

# Looking for a Program or Speaker to Help Address Bullying & Positively Empower Students in Your School?

## *Here's Some Best-Practice Advice for You.*

Some speakers' presentations can be entertaining to watch, but have little research-based value to offer students in terms of anti-bullying content and empowerment. Other presentations, while informative, can be too dry to engage the students' attention and get them motivated to care and make a difference. So how do you find the perfect mix of age-appropriate content and student engagement?

Nationally acclaimed author/speakers [Doug Wilhelm](#), [Trudy Ludwig](#), and [Stan Davis](#) offer some best-practice tips to help you find the right speaker for your school community.

**Please do not expect a single author visit or assembly program to be all your school will need to effectively address and prevent bullying.** Setting in motion real, positive change will require engaging your school on a larger community level—involving students, teachers, and, if possible, parents as well. Guest speakers should be a highlight or a springboard in your school community's efforts to promote empathy, respect, and acceptance.

### **Doug's Tips:**

- **Treat your school as a community.** Bullying is a community-based dynamic, and singling out certain kids (or certain stereotypes) is almost sure to miss the complex realities that your students know very well. Do a project that flattens hierarchies — that involves everyone, and puts everyone on the same plane of listening, discussing, and facing the truth.
- **Make a speaker or presentation part of a larger program** — one that is woven into your curriculum, or that becomes part of your school's experience in a shared and active way. Many schools have worked powerfully with a well-chosen novel or story that deals realistically with bullying. Ask staff members to choose a text, then build a grade-wide or all-school reading and discussion project around it. Challenge staff to develop creative ways of engaging students with the text, and through it with the realities that the students know and live. To find suggested age-specific books, together with study plans and learning resources tailored to them, check out the Anti-Defamation League's "[Words that Heal: Using Children's Literature to Address Bullying](#)." (Full disclosure: my novel *The Revealers* is the ADA's middle-school selection.)
- You can also generate the material to be discussed from within your building. Some schools have set up a web-based forum, where students are invited share their experiences of bullying. This can be done so that students create a screen name that protects them from unwanted exposure, but they must register both their screen and real names with a staff coordinator, so they're restrained from posting irresponsibly. In other schools, groups of students have developed a documentary film, a stage presentation, or a collection of brief, realistic, videotaped episodes based on real accounts or real experiences — then presented those to their peers for wider discussion.

- **Don't lecture. Do listen.** Most often those who engage in bullying, whether they're young people or adults, are powerful members of their community; this can intimidate those who are targeted from speaking up. However well-meant, a program that lectures young people just reinforces their impression that only certain people have a voice in your school. Find ways to give *everyone* a voice — then listen to what they say.
- **Enforcement matters — but so does building empathy.** Of course your school should have clear rules around bullying, and those should be enforced. Students must know that if they bully, they'll face consequences, and if they report bullying something will be done. But just as powerful can be a project that helps students see through other kids' eyes, to connect with each others' real lives. Everyone struggles, everyone fears, everyone feels. Whenever a young person shares with me, after a school visit, that they used to bully but they don't any more, they always give the same reason. One way or another, they'll say: "Now I know how it feels."

*Doug Wilhelm is a parent of two boys and the author of 12 books for young adults. His realistic YA novels include The Revealers, which deals with bullying and has been read and discussed by hundreds of middle schools across the U.S. and internationally. Doug often visits schools that are working with his book. True Shoes, his sequel to The Revealers, is being published this December. For more information about Doug and his work, visit [www.the-revealers.com](http://www.the-revealers.com).*

## Trudy's Tips:

Find a speaker who:

- Clearly identifies for kids the different forms of aggression (physical, verbal, relational, and cyberbullying).
- Helps kids to understand when a friendship takes a wrong turn into the land of bullying.
- Actively engages kids with age-appropriate role-play and activities, as opposed to simply "lecturing" to them about this issue.
- Shows how easy it is for any of us to find ourselves in the bullying, bullied, and bystander roles.
- Does not label kids as "bullies;" instead, focuses on bullying behaviors to emphasize that bullying is a learned behavior, as cited by experts, and that it can be "unlearned" with the help of caring adults.
- Gets kids to understand that NO ONE wins in a bullying situation. It negatively impacts everyone—the bullied, the bystanders AND the kids who bully.
- Helps kids (and adults) understand that reporting bullying to a trusted adult is the right thing to do. Bullying is abuse and needs to be reported.
- Is honest with the kids that there are some adults who, for whatever reason, won't help them with their bullying problem and encourages them to report to another adult they trust for help.

- Lets kids know that they have the power to make a powerful, positive difference in the lives of those who are bullied in small, safe ways and follows up with concrete examples. Please refer to Stan Davis's tips for some specific examples.
- Offers kids safe, non-violent strategies to help address bullying.
- Is able to provide the entire school community (teachers, students and parents) with tips, tools, and resources to help them create safer school climates.

*Trudy Ludwig is a nationally acclaimed speaker and an award-winning author of seven children's books. She has received rave reviews from educators, experts, organizations, and parents for her passion and compassion in addressing friendship, bullying, and cyberbullying issues. An active member of the International Bullying Prevention Association, Trudy collaborates with leading U.S. experts and organizations and has been profiled on national/regional television and radio and in newsprint. For more information about Trudy and her work, visit [www.trudyludwig.com](http://www.trudyludwig.com).*

## **Stan's Tips:**

As I see it, effective school-based interventions focus on changing the climate and day-to-day practices at school. Dr. Charisse Nixon and I conducted online questionnaires with more than 13,000 youth in grades 5-12 in 31 schools around the United States. The more than 2,900 of these students who said they had been repeatedly mistreated by peers told us what worked for them and what didn't. They told us that:

- Standing up to peers who mistreat them rarely made things better, and more often made things worse. This included telling or asking the mistreater to stop and telling the mistreater how they felt.
- Pretending that they weren't bothered by the mean behavior rarely made things better. This worked a bit better in high school than in elementary or middle school.
- Asking for help from adults at home and at school and from peers was more likely to help than standing up to the student who mistreated them. Strikingly, only a third of youth said they had told an adult at school. Those students who told an adult at school told us that things got better afterwards about a fourth of the time in some schools and about 2/3 of the time in other schools. School responsiveness to reports is a key indicator of the effectiveness of school programs and should be a major focus of any intervention.
- Being connected with adults at school and seeing themselves as valued at school led to lower rates of trauma. Building connections between educators and youth, including with youth of color, youth in special education, males, and females is a key focus of intervention.
- Actions of alliance and support from peers were the bystander interventions most likely to make things better. Youth in our study rated "walked with me at school," "listened to me," "called me at home to encourage me," and "helped me get away from situations" as quite likely to make things better.
- Actions of confrontation by peers were less likely to lead to things getting better for mistreated youth than were actions of alliance and support.

For these reasons, when schools bring in speakers or trainers the following elements should be addressed:

- Data gathering through staff and student surveys to measure connectedness, responsiveness, attitudes, and the strengths and needs of current programming.
- Training and consultation for staff and administrators focusing on building effective responses to peer mistreatment, building connections, supports needed for mistreated youth, strategies for changing aggressive behavior, and strategies for building peer alliance in an ongoing way.
- Examination of the modeling that students see in staff-student and staff-staff interactions.
- Inspiring and supporting peer witnesses to become allies and to include all.
- Listening to positive attitudes and behavior by peers at the school and feeding those back to students to inspire even more positive inclusive behavior.

Based on my experience since the 1970s and our research, I would discourage schools from bringing in programs that focus primarily on reshaping the behavior of youth who are mistreated, or one-time programs without ongoing support. In the same way, one-time programs that primarily tell youth what bullying is and why they should not do it are unlikely to have any lasting effect, in the same way that a one-time speaker brought in to tell teens that drug use is a bad thing is unlikely to have any significant impact on rates of drug use without an ongoing effort to educate.

*A longtime school counselor and civil-rights activist who is a former social worker and child and family therapist, Stan Davis has been helping schools prevent bullying since the mid-1990s. His work has been featured in national newspaper and radio articles and on a special 20/20 report on bullying with John Stossel. He is the author of the 2004 book Schools Where Everyone Belongs: Practical Strategies to Reduce Bullying (published in Spanish in 2008), and the 2007 book Empowering Bystanders in Bullying Prevention. Stan has presented keynotes and workshops at conferences and trained school staff and students in 25 U.S. states, Canada, and Africa. With Dr. Charisse Nixon, he co-leads the Youth Voice Research Project, which has collected information from more than 13,000 young people in the United States about what does and doesn't work in bullying prevention. For more information about Stan and his work, visit [www.stopbullyingnow.com](http://www.stopbullyingnow.com).*