



HAPPY, HEALTHY MINDS

A CHILDREN'S GUIDE TO EMOTIONAL WELLBEING

HOW SOMEONE BECOMES A BULLY

Sometimes other people upset us by accident. They might bump into us or they say something that hurts us, but they're not setting out to make us unhappy. But with a bully it's different: a bully wants us to feel miserable. You might be happily doing something on your own and a bully comes up and says something horrible, just to make you feel bad.

In this section we are only going to be talking about bullies who say mean things. There is another kind of bully who can be physically threatening. Physical danger is something you have to talk to a grown-up about — as is the worst kind of verbal danger too.

Let's ask a difficult question: why does the bully say mean things? Why do they want to upset other people?

The answer is surprising: the bully is frightened. This can be hard to believe, because a bullying person doesn't look scared or frightened. Sometimes they look as if they aren't scared of anything. In fact, they are scared of something quite specific: they are mean to others because they are scared that someone will be mean to them.

The bully is attacking in someone else the thing they are afraid of being bullied for themselves — maybe not by anyone at school, but by someone important in their life: a parent or an older brother or sister, maybe. You can't see the other parts of the bully's life. Sadly, they have probably been humiliated and harshly criticised for exactly the same kind of things they are mean to others about. The bully is being really horrible. But it's sad for them. Someone



I have to be mean so they don't laugh at me

If I said I missed my mum they'd call me a baby

If I don't run fast they will say I'm useless

If I said I was scared or frightened no one would even care

If I said I felt shy people will think that I'm being stupid

If I had a soft toy they would tease me

becomes a bully because they have been bullied. They responded to it by thinking, ‘If I become a bully I won’t be bullied.’

If you have ever felt tempted to bully someone — and nearly everyone has at some point — try to remember how you felt at the time. Why did you want to be mean to that person? What was it about them? In what way might you once have been like them? Who wasn’t very nice to you?

WHY PEOPLE BULLY

Around bullying we’re meeting a big idea about why people behave badly.

People are horrible
because they’re suffering

People behave badly — they get angry or they do and say mean things — when they are afraid of something. Usually you can’t see what they are afraid of and they

don’t tell you. They feel they can’t explain their fear, and they are worried that if they tried to explain no one would understand.

So they cover up their fears. They try to look as if they aren’t afraid at all. Maybe this happens to you sometimes.

There’s an old story about this. Once, a very long time ago in Egypt, there was a boy called Androcles. He lived in a village. Every night, all the people in the village could hear a lion roaring not far away in the desert. The lion sounded angry; sometimes the lion would approach the village walls and in the moonlight they could see it stretching out its sharp claws and baring its huge teeth. It looked mean and horrible.

One day, Androcles was playing near some caves and it started to rain. He went to shelter in a cave. It would have been a good place to stay dry... except there, lying at the back, was the lion. As soon as it saw Androcles, the lion jumped up and started making a terrible noise. Androcles was terrified. But, now he was close, he realised there was something strange about the noise the lion was making. It was almost as if the lion was crying. Then Androcles noticed that there was a big thorn sticking into the lion’s paw. That was what had been making the lion so angry: it was in pain. It had been suffering for a long time, but it could never tell anyone what was wrong and it didn’t know how to get the thorn out on its own. Quietly, Androcles went up to the lion and gently pulled out the thorn. The lion stopped roaring and lay down quietly and became the boy’s friend.

It’s only a story — obviously it would be a bad idea to try to take a thorn out of a lion’s paw — but it makes an important point. Lots of people are like this lion. They shout or they get angry, they look mean and threatening, but actually they are suffering. They don’t have a thorn sticking into their hand. They have a different kind of pain, in their mind rather than in their body.

Maybe they feel like no one loves them. Maybe they feel ashamed because they know they have been horrible. Maybe they are sad about something; they could be worried that they will be laughed at or that someone is going to get angry with them.

If someone is behaving badly, and not being nice, it is helpful to ask: what’s the thorn in their mind? You probably won’t know the answer. But imagining what the answer might be makes a big difference to how you see this person. Here’s how a search for a thorn might go...

WHAT WAS THE UPSETTING THING?

Mum was angry and she shouted at me

Dad won't let me spend more time on my iPad

WHAT MIGHT BE THE THORN?

She has a very difficult relationship with her sister

He's really worried about his work right now

TRY WRITING YOUR OWN

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PEOPLE ARE SOMETIMES HORRIBLE TO PEOPLE THEY LIKE

It may sound strange, but sometimes bullies are mean to people that they like. They're so afraid they won't be liked back, they start to behave badly, almost as a way of showing how little they care, because caring is painful for them (it reminds them they might not be wanted).

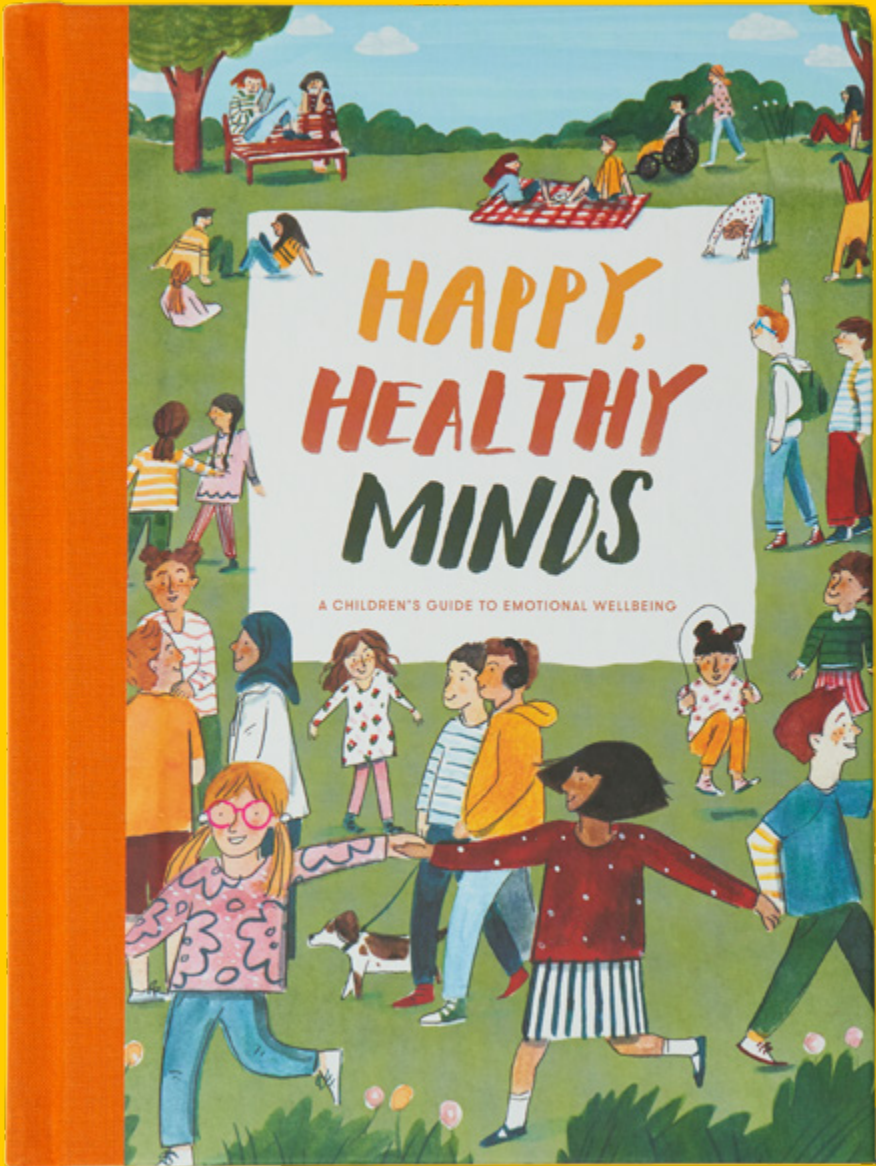
It is uncomfortable to want something that you can't have, so sometimes we reinvent how much we ever wanted the missing element in the first place. When it becomes clear that something — it could be a toy, a friend, a holiday — can never be ours, we re-evaluate how much it means to us. It takes strength to hold on to the idea that something might be precious and yet out of our reach.

Imagine being 9 and entering a class at the start of the year when you notice an extraordinary new pupil: taller than you, with nice eyes, cool clothes and an intelligent smile. They're one of the most charming people you have ever encountered. They are also out of your league. You might long to become their friend. You might want to share jokes and chit-chat, but this kind of attempt could also hurt. So, to reduce the pain, you might decide you do not care. To show you don't care — to yourself and to the person you like — you become a bit nasty. You try to spoil what you cannot have. You become mean where you would, at one level, have wanted to be sweet. You call them a stuck-up idiot and worse, you organise a group to torment them; you steal their scarf. It sounds odd, but it can happen to us all.

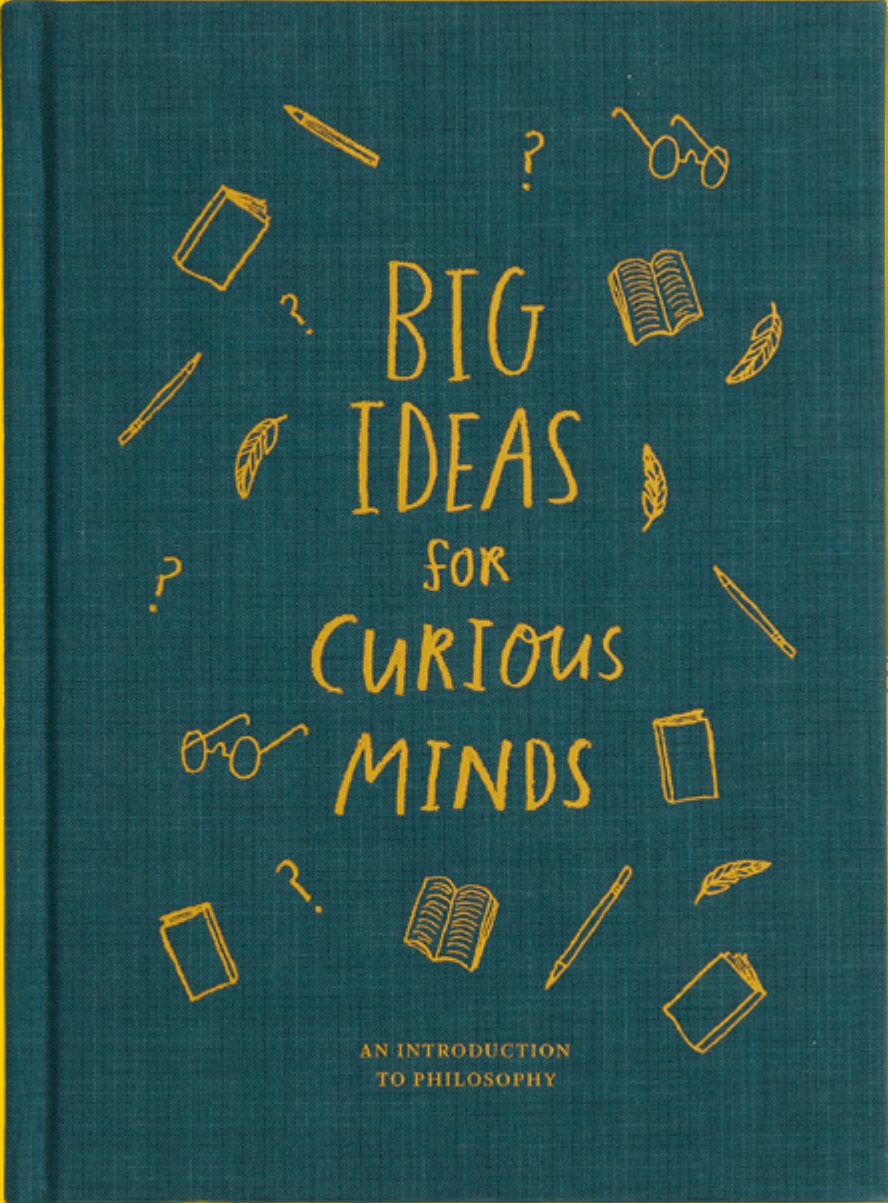
So the next time that you find someone being mysteriously mean to you, without any arrogance, keep one thought in mind: maybe they want to be your friend and they're just scared you won't want to be friends with them.

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