

There's No Such Thing  
as a  
"Bully"

A Personal Story about Bullying, Stress & Trauma

## Growing up was a highly stressful and fear filled experience.

*Its important for me to state at the outset that sharing this story is not an attempt to blame or excuse anyone's behavior including my own.*

I was the second youngest in a large family. My parents were forever struggling to make ends meet. Both worked full time except for short periods when they were each laid off from jobs. Dad was an alcoholic and felt absent to me except for his looming anger. Mom did her best, but had also grown up in traumatic circumstances. She tried, but had limited energy and ability to connect and offer support to us kids. The stress of dealing with six children and an angry, alcoholic husband took up all of her capacity. What I remember most of all is lots of...

### Anger, Yelling, and Fear of Punishment.

I often felt bullied by my siblings and was afraid of my dad. My nervous system was in a constant state of stress. Growing up in a house like this meant that there was little to no experience of safety. I know now that constant stress keeps the body in an ongoing state of fight, flight, or freeze.

*"By processing information from the environment through the senses, the nervous system continually evaluates risk. I have coined the term neuroception to describe how neural circuits distinguish whether situations or people are safe, dangerous, or life-threatening. Because of our heritage as a species, neuroception takes place in primitive parts of the brain, without our conscious awareness." Stephen W. Porges, The Polyvagal Theory: Neurophysiological Foundations of Emotions, Attachment, Communication, and Self-regulation*

*"Playing nice" comes naturally when our neuroception detects safety and promotes physiological states that support social behavior. However, pro-social behavior will not occur when our neuroception misreads the environmental cues and triggers physiological states that support defensive strategies." Stephen W. Porges, The Polyvagal Theory*



I don't recall what was happening in my home when I was in the 4th grade, but my guess is there was something big and scary going on. There was always something scary going on.

## I do remember that I bullied someone at school that year.

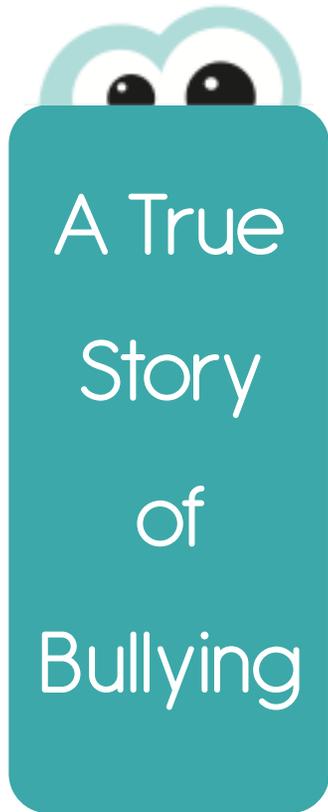
Its difficult for me to admit, but true. The girl I bullied was very pretty. Her stay-at-home mom tied her curly, long brown hair in a beautiful bow each day. Her clothes were new and clean and pressed, many of them hand-made. She only had one younger sibling. Her mom paid a lot of attention to her. This girl was quiet and sweet and shy. I think we had been friends at one point. I don't recall what triggered change in our friendship.

Wearing my mostly too small, hand-me-down clothes, I felt jealous. I'd had a short "pixie cut" because I'm told I screamed when my mom tried to brush the hair on my overly sensitive head. Something about this girl felt like a threat to me.

I know now that the feelings of threat I felt came from my body. I didn't know it then. My home life kept me in a near constant state of stress, which meant fear and threat were well grooved neural pathways in my brain that were easily triggered.

As a result, my young mind made up all sorts of things. This girl had what I wanted and needed. Her life looked perfect. I longed for more attention and was jealous that she seemingly received all the consideration she wanted from her mom. My 9-year-old brain and body felt threatened by her and the emotions this brought up made me act out with bullying behavior.

A scenario like this is not simple. And there aren't easy answers. But in my study of trauma and stress physiology, I've learned many things about the body and brain that could have helped 9-year-old me. Schools and teachers were an oasis for me. Yet, while they couldn't replace all of my needs and heal my pain, they might have helped prevent me from bullying the little brown-haired girl if they'd had the knowledge that I teach today in the Thought Monster Series and Growing Up Kind Curriculum.





# A True Story of Bullying

One important thing that schools and educators can do is become trauma-Informed. Knowledge of trauma and its effects can provide educators with the understanding and techniques to help children settle their nervous systems. Knowing how to settle the nervous system shifts us out of the fight, flight, or freeze response. Using compassionate connection, mindfulness, and body-based tools not only moves our body out of fight or flight, it supports the child's ability to think and concentrate so they can learn.

An effective tool we can use to support kids with learning, whether they're living in a stressful home environment or not, is mind-body awareness. A tool I teach in my curriculum is one that I wish I'd had when I was a child. It's a simple cognitive tool that incorporates mindfulness and body awareness to help people shift out of stress physiology and into the neocortex where we can reason, think, and act more clearly. This tool is called the Thought Model.

Here's an example of what might have happened if I'd had a teacher who'd taught me or was able to walk me through the Thought Model when I was 9. The teacher could have used the tool to understand my motivation for bullying and also helped me to shift into more empowered thinking. In my imagination, I'm picturing myself at 9 and guiding younger me so I can find the thoughts that led me to lash out at the brown-haired girl.

## Listening to my 9-year-old self, I find thoughts like this:

- 'My mom should make clothes like that for me.'
- 'My mom should let me grow my hair out.'
- 'My mom doesn't pay that much attention to me.'
- 'I should be more like that girl.'

These thoughts made me feel angry and alone. The anger and loneliness caused me to act out by bullying.



The actions I took at age 9 were the result of my thoughts about this girl and myself, plus the anger and loneliness those thoughts caused inside of me. The thoughts I was thinking bubbled up from my body because of all the stress I was dealing with at home. These thoughts were then triggered by this girl and her beautiful hair and clothes. I lashed out with mean words, chasing, and throwing gum in her beautiful hair.

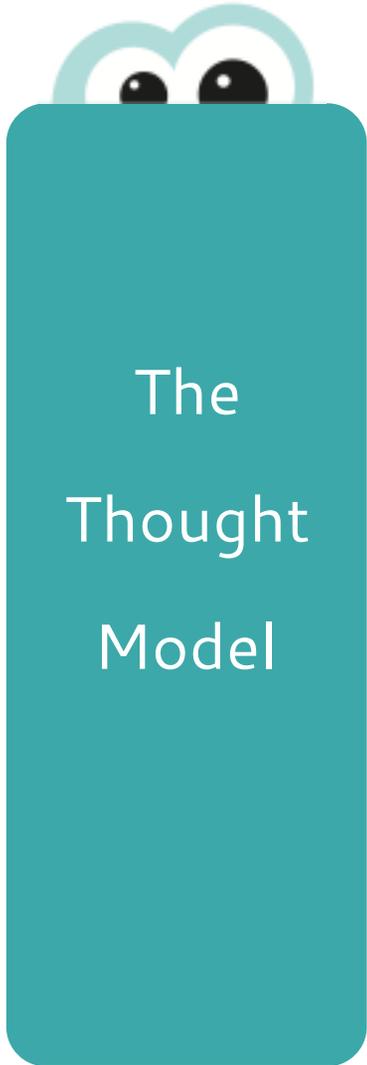
**Using the Thought Model can help the adults who are supporting kids to “stand in their shoes”. This empowers teachers to understand that kids aren’t “bad” and kids aren’t “bullies”.**

**Bullying is an action that people of all ages take as a result of how they are feeling.**

At age 9, I didn’t know what to do with the turbulence of emotion I felt every day. I needed an adult who could listen and guide me. Unfortunately, I didn’t have an adult like that at home. But I had teachers that I loved who cared about me.

When I was in school, stress and trauma weren’t understood like they are today. But I believe that if my teachers had been trauma-informed and had had access to tools that could shift me out of my stress physiology and into my thinking brain, it might have stopped me from bullying. I needed an adult to connect with me compassionately, to listen, and to help me feel better and do better.

On the next page, I’ll walk through and overview of the Thought Model to show how our thoughts create our actions and results in life. The Thought Model tool is only one of the modules offered in Growing Up Kind™ Curriculum.



Even children who grow up in healthy, safe homes experience the fight, flight or freeze response when they're stressed.

Coming into the present moment and understanding our Thoughts can shift us out of our stress physiology. The Thought Model is a useful tool for shifting into our thinking brain.

### Thought Model Overview:

1. We have **CIRCUMSTANCES** in life that we encounter each day.
2. **THOUGHTS** arise based on each Circumstance.
3. The Thoughts we have cause us to feel **FEELINGS**.
4. Most of us respond in some way to our Feelings. These responses are called **ACTIONS** or behaviors.
5. The Actions we take (or don't take) give us our **RESULTS**.

In the , a module of the Growing Up Kind™ Curriculum, we teach each part of the above Thought Model in detail. For many, understanding just one part of the model can create positive shifts!



We  
Can  
Heal

Later, I remember feeling very ashamed of hurting that little girl. The guilt stayed with me for years.

I could have used help from an adult to release those negative feelings and to forgive myself.

I didn't know that the painful thoughts I had about myself weren't true...until, as an adult, I learned how the body and mind work.

We can teach the information about our thinking, about our stress physiology, and how our bodies work to children. We don't have to hold onto painful experiences long into our adulthood. In fact, the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study conducted by Kaiser and the CDC has shown that painful experiences from childhood have a direct link to disease and adversity in adulthood.

In the Somatic Experiencing work I do with clients, I find that long held painful experiences affect the quality of life for people in the present even when the incident itself has been completely forgotten.

When children have a caring adult to support them in learning tools that help them manage during stressful experiences, release pain and stress in healthy ways, and help them build resilience, children are more likely to thrive. This is why I'm passionate about providing these tools for parents, educators, and kids.

I eventually did release the feelings of shame and most of the pain experienced in my childhood. In fact, my childhood was a big motivation for the healing work I do with adults and children today.



# How can adults help?

## How to begin helping yourself and your kids. The Growing Up Kind Curriculum offers tools to support you:

1. UNDERSTAND STRESS & TRAUMA by becoming TRAUMA-INFORMED.  
Not only will this help you in dealing with your kids and students, but this knowledge will help YOU increase your capacity to handle times of stress. We offer a module on stress physiology and the nervous system as well as tools you can use to support yourself and your kids in settling the stress physiology.
2. GROUND YOURSELF, GROUND THE KIDS IN YOUR LIFE.  
We teach grounding tools, but if you have your own, use them with your kids now! Grounding is a very effective tool for shifting out of stress physiology.
3. LEARN THE THOUGHT MODEL.  
If you're thinking, 'I'm not stressed or traumatized!', please know that the Thought Model is a powerful tool to use in your life and with your students to help feel better and do better in any circumstance!
4. CONNECT and be a COMPASSIONATE LISTENER for all children, especially your students and the kids in your care.
5. But first, TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF ▪ FILL UP YOUR OWN COMPASSION TANK ▪ SLOW DOWN ▪ Make time to CONNECT with students every day ▪ PAY ATTENTION ▪ Listen like a CURIOUS SCIENTIST to what your kids say and share ▪ KEEP TAKING CARE OF YOU!



“Too often we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring, all of which have the potential to turn a life around.”

Leo Buscaglia



Be  
there  
for  
kids  
Today

## Kids who bully are not bad.

Shame caused by negative beliefs, comparison and isolation, perhaps as a result of stressful circumstances at home, can cause a child to bully. On the other hand, being the victim of bullying can result in shame and can lead to isolation. Keep an eye out for both sides of this in your kids.

Adults can start to build the trust kids need in order to share their experiences, both good and bad, by cleaning up our own thinking, releasing stress and trauma, and becoming devoted listeners who lead by example in how to engage and connect with others. We can teach our kids how to recognize negative beliefs and begin to think powerfully about themselves.

Kids can be taught to understand why they have taken the action of bullying. We can help them change their beliefs about themselves so they stop bullying. Most of all, with the right tools, we can support children in becoming resilient adults.

We can help kids who have been bullied understand that the experience does not have to keep them fearful. Kids who are bullied can move beyond being the victim with the help of caring adults.

## Start NOW.

Help kids BEFORE they resort to the action of bullying. Connect to the kids in your care, especially those who are hurting, withdrawn, or “shy”.

If you would like more info, please contact Katie McClain at [www.katiemccclain.com](http://www.katiemccclain.com).

**Thank you for all you do for kids!**