

# what happens next

A Discussion Guide for  
Teachers & Librarians:  
Grades 4–6



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## About the Book

*What Happens Next* is a story told by an unnamed protagonist who is made to feel different from everybody else—even invisible sometimes. Bullied by a girl at school, our narrator takes these hurt feelings home, where Mom listens and offers some ideas. At school the next day, the child confronts the bully by turning a "weirdo" fascination with science into an opportunity to find common ground, and maybe help the bully see the world in a new way.

## About This Guide

*What Happens Next* provides an opportunity to support students' social and emotional development. Discussion of topics in the book allows teachers to support students in learning to identify and respond to bullying, as well as building empathy skills and understanding how others feel.

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### Curriculum Links:

**Language Arts:** Reading Comprehension

**Social Studies:** Creative Problem-Solving

**Character Education:** Empathy

### Reading Levels:

**Fountas & Pinnell:** N

**Lexile® Measure:** 500L

**Common Core:** W, SL, RF, L, RL



For teachers, it is important to communicate to your class that bullying behaviors are harmful, unacceptable and will not be tolerated. Students should be encouraged to talk to trusted adults (e.g., teacher, parent, guidance counselor, coach, etc.) when they see bullying, whether the bullying is directed toward themselves or others.

This guide uses person-first language, and you are encouraged to do the same in discussions about the book. Rather than "bully," "victim," and "bystander," the terms "child who bullied others," "child who was bullied," and "children who were bystanders" are used. Person-first language helps to emphasize that all children are important and valued members of their school or community who deserve respect, empathy and understanding.

In this guide we refer to groups of children as students. This guide is primarily intended for schools, but can also be used in after-school activities, community groups, families and more.



## Discussion Topics for Students

### 1. What is the difference between bullying and teasing?

**AIM:** Help students learn characteristics that distinguish bullying from teasing. Refer to the **Background on Bullying** fact sheet at the end of this guide for supplementary information.

Bullying involves:

- trying to harm or hurt the other person
- doing hurtful things again and again
- uneven power between the two people

On the other hand, teasing involves:

- a more playful or joking tone
- no one feels distressed or upset
- people have equal power
- teasing sometimes happens in friendships and is meant affectionately

#### Talking to students about responding to bullying

Using visuals can be a good way to help students brainstorm and become more familiar with ways to respond to bullying.

For example, it might be helpful to list strategies on a whiteboard. Another idea is to brainstorm strategies as a group and then have students make posters to put up around the classroom or school.

Ask students to find evidence from the book to decide if the behavior was bullying or teasing. This could include:

- Name-calling (e.g., Weirdo) and hurtful comments (e.g., Why are you so weird?) happened on multiple days [**repetitive – bullying**]
- Physical behaviors (e.g., blocking way, pushing books) happened on multiple days [**repetitive – bullying**]
- It made the child who was bullied feel bad, have nightmares and want to avoid school [**hurtful – bullying**]
- The child who was bullied wished the child who bullied was on a star far away [**suggests the child felt powerless to stop behaviors – bullying**]

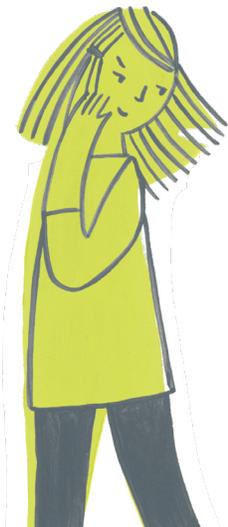
## 2. How do you think *the child who was bullied* feels in the story?

**AIM:** Encourage students to identify a range of feelings and the possible reasons for those feelings. For example, the child who was bullied might be feeling:

- **Hurt** because they were called a hurtful name
- **Frustrated** because they don't know what to do (initially)
- **Scared** because of the nightmare or scared about going back to school
- **Embarrassed** because they were picked on in front of others
- **Lonely** because no one helped
- **Loved** because of Mom's support
- **Proud** because they made a change in their situation
- **Hopeful** that things will be a little bit better at school



Emphasize that there are no "right" or "wrong" answers here. It's possible for children to have many different feelings in a situation. Two people might also feel differently about the same situation.



## 3. How do you think *the child who bullied others* feels in the story?

**AIM:** Help students humanize the child who bullied others and recognize that while her actions weren't appropriate, she is also a person with thoughts, feelings and perspectives. For example, she may have felt:

- **Unaware** of how her actions make the other child feel
- **Uncomfortable** about how to act around her friends and trying to make them laugh

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- **In control** of the situation and happy that her friends laughed at what she said and did
- **Frustrated** by something someone else has done to her
- **Hurt** because maybe she has been bullied by someone else

#### 4. How do you think *the children who were bystanders* felt in the story?

**AIM:** Help students draw attention to children who were bystanders.

Explain what a bystander is: somebody who is not involved in the bullying interaction, but is nearby or watching. In this story, their action was to do nothing, but they may have felt:

- **Sympathy** or feeling bad for the child who was bullied
- **Helpless** about not being able to make it stop
- **Uncertain** about what to do
- **Scared** because they wanted to help but didn't want to be bullied themselves



Children who bully others sometimes do not recognize their own behaviors as bullying. They may have difficulty identifying the impact of their actions on others. Building an awareness of the feelings and actions of the child who bullied others in this story may help students recognize times they have felt or acted in similar ways.

Invite students to discuss what generally makes people do hurtful things: frustration, wanting to impress others, wanting to feel in control of situations, etc.

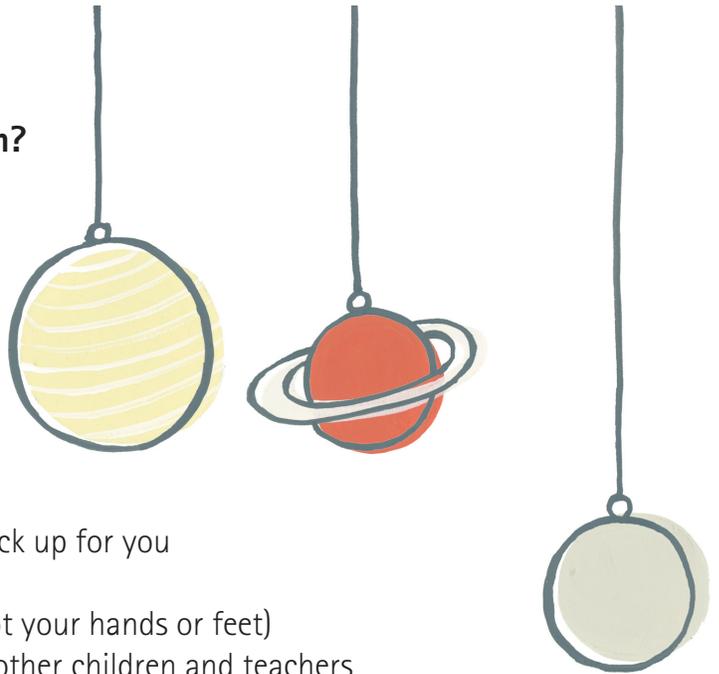
Help students recognize that it can be useful to have a number of different strategies to deal with bullying. Different approaches might work better in different situations. For example, it might be possible to ignore snide comments made while walking down the hallway. However, it might be a better idea to ask for help or tell an adult if a child is feeling really sad about the situation or worried about their own safety.

## 5. What are things that *the child who was bullied* could have done in this situation?

**AIM:** Help students brainstorm ideas about how to respond if they are being bullied.

This could include:

- **Telling** a trusted adult (teacher, parent, guidance counselor, coach)
- **Walking** away
- **Ignoring** it
- **Talking** it out
- **Spending time** with friends or kids who will stick up for you
- **Staying** in areas where you feel safe
- **Being assertive** and brave (with your words, not your hands or feet)
- **Participating** in activities at lunch/recess with other children and teachers



## 6. What are things that *the children who were bystanders* could have done in this situation?

**AIM:** Help students understand the range of ways they can support children who are bullied. This might involve:

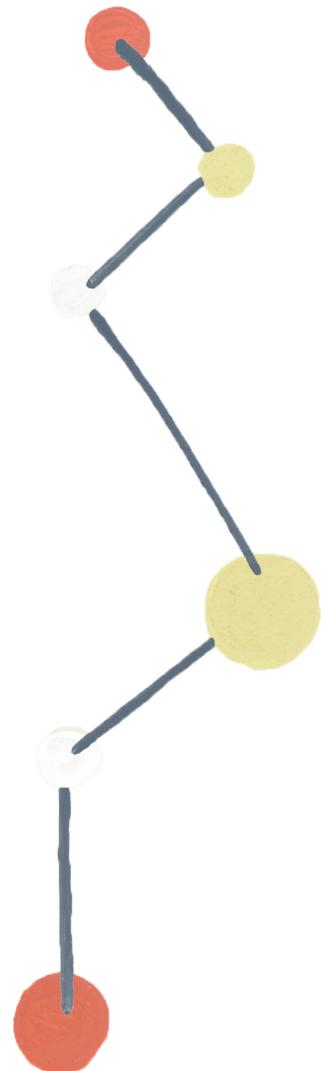
- **Standing up** for them
- **Inviting** them to join in activities and conversations
- **Spending** time with them and being their friend
- **Doing something** to make them feel better
- **Talking** to a trusted adult about the situation
- **Not laughing** or doing things that might encourage bullying

## 7. What are things that *the child who bullied others* could have done in this situation?

**AIM:** Help students identify that the child who bullied others doesn't have to be friends with the narrator, but she should be respectful and stop behaviors when she learns they are hurtful.

Other things that the child who bullied others could do:

- **Find other ways** to use leadership skills and feel a sense of power/authority (e.g., leadership role in club, volunteering with younger children)
- **Apologize** to the child who was bullied
- **Ask adults** for help managing feelings, thinking about the consequences of her actions and getting along with others



**8. When you were reading the story, did you interpret the child who was bullied as being male or female? Why did you think that?**

**AIM:** Help students recognize their own interpretation of the story, and how theirs may differ from other readers' understandings.

Ask students:

- What clues are there that the narrator is female?
- What clues are there that the narrator is male?
- What parts of your own experience do you think led you to interpret the book the way you do?
- Why might the author have decided to leave the narrator's gender ambiguous?



**9. At the end of the story, both characters change how they refer to each other. The child who bullied others stops saying "Weirdo." The child who was bullied starts to say the name "Brielle" instead of "Bully B." Why do you think that happened?**

**AIM:** Help students recognize that both the child who bullied others and the child who was bullied learned more about each other throughout the story.

- The child who bullied others learned some interesting facts and stopped saying the insult "Weirdo." The child who was bullied learns about Brielle's perspectives and viewpoints after talking with Mom. The narrator realizes that Brielle is also a person, not just a bully.
- Emphasize that all students are important and valued members of the school community who deserve respect, empathy and understanding.



**About Vicky Timmermanis**

Dr. Vicky Timmermanis is a school and clinical child psychologist who works for the Toronto District School Board. Her doctoral dissertation focused on bullying and social perspective-taking, particularly among youth with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder. Vicky has worked with children, adolescents and their families in hospitals, community mental health centres, schools and private practice settings. She believes that ongoing education and discussions about topics related to social and emotional development are essential to enhancing the well-being of the "whole-child."

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# Background on Bullying

## When children are involved in bullying, it can have long-term consequences on their:

- Emotions
- Relationships
- Schooling

## Children who are bullied have more difficulties with:

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Low self-esteem
- Loneliness
- School absences
- Academic achievement

## Children who bully others also face long-term difficulties including:

Higher chance of being involved in crime and violence later in life

It's thought that the power and aggression involved in bullying are carried forward into later relationship difficulties such as dating/marital aggression, workplace harassment and elder abuse.

Children who both bully others and are bullied themselves are at the greatest risk for long-term difficulties. For these reasons, it's important to have conversations with students to help them understand how to identify and respond to bullying.

## Bullying refers to behaviors that have three characteristics:

1. The behaviors are intentionally harmful
2. The behaviors are repetitive
3. The behaviors occur in a relationship where there is a power differential. A power differential means that the child who is being bullied feels powerless—as though they cannot defend themselves or make the bullying stop.

## Bullying behaviors can be:

- **Physical** (hitting, kicking)
- **Verbal** (name-calling)
- **Relational** (spreading rumors, exclusion from groups)
- **Cyberbullying** (sending hurtful messages or spreading negative information online)

## Different types of bullying are more common at different ages:

**Physical** bullying is more common in young children  
**Relational** bullying emerges more often in middle/high school

## Bullying is different from "teasing" and "play fighting," which:

- Are characterized by a playful or joking tone
- Usually take place in a stronger or more equal relationship
- Do not involve the intention to harm the other person
- Do not result in people feeling distressed or upset

## Sources and Additional Reading

If you are interested in learning more about bullying, the following websites may be helpful:

**prevnet.ca:** A website about fostering healthy relationships that helps children, teenagers, parents and teachers prevent, recognize and respond to bullying.

**witsprogram.ca:** Helps elementary school children deal with bullying and provides information and resources for children, parents and teachers.

**stopbullying.gov:** Provides resources to support parents and teachers in preventing and responding to bullying.

**cyberbullying.org:** Focuses on cyberbullying and social media.