WHEN NO ONE SEES

When No One Sees

A clear guide to recognising bullying, stopping it safely and supporting recovery

Michel Peen

English translation of Als niemand het ziet

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The personal experiences in this book are told from the author's memory and perspective. Where necessary, identifying details have been omitted or changed to protect other people's privacy. General information and practical guidance are based on publicly available sources consulted for this book. This book does not replace an individual medical, psychological or legal assessment.

In the Netherlands, call 112 in an immediate emergency. If you are having thoughts of suicide, you can call 0800-0113 free of charge and anonymously in the Netherlands, or chat via 113.nl. Do not wait if there is immediate danger, and do not leave the person alone.

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About this English edition

This is the English translation of Als niemand het ziet by Michel Peen. The original Dutch edition was first published in 2026. The publication details and product information reproduced here refer to that Dutch edition.

The schools, professional roles, organisations and procedures in this book are described in their Dutch setting. GP means family doctor, mbo means Dutch secondary vocational education, and a school mentor has pastoral responsibilities. Dutch organisation names are retained and explained where relevant.

The emergency and support routes in the book are Netherlands-specific. Readers in other countries should use the appropriate local emergency services and seek advice about the procedures that apply where they live. The source information and its consultation dates are retained; this translation does not replace an individual professional assessment.

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Dedication

For every child who laughed when they really wanted to cry.

For every person who gave a small sign and hoped someone would see it.

And for the person who did not look away.

Preface

A child can laugh while hoping someone will ask how they are really doing. I know, because I was that child.

This book is about bullying, but not just about cruel words in a playground. It is about what happens out of sight. About looks, whispers, threats, group chats, exclusion and stories turned around so cleverly that the victim ends up being identified as the problem. It is about children who stay silent because telling someone feels dangerous. About parents who notice their child changing but do not know why. About schools that sometimes sincerely want to help, yet act too late or in the wrong way. And about adults who, years later, still feel what bullying has done to their trust, boundaries and self-image.

I am not writing as someone who has studied how bullying works from a safe distance. I have experienced what it is like when other people decide who you are. I learned how to put on a mask, avoid eye contact and make myself small, hoping the next blow, humiliation or remark would pass me by. I have also experienced what can happen when pain has nowhere safe to go for years. Fear, isolation, trauma and numbing my feelings did not politely wait for their own separate chapters in my life. They overlapped, as they often do in real life.

Still, this is not a book asking for pity. Pity looks for a moment and then moves on. I want something else: recognition, responsibility and practical steps.

A child should not have to reach breaking point before adults act. A victim should not have to find the perfect words to be believed. And a school should not be satisfied simply because a policy exists on paper. The question is whether someone actually feels safer today.

That is why this book follows three threads that continually come together.

The first thread is my personal story. Not to make it the centre of attention again, but to show what can be missed from the outside. Beneath every passage about my experiences lies the same question: what could someone have seen or done then, and what can the reader do differently today?

The second thread is explanation. What exactly is bullying? How does it differ from teasing or an argument? Why does a victim stay silent? How does a group work? What does a prolonged lack of safety do to a person? And why is stopping the visible behaviour not the same as recovery?

The third thread is action. How do you have a safe first conversation? How do you protect someone against retaliation? What do you record? Who takes the lead? How do you speak clearly to the person doing the bullying without humiliating them yourself? What can parents, schools, GPs and support professionals do? And how do you prevent a victim from being hurt again after speaking up, through disbelief, haste or a badly organised conversation?

Thoughts of suicide, self-harm and addiction are also discussed. Not for shock value, and not with the claim that bullying always leads directly to one particular outcome. People and causes are more complicated than that. But we must be honest: ongoing humiliation, fear, loneliness and a loss of trust can take a heavy toll. Signs must therefore never be brushed aside. If someone tells you they no longer want to live, you do not have to become a therapist yourself. You do, however, need to stay, listen and get appropriate help.

This book is written for young people and adults. A young person should be able to understand its main message. A parent should be able to use it to act. A teacher should be able to ask themselves honest questions. A GP or support professional should be able to find quickly what matters in their role. And an adult who was bullied in the past should not feel as though their past is being treated as something that simply disappeared after their last day at school.

There can also be a little breathing space in the book now and then. Not because bullying is funny. It never is. But humour can give us room to breathe. Sometimes a small human moment is exactly what we need to turn a difficult page. I have learned that surviving does not mean you never laugh again. Sometimes laughter is proof that not everything has been taken from you.

Do not read this book as a set of rules that can solve every situation in one go. Use it as a compass. Look carefully. Listen without interrogating. Protect without shutting the victim away. Set limits on the person doing the bullying. Record agreements. Check with the victim themselves whether things are actually improving. And stay present when the initial attention has faded again.

Because telling someone is not the end of the problem.

Telling someone is where responsibility begins for the people who now know.

PART I

What bullying really is

Chapter 1

My story and what adults did not see

Some childhood memories look like a photograph. You still remember where things were, how a room smelled and roughly what time it got dark. Other memories feel more like a signal from your body. Your shoulders rise. Your breathing gets shallower. You automatically look for the door. Before you have consciously worked out why, your body has already checked the situation.

As a child, I learned early on to read the room. That almost sounds like a talent. In reality, it was often a survival strategy. Who is angry? Whose mood might change without warning? Where can I stand without being noticed? When is it safer to stay quiet than to answer? Children who live under prolonged stress can become remarkably good at this. An adult may see a quiet, well-behaved child. Inside, that child is running a full-scale safety operation that would put many an emergency control room to shame.

I grew up feeling unsafe, with violence around me. At school, prolonged bullying was added to that. I do not need to retell every incident here. What matters is the pattern. I did not feel safe, but I could not explain that in the clear, orderly way an adult might. I had no case file, no timeline and no words such as power imbalance, trauma or group dynamics. All I had was a body sounding the alarm and a mind trying to get through the day.

Bullies rarely do everything in front of someone who can intervene. That is no accident. They often know exactly when a teacher turns away, when the adult supervising the playground is on the other side, or which remark sounds harmless if you do not know the history behind it. A shove can be passed off as a joke. A threat can be spoken

quietly. A group can exclude someone without breaking a single rule that is easy to point to.

Then, sometimes, the victim reacts. They may be angry, loud, crying or desperate. That is what adults see. The reaction becomes the incident, and everything that came before it disappears from view. The bully stays calm and says the victim always behaves like that. Meanwhile, the victim has no calmly organised account ready to give. Their body is still tense. Words get muddled. Details are missing. And so the person who has been hurt the longest can suddenly look like the one causing the problem.

I know what that is like. It was not only the bullying that hurt, but also being blamed again and again. When others see your reaction but miss what caused it, you eventually begin to doubt yourself. Maybe it really is my fault. Maybe I am too sensitive. Maybe I make everything worse. Maybe I should just become even quieter.

Becoming even quieter can look like good behaviour from the outside. The child argues less, withdraws and no longer asks for anything. People around them may think things have settled down. For the child, the opposite may be true. Silence does not always mean safety. Sometimes silence is the point at which someone has stopped believing that talking will help.

The mask

A mask is not always a big smile. It can also be politeness. Good grades. Making jokes. Always saying you are tired. Going straight to your room. Pretending you prefer to be alone. Avoiding eye contact so that no one looks at your face for too long. Or making very convincing eye contact because you have practised what 'normal' looks like.

I could hide things. That did not mean there was nothing to see. There were changes, small signals and moments when someone could have asked a little more. But a signal is rarely a signed statement with the

subject line: 'I hereby report that I am not doing well.' It may be an offhand comment, a joke that is just a little too dark, suddenly not wanting to go somewhere, or being ill unusually often. It may be a child who gets a stomach ache just before reaching the school door but can eat again an hour later at home.

A sign is not proof. Avoiding eye contact may be linked to anxiety, but also to shyness, neurodiversity, culture, tiredness or something else entirely. Poorer sleep may be caused by bullying, but also by worries at home or a week of tests. An adult should therefore not jump to conclusions about a child. They can, however, take an interest and make themselves available.

Avoid: 'You must be getting bullied.'

Try: 'I've noticed you've been quieter lately and sometimes look away when school comes up. Is something making you feel anxious? You don't have to explain it straight away. I just want you to know I'm listening.'

The difference is the room you leave for the child. The first sentence supplies the answer. The second describes what has actually been observed and lets the child stay in control of their own story.

Why I did not just tell someone

People sometimes ask afterwards why a victim did not say anything. The question sounds reasonable to someone who feels safe. For a child in an unsafe situation, telling someone may feel like the most dangerous step of all.

What if the bully finds out? What if it gets worse? What if the teacher brings everyone together and immediately says who complained? What if my parents get angry and phone the school, and tomorrow I am back in class beside the same children? What if no one believes me? What if they ask what I did myself? What if I start crying and cannot stop?

A child can run through all those scenarios in silence. Some are fears. Others are based on previous experiences. If an earlier attempt to tell someone went wrong, it becomes even harder to try again. Trust does not always disappear in one blow. It can also drain away through small moments when adults did not listen, passed something on, or promised to help and then never came back.

That is why 'you can always come to me' is not enough. A child needs to experience that it is true. That you stay calm when the story becomes difficult. That you do not direct your own visible panic or anger at the child. That you explain what you will do with the information. That you follow up on what you agreed. And that you do not disappear as soon as the first conversation is over.

Hiding away

People who do not feel safe anywhere often look for a place where as little as possible can happen. It may be a bedroom, a corner, a screen, music, animals or an inner world of their own. Hiding away can offer temporary protection. No one can laugh at you in that moment. You do not have to read faces. For a while, you do not have to pretend.

But a refuge can also become a prison. When contact with other people becomes increasingly stressful, the mind has plenty of room to invent its own stories. They think I am strange. Everyone can see I am weak. I do not belong anywhere. Nothing will ever change. Over time, thoughts like these start to feel like facts, even though they grew in surroundings where the person rarely hears a different view from someone they feel safe with.

I lived for a long time with isolation and mistrust. The outside world did not feel like a place where good things would naturally be waiting. That did not change because someone told me to think more positively. Recovery only began when safety, support and choices of my own became more real than the old threat. It did not happen in a straight line. A human life is not an advice leaflet: you can have a

breakthrough on Tuesday and still find yourself lying on the bed with your coat on again on Wednesday.

What someone could have done back then

No one could have solved everything with one perfect conversation. But adults could have made a difference by recognising patterns earlier and taking responsibility.

They did not have to judge my reaction separately from what came before it. They could have spoken to me privately, without the bully there. They could have asked specifically where and when I felt unsafe. They could have explained what they would do with my words. They did not have to demand that I tell everything at once. They could have checked in with me again, even if I had initially said nothing was wrong.

Above all, they did not have to expect me to stop the bullying myself. A child facing a power imbalance does not need a course in 'standing up for themselves' as a substitute for protection. Assertiveness can be valuable, but responsibility remains with the person doing the bullying and the adults responsible for creating a safe environment.

What the reader can do differently today

Start small and stick to the facts. Describe what you see without imposing a judgement. Make sure the conversation can take place calmly and in private. Give the child choices: talking, writing, drawing, coming back later or bringing someone they trust. Ask not only what happened, but also what the child thinks might happen if others find out they have told someone.

Do not make a promise you cannot keep if there is danger. It is better to be honest: 'I won't just pass this on. If I think you're in immediate danger, I'll need to get help. I'll tell you first who I need to speak to and why.'

After the conversation, record what has been agreed. Who will do what? When? How can the child raise the alarm again? When will you check whether things are improving? A warm response without follow-up may be well meant, but it still leaves someone alone.

Finally, do not look only at whether new reports have stopped. Ask whether the victim actually feels safer. Bullies can become more subtle. A child may put on a mask again. Calm on the surface is not the same as recovery.

Points to remember

- A strong reaction may be the visible end of a long series of unseen events.
- Silence may mean someone no longer trusts that telling will help.
- A sign is not proof, but it is a reason to ask calm, open questions.
- Do not force eye contact, a full account, confrontation or forgiveness.
- Protection is the responsibility of adults and organisations, not the victim.
- After the conversation, check with the victim themselves whether their safety has actually improved.

My story began in a world where I was not safe. It does not end there. That is also the promise of this book: what has been done to someone does not have to have the final word. But before recovery becomes possible, someone first has to dare to look at what is really happening.

Chapter 2

Teasing, arguments, conflict, intimidation and bullying

Not every hurtful remark is bullying. It is important to say this, because words lose their meaning if we call everything the same thing. At the same time, this distinction must never be used to minimise harm. A child who is seriously humiliated just once may also need protection and support to recover. So the right question is not just which label fits an event. The right questions are: what happened, how safe is this person now, and what needs to change?

Adults sometimes talk past each other. The parent says, ‘My child is being bullied.’ The school replies, ‘We see a conflict.’ The conversation then centres on the definition, while a pupil is already dreading the next break. A good definition helps people act; it must never become a waiting room.

Teasing

Teasing usually happens in a situation where people are more or less equal. Roles can change, both children can stop, and there is enough safety to say when something is no longer fun. People can laugh without one person always paying the price.

That sounds simple, but teasing can also cross a line. The person who intended something as a joke does not get to decide alone whether it was funny. When the other person freezes, walks away or asks them to stop, it should stop.

‘It was only a joke’ does not exempt anyone from responsibility.

Useful questions to ask are:

- Can everyone truly choose freely whether to join in or refuse?
- Do the roles change, or is the same person always the target?

- Does it stop immediately when someone says they have had enough?
- Does the person the joke is about still feel safe and equal afterwards?

If the answer is repeatedly no, ‘teasing’ is probably too kind a word.

Arguments

In an argument, people clash over something. Both sides may get angry, say hurtful things or react badly. There does not have to be an established power imbalance. Often, both sides want something and their interests or emotions collide.

An argument usually calls for time to cool down, hearing each person's account separately, restoring boundaries and making agreements. Sometimes a joint conversation can help, but only if both sides are sufficiently safe and free to speak.

An argument can develop into bullying. For example, after one disagreement, a group may exclude a pupil for weeks, circulate their photograph or tell others to stop spending time with them. The original disagreement may explain where it began, but it does not justify what happens afterwards.

Conflict

A conflict often lasts longer than a single argument and may involve clashing wishes, values or interests. Adults have conflicts too. A conflict is not automatically wrong; people are allowed to differ. How it is handled determines whether the situation stays safe.

In a conflict between people who truly have equal power, discussion, mediation or agreements to repair harm may be appropriate. Bullying is different. Someone who fears retaliation cannot negotiate freely in a shared room. A mediator who immediately assigns equal responsibility to both sides may unintentionally reinforce the power imbalance.

Intimidation and threats

Intimidation is behaviour that frightens someone, puts them under pressure or makes them feel they have no free choice. It may be visible—threatening violence, blocking someone's path, taking their belongings—but it can also be subtle. A look, a gesture, a message saying only ‘just you wait’, or mentioning someone's address may be perfectly clear in the context of what has happened before.

A threat does not have to be repeated often to be serious. One specific threat may require immediate safety measures. Where there may be a criminal offence, immediate danger, weapons, extortion, stalking or sexual images, a school or family should not spend weeks playing investigator themselves. Appropriate expert or official help must then be brought in. In immediate danger, call 112.

Bullying

Bullying usually involves three elements together:

1. Someone is deliberately hurt, excluded, humiliated or frightened;

2. The behaviour happens repeatedly, or there is a real threat that it will happen again;

3. There is a power imbalance that means the victim cannot easily stop it themselves.

Power is not just about physical strength. A group can have power over one person. Someone may be more popular, older or more digitally skilled, have access to embarrassing information, or have friends backing them up. A teacher, coach, support worker, manager or family member can also misuse their position. Online, one person with an account, screenshot or group chat can suddenly turn an audience against someone.

Repetition does not mean that exactly the same incident has to happen every day either. A photograph posted once but viewed and forwarded endlessly can hurt someone continually. A pupil who never

knows when the next humiliation will come lives with that threat between incidents too.

Look at the pattern, not just isolated minutes

Bullying is often arranged in small pieces that each seem harmless on their own. On Monday, a chair is pulled away. On Tuesday, someone is ignored in the group chat. On Wednesday, someone whispers a nickname just loudly enough to be heard. On Thursday, a teacher asks what is going on and everyone says, ‘Nothing.’ On Friday, the victim explodes when someone takes their pen.

If you look only at Friday, you see a child reacting out of proportion to a pen. If you look at the week, you see a pattern.

That is why an investigation must go beyond asking, ‘What exactly happened at 10.20 am?’ Also ask:

- What happened before this?
- Does something similar happen more often, including in other forms?
- Who was there, and what roles did they take?
- Where, or through which online channels, does it happen?
- What does the victim fear will happen next?
- Have behaviour, attendance, learning, sleep or social contact changed?

Intent matters, but so does the impact

Sometimes someone says, ‘I didn't mean to hurt him.’ That may be true. Clumsiness is not the same as deliberate cruelty. Still, good intentions do not relieve anyone of the responsibility to listen, stop and repair the harm.

Both intent and impact matter when deciding on an appropriate response. Was it a one-off joke that went wrong, and does the person immediately take responsibility? That calls for a different approach from someone who deliberately, secretly and repeatedly carries on.

But in either case, the victim does not have to prove that the other person specifically intended, in their own mind, to cause the greatest possible harm. The danger someone experiences and the visible pattern deserve attention in their own right.

A quick decision-making route

When in doubt, follow this order:

Safety first. Is there danger, a threat, blackmail, violence, images being shared, self-harm or a risk of suicide now? Act immediately.

Then establish the facts. Record specific words, behaviours, times, places, digital channels and those present. Avoid labels in the initial record.

Then consider the pattern and power. Who can speak freely? Who controls the group? Can the victim stop it themselves without fearing the consequences?

Then choose an approach. An argument between equals may call for mediation. Bullying first requires protection, boundaries and changes within the group. A threat may require official help.

Then check. Do not only ask whether another incident has been reported; ask whether the victim feels safer.

Words that help

When a child tells you something, you do not need to put it in the right category immediately. You can say:

‘What you're describing sounds unsafe. I want to understand what's happening first and make sure you're not facing it alone. Then we'll work out what steps are needed.’

That is more honest and safer than a quick declaration such as ‘children tease each other, that's just what they do’ or ‘you're both to

blame’. It allows room to investigate without already brushing away the child's experience.

Points to remember

- Teasing is only playful when everyone is free to join in and to stop.
- An argument or conflict may involve equal power; bullying involves a power imbalance.
- One serious threat may require immediate action, even without repetition.
- Online, one action can have a lasting, repeated impact.
- Investigate patterns and what happened before, not just the visible incident.
- A debate about definitions must never delay protection.

Chapter 3

Power, repetition and the surrounding group

Bullying is often described as something between two children: a bully and a victim. That picture is too narrow. There is almost always a group around them. Some people laugh along, others look away, one person sends a kind message later, and someone else wanted to intervene but froze. The group's response helps determine whether bullying earns status or stops.

If you only remove the child who bullies from the classroom and then do nothing with the rest, you leave much of the system in place. The nickname still exists. The group chat still exists. The fear of social exclusion still exists. Even when the visible behaviour stops, everyone may know who is at the bottom.

Power means more than being big and strong

A power imbalance may arise from:

- Physical strength or age;
- Popularity and access to the group;
- Verbal ability, quickness or confidence;
- Money, possessions or social status;
- Knowledge of a secret, photograph or vulnerability;
- Digital influence or control of a group chat;
- A formal position, such as teacher, coach, support worker or manager;
- Several people supporting each other against one person;
- The ability to appear credible and calm in front of adults.

That last point is underestimated. A victim under stress may give a confused, angry or contradictory account. The person who bullies

may stay calm and present a neat story. Calmness is not proof of honesty. Emotion is not proof of unreliability.

Roles within a group

Roles are not fixed personalities. A child may be a defender in one group and a follower in another. The purpose of naming roles is therefore not to hand out new labels, but to see where change is possible.

The instigator. This person starts things, directs others or chooses the target. Sometimes openly, sometimes through other people.

The active follower. This person joins in, shares messages, hides belongings or repeats the nickname.

The encourager. This person laughs, watches, likes posts or provides an audience. Claiming to have 'done nothing' can still mean adding fuel.

The silent bystander. This person sees something but does not intervene. Fear of becoming a target themselves may play a large part.

The potential helper. This person feels that it is wrong but does not know how to act safely.

The defender. This person seeks support, stands beside the victim, reports what is happening or refuses to join in.

The victim. This is not a role someone chooses, nor an identity they carry forever. It describes who is being hurt in this situation and needs protection.

Why following the crowd can be tempting

Children want to belong. That is not a character flaw; it is a human need. In an unsafe group, belonging may become conditional on joining in with someone else's humiliation. Laughing becomes an entry ticket. Staying silent feels safer than standing up.

That explains behaviour, but does not excuse it. It does offer clues to an effective approach. Simply telling everyone to ‘be nice’ does not change the reward. The group needs to see that humiliating people does not earn status, that adults visibly follow things up, and that helping safely is genuinely protected.

The unseen director

Sometimes the person laughing loudest seems to be the leader, while someone else determines what happens behind the scenes. That person may make suggestions, pass on information or use others. If the school only challenges the person carrying it out, the direction behind it stays out of sight.

So do not only ask, ‘Who did it?’ Also ask:

- Who first brought up the target?
- Who decided someone was not allowed to join in?
- Who has or distributes the material?
- Who encourages others?
- Who benefits from their position in the group?
- Who can stop the behaviour with one sentence?

Repetition also lives in anticipation

A child does not have to be hit every day to be frightened every day. When bullying is unpredictable, the body continually scans for danger. Will something happen today? Has something else been posted online? Who is laughing over there? Why is that group looking my way?

That anticipation takes up attention. Learning becomes harder, sleep more unsettled, and ordinary social situations feel like possible traps. A school may say that ‘nothing happened this week’, while the victim has spent the entire week on alert.

Changing the group

An approach that addresses the group does not mean the victim has to tell their story to the whole class. That may actually be dangerous. The school can work clearly on general standards, supervision and behaviour without revealing confidential details.

Work on three levels:

1. Protect the victim. Establish safe routes, people to contact and specific agreements. Prevent protection from feeling like punishment, for example when only the victim has to change classes or where they spend their breaks.

2. Set boundaries for those involved in bullying and following along. Identify specific behaviour, set conditions that can be checked, and link consequences to breaches.

3. Mobilise the group. Teach bystanders safe actions: do not forward material, do not laugh, stand beside someone, alert an adult, and preserve evidence without sharing it further.

Helping safely without having to play the hero

A child does not have to jump physically into a fight. An adult should not take a risk that makes the situation more dangerous either. Helping can be small and thoughtful:

- Do not laugh along or like posts;
- Walk away and take one other person with you, reducing the audience;
- Sit beside the victim later;
- Go together to a trustworthy adult;
- Report a specific incident;
- Do not share online material further, but preserve it safely as evidence;
- Call the emergency services in immediate danger.

The most important message for a bystander is: you do not have to solve it alone, but you do not have to pretend you saw nothing either.

When adults become part of the group

Adults can unintentionally reinforce group dynamics too. A teacher who jokes about a pupil in class gives others permission to do the same. A coach who adopts a nickname makes humiliation official. A parent who speculates about ‘that difficult child’ in a group chat increases the stigma.

Professional power requires extra care. A child can hardly disagree freely when grades, playing time, care or access depend on the adult. Reporting routes must therefore also be usable when the person in authority is part of the problem.

Points to remember

- Bullying is usually a group process, not a duel between two children.
- A calm account is not automatically honest; emotion is not automatically unreliable.
- Roles can change and must not be used as permanent labels.
- Bystanders need specific, safe alternatives to following along or staying silent.
- Protection must not isolate the victim further.
- Investigate who exercises influence behind the scenes too.

Chapter 4

Why a child often stays silent and may wear a mask

A child who stays silent does not have nothing to say. Often, they have too much to lose all at once.

Adults sometimes present telling someone as a straight route: something happens, the child reports it, and the adult solves it. In the victim's mind, a whole maze lies between those steps. Who will hear? Who will get angry? Who will pass it on? Will I have to go back to the same place tomorrow? Will they believe me? Will I be seen as a snitch? Will my phone be taken away? Will my parents look upset? Will I get the blame?

Staying silent may then be an attempt to keep control.

The hidden calculation

Before each word, a victim may unconsciously weigh up risks:

- The chance of the bullying getting worse;
- The chance that the adult will not believe them;
- The shame of saying the details aloud;
- Fear that parents or the school will immediately take major action;
- Fear of losing friends;
- Guilt because the family already has worries;
- Previous experiences in which help did not help;
- Threats such as ‘if you say anything, then…’;
- The belief that the situation is their own fault.

From the outside, this may look like delay. Inside, it may be a daily calculation of safety.

The mask

A mask is behaviour through which someone hides pain, fear or despair. It may be conscious—‘I won't let anything show’—but also a habit so old that someone hardly realises they are doing it any more.

Possible masks include:

- Laughing or joking when the subject comes too close;
- Saying everything is fine;
- High grades or exemplary behaviour;
- Restless, tough or challenging behaviour;
- Always seeming tired;
- Throwing themselves completely into sport, gaming or work;
- Helping others to avoid having to talk about themselves;
- Avoiding eye contact;
- Appearing unusually relaxed or cheerful;
- Only releasing their emotions at home after a quiet school day.

No single sign proves bullying. Eye contact, for example, may relate to personality, culture, tension or neurodiversity. Never force it. Look at changes, combinations and context.

Why avoiding eye contact may mean something

A face sometimes gives away more than someone wants it to. Someone afraid that their sadness will show may look away. Eye contact may also feel like an invitation to questions they do not yet dare answer. Or a child may have learned that bullies interpret looking at them as a challenge.

Do not say, ‘Look at me when I'm talking to you.’ That may increase precisely the pressure that blocks the conversation. A safe conversation can also happen side by side: while walking, drawing, driving or tidying a room. Some people talk better when they are not being watched.

Small signals

A victim does not always say, ‘I'm being bullied.’ They may test the waters:

- ‘What would you do if someone was laughed at every day?’
- ‘A boy in my class doesn't want to go to school any more.’
- ‘No one cares anyway.’
- ‘Can you actually change classes?’
- ‘Do you promise you won't phone someone straight away?’
- A dark joke about disappearing or no longer being around;
- Suddenly asking questions about blocking, reporting or screenshots;
- Lingering noticeably long near an adult without saying anything.

A signal like this is not proof, but it is a door opening very cautiously. Do not slam it shut with a quick solution or a laugh.

A helpful response might be:

‘I don't know whether you're asking this about yourself, but you don't have to carry it alone. I'll listen even if you can't tell me everything yet.’

Or:

‘I can see this question matters to you. Would you like me just to listen, think it through with you, or do something for you?’

When the story comes in pieces

Traumatic or prolonged experiences are not always told in neat date order. A child may first mention the least serious part to test what the adult does. More comes later. Details may shift because tension, shame or memory play a part. That does not automatically mean the story is untrue.

Do not play detective yourself with leading questions. Record exactly what is volunteered, ask open questions to clarify, and leave specialist investigation to authorised professionals when needed. The first

listener's job is safety and a careful handover, not a cross-examination.

If the child denies anything is wrong while you remain concerned

Applying pressure may close the door further. Say what you actually notice and stay in contact:

‘You say nothing is wrong. I respect that. I have noticed that over the last few weeks you've often had a stomach ache before school and have been quieter. So I'll keep asking how you're doing from time to time. You don't have to tell me anything before you're ready.’

Meanwhile, make the surroundings safer without singling the child out publicly. Improve supervision, check places where risks occur, make your availability visible, and watch for digital signs within the limits of privacy and your role.

No pressure on the victim

No pressure does not mean adults remain passive. It means:

- Do not demand that everything be told in one conversation;
- Do not force eye contact;
- Do not unexpectedly bring the alleged bully into the conversation;
- Do not threaten measures if the child stays silent;
- Do not force the child to report to the police, forgive or return before it feels safe;
- Do be clear about what must happen in immediate danger;
- Do return regularly;
- Do offer choices about format, pace and a person to support them;
- Do take responsibility for safety.

You build trust through predictability

Trust does not come from one warm sentence. It grows when words and actions match. Return at the agreed time. Explain who will

receive information. Tell the child beforehand what a next step involves. Give them a chance to correct a factual summary. Say when something takes longer. And acknowledge a mistake when you make one.

An adult does not have to be perfect. Being predictable and honest matters more than being impressive.

Points to remember

- Silence may be a safety strategy, not unwillingness.
- A mask may consist of laughing, achieving, restless behaviour or isolation.
- Avoiding eye contact is a possible sign, never proof on its own.
- Indirect remarks may be tentative signals to test whether someone responds safely.
- Allow the story to come in parts and do not ask leading questions.
- No pressure on the victim still means actively protecting them and reliably returning.

Chapter 5

Physical, verbal, social and digital bullying

Bullying rarely takes just one distinct form. A child may be ridiculed at school, excluded during breaks and sent messages in the evening. The visible shove is then just one piece of a larger system.

If you look only for bruises, you miss much of the harm.

Physical bullying

Physical bullying includes hitting, kicking, pushing, pinching, spitting at someone, blocking their path, locking them in, taking or damaging belongings, and forcing them to do something. Repeatedly bumping ‘accidentally’ into the same pupil may also be part of a pattern.

Do not only look for injuries. Also look for broken belongings, missing lunches, a child taking detours, always staying close to adults, or being afraid to go into the changing room or toilet.

In cases of injury or possibly criminal behaviour, appropriate medical assistance, action by the relevant authorities or police assistance should be considered. In immediate danger, call 112. Secure safety first; do not begin a joint search for the truth in the corridor.

Verbal bullying

Words can continually diminish someone: name-calling, threats, sexual remarks, racist or discriminatory language, imitation, humiliating nicknames and supposedly funny predictions about what someone ‘deserves’.

The meaning often lies in the history. One word may sound harmless to an outsider and refer to months of humiliation for the victim. So ask what a term or gesture means within the group.

Verbal bullying does not show up on an X-ray. That does not make it minor.

Social or relational bullying

This attacks someone's place in the group. Examples include:

- Deliberate exclusion;
- Forbidding others to have contact with someone;
- Spreading rumours;
- Acting as if someone does not exist;
- Sabotaging friendships;
- Always choosing someone last;
- Openly discussing invitations and leaving one person out;
- Withholding information so someone makes mistakes;
- Using private confidences to isolate someone.

This form is difficult to prove through a single incident. A log of patterns and conversations with several people may be needed. Remember that ‘no one wants to spend time with him’ is not a natural phenomenon. Ask who established that rule and what happens to children who do seek contact.

Bullying involving belongings and extortion

Hiding belongings, demanding money, taking food, damaging clothes or pressuring someone to pay can be bullying and sometimes criminal behaviour. Shame may lead a child to explain losses as carelessness.

Repeated requests for money, suddenly missing belongings or unexplained payments deserve calm questions. Do not accuse the child of lying or carelessness before the context is known.

Sexual bullying

Sexual remarks, rumours, touching, judging people's bodies, homophobic or transphobic insults, demanding images and sharing

intimate material can cause deep harm. Shame and fear of blame make telling someone particularly difficult.

Never respond with, ‘Why did you send that photograph, then?’ First secure safety, limit sharing and obtain appropriate expert help. Responsibility for unauthorised sharing lies with the person sharing it, not with the person whose trust has been betrayed.

Where sexual violence or abuse is suspected, professional reporting and response duties apply. Schools and support professionals must follow the procedures required by Dutch law and involve the confidential inspector at the Dutch Education Inspectorate, police or specialist help where necessary.

Digital bullying

Online bullying can continue day and night. The audience is larger, material can be copied, and the perpetrator may appear anonymous. Examples include:

- Abusive messages or comments;
- Removing someone from group chats and adding them back to humiliate them;
- Fake accounts or edited images;
- Doxing: publishing personal information;
- Polls, rankings or memes about a person;
- Exclusion in games or online groups;
- Taking over accounts;
- Threatening to make information public;
- Sharing photographs, videos or audio recordings without permission;
- Repeated contact after being blocked.

‘Just turn your phone off’ is rarely a complete solution. The phone also contains friends, homework, relaxation and evidence. Cutting the victim off from the digital world may feel like punishment, while the person bullying retains access.

First steps with online bullying

1. Assess immediate danger. Does it involve a specific threat, location data, extortion, sexual images, stalking or a threat of violence? Bring in appropriate help.

2. Preserve evidence carefully. Take screenshots showing the date, time, account name and context. Keep original links and files where this is safe and lawful.

3. Do not share it further. Do not circulate harmful or intimate material ‘to collect evidence’. Restrict access.

4. Block and report when safe. Sometimes evidence needs to be secured first. Use the platform's reporting functions.

5. Secure accounts. Change passwords, use unique passwords and two-step verification, and check logged-in devices and privacy settings.

6. Inform those with relevant responsibilities. Online behaviour between pupils can directly affect social safety at school, even when it happens at home.

7. Plan follow-up support. Deleting a message does not erase the fear of it happening again.

Bullying by adults or within organisations

Although this book often discusses children and schools, bullying can also occur at work, in clubs, in care settings, within families or in neighbourhoods. The forms are similar: belittling, withholding information, gossiping, isolating, threatening consequences and using the victim's reaction as evidence that they are ‘difficult’.

A formal position of power makes careful records and an independent reporting route especially important. Simply referring a complaint back to the person being complained about is not a safe procedure.