INSIGHT INTO

CHILD AND
ADULT BULLYING

Helena Wilkinson
Waverley Abbey Insight Series

The Waverley Abbey Insight Series has been developed in response to the great need to help people understand and face some key issues that many of us struggle with today. CWR’s ministry spans teaching, training and publishing, and this series draws on all of these areas of ministry.

Sourced from material first presented over Insight Days by CWR at either Waverley Abbey House or Pilgrim Hall, presenters and authors have worked in close co-operation to bring this series together, offering clear insight, teaching and help on a broad range of subjects and issues. Bringing biblical understanding and godly insight, these books are written both for those who help others and those who face these issues themselves.
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Dedication
In my research I have come across some amazing people whose lives were once shattered by the disempowerment and long-term consequences of bullying. Their contributions have given me a wider perspective of the depth and complexities involved and I dedicate this book to them in honour of the rebuilding of their broken lives.

Thanks
My grateful thanks go to Nikki Cole, who has endless patience and much skill in pulling apart my writing and challenging me to see beyond my initial limited view.

Disclaimer
Whilst I hold qualifications in counselling I do not claim to be an expert in the field of bullying. My insights come from personal experience, research and interviews with targets of bullying. The information given is accurate to the best of my knowledge.

Other books by Helena Wilkinson
INTRODUCTION

Bullying in the UK is reaching epidemic proportions. It is said that 69% of children are bullied at school.¹ Bullying is a very real problem for a large number of people at work too² and many have been bullied within relationships and in other contexts. However, most would struggle to admit to themselves that they are being, or have been, bullied, let alone tell anyone.

Being bullied is a nightmare from which you long to wake. Your mind races as it revisits the distorted words, incriminating comments and unjust actions of the bully. Anxiety soars in anticipation of what’s going to happen next and feelings of powerlessness overwhelm.

For many years if I heard the word ‘bullying’ I would be transported to my convent boarding school where, as a quivering ten-year-old, I endured emotional torment and physical punishment on a regular basis. Bullying in the day ate into my self-confidence and stirred up feelings of not being liked, wanted or valued. Bullying at night was the worst because I knew that no one would ever see or suspect what was happening.

Overwhelmed by feelings of isolation, and having been told not to tell or I’d die, I’d lie awake, staring out of the little window opposite my bed. My heart was aching for connection with someone who cared and I longed for a way out of the web of silent suffering. My tear-filled eyes would scan the night sky and be drawn to the bright light of the moon which offered a glimmer of hope. I’d seen the historic landing of Neil Armstrong and team when I was about five years old and in my naivety I thought there was still a man on the moon.

‘It’s happened again,’ I’d whisper.

Of course I never received a response, but somehow that didn’t
matter. Just knowing someone was listening (or so I thought) was a great source of comfort.

Being bullied as a child put me in a vulnerable position as an adult. Time and again I would find myself sucked into the manipulation and control of other people, causing no end of complications. It took me considerable time to realise that these traumatic encounters, even with people deemed as ‘safe’, were, in fact, bullying in a different guise.

In my work (largely with people with eating disorders) I began to notice a similar pattern: the person traumatised as a child and not helped to deal with their vulnerability becomes an easy target for repeated adult bullying. My personal and professional experiences led to a passion to write a book addressing both childhood and adulthood bullying that would empower people to grow in courage, strength and skill. You may not always find it comfortable reading this book, but I encourage you to persevere. If you, yourself, have been a target of bullying, I believe that by the end you will have gained, amongst other things, hope and strength to face bullying and to heal from its effects. If you are a friend, family member, helper or counsellor, I believe the insights you gain will help the target to take courage and face the issues, and will enable you to journey together towards healing.

Helena Wilkinson
Gower, Swansea 2012
Half the population are bullied … most people only realise it when they read this page.

Tim Field

SPOTTING THE TARGET
Some years ago, whilst on a speaking tour in Zimbabwe, I was watching a group of sun-scorched elephants churning up the earth and graciously dropping the much sought-after trace elements into their mouths. In a split second the tranquility of the early morning African wilderness was rudely interrupted by a large vulture swooping down at great speed, forcibly snatching the bacon from my plate and leaving me rather stunned. Bullying is not dissimilar: the bully has their eye on a target, swoops in, attacks and leaves the person reeling.

Sometimes the attack is less obvious but equally damaging. Rather than acting with force, an unassuming bird craftily sidles up to a little sea creature and persistently pecks away at
its shell. The tapping of the sharp beak eventually cracks the outside, leaving the tender inside raw and exposed; in the same way the bully consistently undermines the target, who becomes a shadow of their former self.

**SOWING SEEDS OF DOUBT**
Most bullies are either unaware of the impact of their behaviour or extremely clever at disguising it. Either way, seeds of doubt are sown in the target’s mind, leaving the confused individual asking themselves: ‘Am I really being bullied or is it just me?’ Perhaps you’ve asked that very same question or wondered what it is about you that leads to your being intimidated by others.

The doubt in your own mind is bad enough, but to prove to others that you are being bullied is harder still. It’s frequently one person’s word against another with few, if any, witnesses. Like sand slipping between your fingers, the evidence of the existence of bullying quickly disappears and you are left with nothing tangible to explain. Bullying all too easily becomes the target’s best kept secret, maybe for years.

**AM I BEING BULLIED?**
Perhaps you are wondering about your own experiences, in which case consider the list below. If your answer is ‘yes’ to most of the questions, it’s likely that bullying is taking/has taken place.

**With reference to a particular person, do you …**
- Experience high levels of anxiety in their presence?
- Find yourself subjected to hurtful actions or words over and over again?