying.[10]

Discussion Guide

To deepen students' understanding of the film and enhance your discussion, follow these steps:

1. Pass out the *Bullying* Definition, Roles, and Categories Handout (see page 12).

2. Review the definition of *bullying* and how it differs from *conflict*.

First, ask students what they know about bullying. Then develop a class definition of *bullying*, being sure to include the following:

- Unwanted aggressive behavior
- Intention: one person/group chooses to target another
- Imbalance of power: one party has more physical or social power than the other
- Repeated over time: the behavior persists, with the more powerful party always in the role of the aggressor

Now compare *bullying* with *conflict,* which occurs when people disagree, argue, or struggle but without intent to harm, an imbalance of power, or repeated aggression.

Have students privately reflect on a time when they think they have experienced bullying. Then ask them to reconsider whether it was bullying or conflict.

3. Review the roles people play in the bullying cycle.

Ask students to privately reflect on which roles, if any, they may have played in a bullying incident.

4. Review the four main categories of bullying.

Prior to watching the video, ask students to privately reflect on whether they have experienced any of those bullying types.

5. Watch *Confessions of a Social Bully*.

Explain to students that they will be watching a film about bullying and prompt them to pay attention to how each person feels throughout the film.

Show the film.

6. Discuss the following key issues in the film:

▪ **Confidence and Self-Esteem**

Natasha states that although she appeared happy throughout middle school, she was struggling beneath the surface.

- What are some examples of how Natasha's public image differed from the way she was feeling inside?
- What did Natasha hope to gain from bullying Jane?
- How do you think Natasha felt after a bullying incident?
- Do you think her feelings were different depending on whether she was alone or with one or more friends? Why or why not?
- What do you think Natasha could have done to feel better about herself without resorting to bullying Jane?
- What did Natasha need from the adults in her life? How could she have communicated her feelings about herself, Jane, and the whole situation to them?

Beneath the facade of popularity, Natasha struggled with feelings of insecurity.

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³ StopBullying.gov, "Who Is at Risk"
⁴ StopBullying.gov, "Who Is at Risk"
⁵ Espelage, Van Ryzin, and Holt
⁶ StopBullying.gov, "Warning Signs for Bullying"
⁷ US Department of Education
⁸ StopBullying.gov, "LGBTQ Youth"
⁹ StopBullying.gov, "Who Is at Risk"
¹⁰ Espelage, Polanin, and Low

■ **Social Bullying/Relational Aggression**

Social bullying, or *relational aggression*, is the intent to harm someone by damaging their relationships with others. It includes ignoring, spreading rumors, excluding, and withholding friendship. It is the most difficult type of bullying to detect; for this reason, it is sometimes called *silent bullying*.

- What are some examples of how and where Natasha used relational aggression against Jane?

- What are some examples of relational aggression that you have witnessed? Where did they take place? Did other people notice?

■ **Social Power**

The term *social power* refers to a person's capacity to influence their peers, and potentially, the broader social environment. Students with social power tend to be popular or have friends in popular groups. They can be quiet or outgoing, and they come from all backgrounds.

Natasha gossiped about Jane to influence others and maintain her superior social status.

Natasha had a lot of social power within her middle school cohort. She was popular, had lots of friends, and knew how to influence her peers. Jane, on the other hand, had virtually no social power. With few friends and little influence on her peers, Jane was an easy target for Natasha.

- Why did Natasha use her social power against Jane?

- Why do you think Natasha's friends went along with Natasha in deciding they "didn't like" Jane?

- What could Natasha's friends have said or done to persuade Natasha not to take out her jealousy on Jane?

- How can someone use their social power for good?

- Have you ever used your social power, or witnessed someone else using their social power, to help someone? How?

- Have you ever used your social power to harm someone? What did you do and why? How did you feel (physically, emotionally) about your actions? Did your behavior make you feel good? Bad? Both? Explain.

- Have you ever witnessed someone else using their social power to harm someone? What did they do and why do you think they did it? How do you think it made them feel? Good? Bad? Both? Explain.

■ **Differences and Similarities**

Differences come in many forms—some you can see and hear, and some you cannot. Students with physical, developmental, intellectual, emotional, or sensory challenges are at higher risk of being bullied, as are students of color, immigrants, and those who identify as LGBTQ.[11]

While Natasha does not explicitly identify a difference she saw in Jane, she admits that she refused to get to know Jane beyond the surface of their initial friendship. That made it easier for Natasha to reject Jane and ultimately consider her different from the other girls in the group.

- What are some things (race, religion, accent, physical disability, clothing, hairstyle) that make people seem different in ways you can see or hear?

- What are some things (religion, learning challenges, other disabilities) that make people seem different in ways you cannot see or hear?

- What are some similarities that people who appear *different from* one another share?

- What are some differences that people who appear *similar to* one another might have?

- Do you think Natasha felt different from her classmates? If so, how?

- In what ways did Natasha and her friends perceive Jane as different from them?

- What similarities did Natasha and Jane share?

- What are some ways in which you feel different from your peers?

- What are some ways in which you feel similar to your peers?
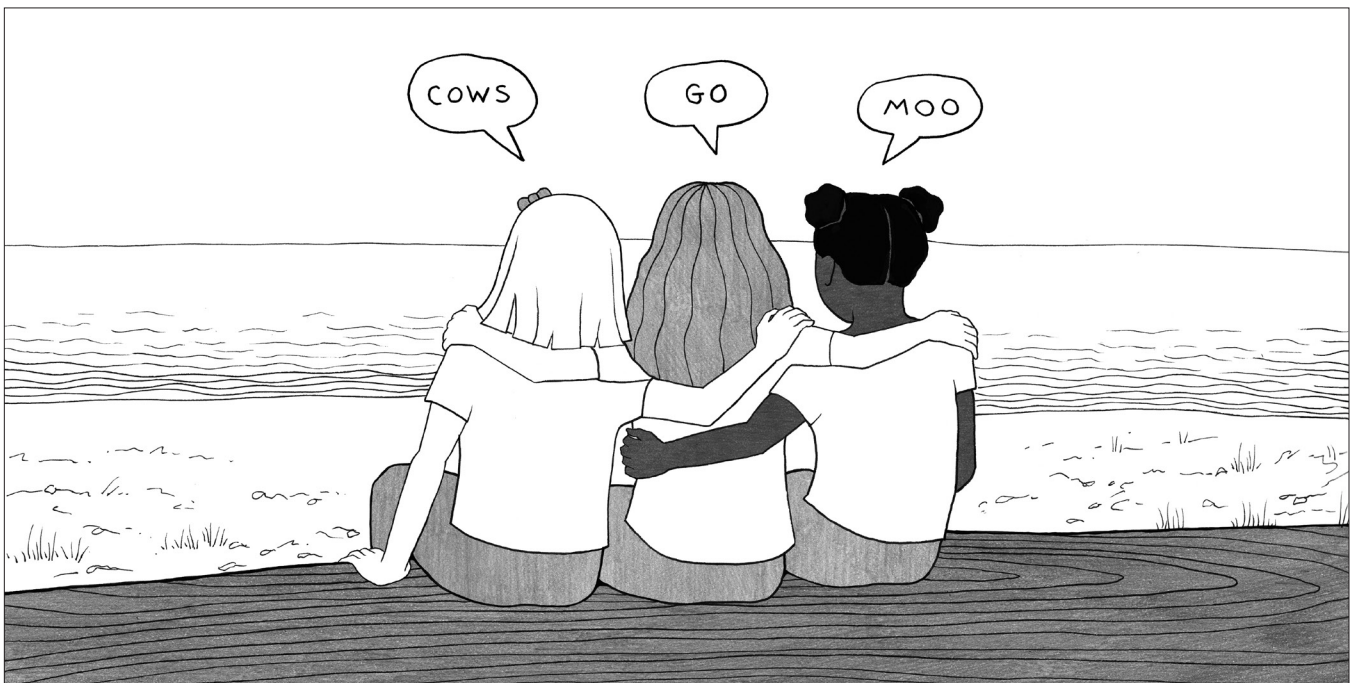
Natasha and Jane initially became friends because they had similar interests.

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[11] Goldman, *Bullied*

Discussion Guide, continued

■ **Assumptions—Stories We Tell Ourselves**

It is easy to make snap judgments about people based on what we first notice. Natasha states that she did not truly get to know Jane until high school. Even though Natasha saw Jane every day, she made no effort to get to know Jane beyond the surface. Instead, Natasha made assumptions about Jane—that Jane was not cool or interesting or fun—because Natasha needed to justify her bullying behavior to herself and to her friends. Natasha told herself the story that Jane was not worth including in her group of friends so that she could have someone to blame for her own shortcomings.

- What assumptions did Natasha make about Jane?

- Why did Natasha accept the story she told herself about Jane? What did she gain from that story?

- Natasha states that in high school she finally "made an effort" to get to know Jane. Why do you think she did not want to get to know Jane in middle school?

- Think of a time when you assumed something about someone you did not know. What were those assumptions based on? What was the story you told yourself that you did not really know or could not prove? What did your story give you that you felt you needed?

- What are some general assumptions you make about people who are different from you in race, gender, sexual orientation, age, physical or mental ability, or other ways?

When Natasha finally allowed herself to look beyond the assumptions she had made about Jane, she realized what an interesting person Jane was.

Discussion Guide, continued

■ **Standing Up**

Bystanders to bullying incidents can play different roles, most of which encourage the bullying to continue. Some bystanders join in a bullying incident initiated by another student or group of students. Others provide reinforcement by laughing at or cheering on bullying incidents. Often, bystanders watch the bullying incident and do not say or do anything to support either side, which conveys tolerance without the threat of consequences.

Students who step in to defend or comfort a target are sometimes called *upstanders*. Upstanders can play a key role in reshaping an environment that may be permissive to bullying into one that does not allow bullying to occur unchallenged.

- What are some of the reasons why Natasha's friends and classmates joined Natasha in bullying Jane?

- What feelings do you think the bystanders might have had about the bullying?

- What do you think the bystanders could have done to intervene, either during a bullying incident or afterward? How could the bystanders have encouraged Natasha to stop bullying Jane?

- What are some ways in which the bystanders could have supported Jane, either during a bullying incident or afterward?

- Have you ever witnessed a bullying incident and joined in? Have you supported the bullying by laughing or cheering? Or watched and remained silent? What are some ways in which you could have stood up, either in the moment or after the incident?

- What are some reasons why it can be difficult to intervene in a bullying incident, either in the moment or after it is over?

- In what ways do you think a school environment can influence whether a student stands up to bullying? Do you feel supported by the adults (teachers, staff, administrators) in your school? Would you feel comfortable reporting a bullying incident?

- What are some things you learned from the movie and our discussion that you will keep in mind the next time you witness a bullying incident, taking both the perpetrator's and target's perspectives into consideration?

■ **Compassion**

Compassion is kindness and caring for a person who is struggling or in distress. Natasha says she did not know how to be compassionate toward others because she did not know how to be compassionate toward herself.

- What does Natasha mean when she talks about the difference between being compassionate toward yourself and feeling sorry for yourself?

- What does *compassion* mean to you?

- Share some examples of acts of compassion you have engaged in or witnessed.

- What are some examples of how you can be compassionate toward yourself?

Natasha had assumed Jane was not strong enough to reveal how badly her classmates had treated her, and was surprised when Jane finally stood up for herself.

Handout: *Bullying* Definition, Roles, and Categories

Definition of *Bullying* and How Bullying Differs from Conflict

Bullying is unwanted aggressive behavior among school-aged children that involves a real or perceived power imbalance. The behavior is repeated, or has the potential to be repeated, over time. Both kids who are bullied and who bully others may have serious, lasting problems.[12]

Three defining characteristics of bullying are:

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The chart below illustrates the important ways in which *bullying* differs from *conflict*.

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Bullying roles include:

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[12] StopBullying.gov

Recommended Resources

Social and Emotional Learning

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) is a comprehensive resource on evidence-based SEL programing and policy.

casel.org

Committee for Children is a leading creator of research- and evidence-based SEL programs.

cfchildren.org

Roots of Empathy is an empathy-building program that brings infants into classrooms to teach students empathy skills.

rootsofempathy.org

StopBullying.gov, managed by the US Department of Health and Human Services, is an excellent source for facts about bullying.

stopbullying.gov

Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence conducts research and offers professional trainings on emotional intelligence. They created the Recognizing-Understanding-Labeling-Expressing-Regulating (RULER) approach to school-wide SEL implementation.

ycei.org

It took years for Natasha to truly understand the effect she had had on Jane.

Books for Educators

UnSelfie: Why Empathetic Kids Succeed in Our All-About-Me World by Michele Borba, EdD. New York: Touchstone, 2016.

The Bully, the Bullied, and the Not-So-Innocent Bystander by Barbara Coloroso. New York: Harper Collins, 2016.

Bullied: What Every Parent, Teacher, and Kid Needs to Know About Ending the Cycle of Fear by Carrie Goldman. New York: Harper Collins, 2012.

Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ by Daniel Goleman. New York: Bantam Dell, 2005 (10th-anniversary edition).

Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys by Dan Kindlon, PhD and Michael Thompson, PhD. New York: Ballantine Books, 1999.

Brainstorm: The Power and Purpose of the Teenage Brain by Daniel J. Siegel, MD. New York: Penguin, 2013.

Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls by Rachel Simmons. Boston: Mariner Books, 2011.

Queen Bees and Wannabees: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends, and the New Realities of Girl World by Rosalind Wiseman. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2009.

Books for Young Readers

Blubber by Judy Blume. New York: Atheneum, 2014 (40th-anniversary reissue). This book examines the complexities of bullying through the eyes of the main character, Jill, whose experience spans every role in the bullying cycle. Bullying categories include verbal, physical, and social. Ages 8–14.

Out of My Mind by Sharon M. Draper. New York: Atheneum, 2010. Born with cerebral palsy, Melody is trapped inside her body. This harrowing and inspiring story portrays how others disregard Melody because of her physical differences, and how she fights to be seen for her exceptional abilities. Bullying categories include verbal and social. Ages 10+.

The Hundred Dresses by Eleanor Estes. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014 (60th-anniversary reissue). In this classic story, Wanda suffers social rejection at school because her family is poor and new to this country. Told from the perspective of Maggie, a bystander/accomplice to the social bullying of Wanda. Bullying categories include verbal and social. Ages 6–10.

The Julian Chapter by R. J. Palacio. New York: Knopf, 2014 (digital edition). This novella takes a deep dive into the life of Julian, Auggie's main perpetrator in the book *Wonder*, examining the many outside factors that have led Julian to treat Auggie with contempt. Bullying categories include verbal and social. Ages 8–12.

Wonder by R. J. Palacio. New York: Knopf, 2012. The story of Auggie—a boy whose facial anomalies make him stand out from his peers—is told from multiple characters' perspectives, allowing the reader a full range of insight into his journey to become accepted at school. Bullying categories include physical, verbal, and social. Ages 8–12.

Stargirl by Jerry Spinelli. New York: Knopf, 2000. The story of the social isolation of a magical girl named Stargirl, who does not conform to conventional high school norms and expectations. Told from the perspective of Leo, Stargirl's friend and silent bystander to the bullying. Bullying categories include verbal and social. Ages 12+.

Gossiping about Jane became a daily habit for Natasha and her friends. Targeted students often report that lunch is the most difficult period of their school day.

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Natasha was neither aware of how her thoughts and feelings about *herself* led her to bully Jane, nor did she consider how her actions affected Jane's self-esteem.

Web Resources

"Facts About Bullying," StopBullying.gov, accessed September 10, 2020, https://www.stopbullying.gov/resources/facts.

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I didn't feel like I knew how to be compassionate... I realized that I wasn't really [being] compassionate toward myself so how could I be compassionate toward anybody else? When you're compassionate toward yourself you're able to understand and look at why you do the negative things you do and how those things negatively affect you. And [then you can] start to work toward moving through that.

— *Natasha*