

CPI *Unrestrained* Transcription

Guest : Julie Hertzog

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Host: Terry Vittone

Terry: Hello, and welcome to Unrestrained, the CPI podcast series. This is your host, Terry Vittone, and today my guest is Julie Hertzog, nationally recognized leader on bullying prevention. Hello and welcome, Julie.

Julie: I am happy to be on the show, Terry, thank you.

Terry: You're welcome. Julie is the Director of PACER's National Bullying Prevention Center, which she helped create back in 2006, and where she has led the development of a variety of curricula and resources, including creating content for PACERKidsAgainstBullying.org, and PACERTeensAgainstBullying.org. A little later in the podcast we will go and get the exact addresses for people to find that.

In 2012, Julie was appointed as a member and co-chair of Minnesota's Governor's Task Force on the Prevention of School Bullying. She has been quoted by media throughout the US, including CNN, NBC Nightly News with Brian Williams, Time for Kids, The Huffington Post. And she has been on staff at PACER since 2000.

Julie, to begin today, I think it would be great if you could talk about your son, David, and the way he personally inspired you to become a leading bullying prevention advocate.

Julie: Oh, well thank you, Terry. I love being able to start with that question, because in my role as Director at our National Bullying Prevention Center, I think, when we come to our careers, everybody kind of has a story of how they got there. As a young person growing up, I certainly never said to myself, "Some day I am going to be the Director of the National Bullying Prevention Center." But it is amazing how life and situations impact what you do and what you become passionate about.

My husband and I had a daughter back in 1995 and then we quickly followed up about a year later with another child in 1996, who is our son, David. David was born with Down's syndrome, and he also had some very significant medical issues. He was a little boy who was medically fragile. He had three open-heart

surgeries. He had a pacemaker, a feeding tube, some other really significant things. He was on a ventilator. And so, he was a child who just fought incredibly hard to survive, and it impacted our family a lot.

When David was entering in to kindergarten, I was working for an organization; it is called PACER Center, which I will get in to a little bit as well. But when David was going in to kindergarten, I was looking at him and thinking, "Here is a child who is incredibly vulnerable. He doesn't talk. He is small in stature."

He had some really obvious differences, and I thought to myself, "Wow, I can't bear the thought of anybody ever being cruel to David, or teasing him because of those differences, especially knowing what a courageous little soul he is, just in surviving and living."

So he really inspired my work around the topic of bullying, because I thought, "You know, if anybody deserves to be safe in our schools, it is my son." And it is all the other kids out there like him who have stories that are powerful. And so much of bullying is about differences, and about what makes kids truly unique. And I thought, "I am in a marvelous position to make a difference." And PACER Center is an advocacy organization for students with disabilities.

And so, just having that background, I also have a master's degree in Counseling Psychology and had worked extensively in the field of domestic abuse and child abuse. I thought, "I can apply all of these lessons and really think about this topic of bullying." Because in early 2000, people weren't talking about it very much. And so, David, since age 5, and he is now 18, so 13 years later, has really been inspirational in all the work that I do around bullying.

But our efforts aren't just for kids with disabilities; they are for all kids. Because kids are, again, bullied because of differences, whether it is their weight, whether it is their academic ability, whether it is their disability. Whether they are perceived or identified as LGBT students, kids get bullied. At PACER Center we have been at this work for a long time, but at my personal core as a mom, David is always at the forefront.

Terry: And at 18, may I ask, what are his interests today?

Julie: Well at 18, he is now a senior. One of the things, Terry, that I love to say at this point in time is that David is actually quite popular at this school.

Terry: Brilliant.

Julie: Which is such a different experience than kids had 10, 20, well definitely 20 years ago. And he is non-verbal, and I think that that is such an amazing testimony to

what we did a lot at his school. This was always involving his peers and having honest conversations about his disability. Kids, his peers, are amazing in how they reach out to him and connect with him, and are comfortable doing that. But a lot of that was very purposefully. It didn't happen just organically either. We implemented programs.

Terry: Then it has to be deeply gratifying for you personally, and also as a powerful example to other parents, and other school systems and administrators who might want to create a safe place. That is a success story of note.

Julie: It is. And I think one of the things is, when there are differences, is that we want to be talking about those differences, and not putting them under the rug. We want to be sharing that it does harm somebody to tease them about their weight, whether underweight or overweight, and just bringing that to kids' awareness, because I find that kids are incredibly sensitive if you share why it is that that hurts somebody. Because they don't always recognize it right away. They may kind of get it, but to be having those honest conversations is really important.

Terry: Well, that leads me to another question I had today. You advocate empathy education as a component of effective bullying prevention initiatives, and getting those kids to empathize with other students. Where and how would schools interested in providing empathy education, how do they begin to find a way to do that?

Julie: Well, there are a lot of great programs out there, and you have to make it part of your daily curriculum. A lot of times I think when people look at this whole topic of bullying prevention, it started with, "Well, we will have a one-day school assembly and we'll talk about bullying. And it will go away."

But it is just not that simple, because bullying has been around for a lot of years. And so, when you talk about a change in culture, we talk at PACER about, you know, we are making a paradigm shift from bullying being this "accepted rite of childhood passage." Or some of those other statements we have about it just being a natural part of growing up. You really have to start by saying, "Number One, this behavior is not accepted in our school." And giving the behavior a name, too, so the kids can understand exactly what "bullying" is.

And then from there, what we want to do is build schools that have a culture of respect, and empathy, and understanding, and inclusion. You do that by having special events, so that there are conversations starting about maybe different populations of kids. I will go back to disability, because that is what I am most familiar with. At our organization, when we talk about disabilities, it is not just a child like David, who we are very aware has a disability, because you can see his differences.

But it is also that child with Tourette's, or that child with a learning disability, or ADHD, where their behaviors are more reflective of their disability, but they are going to look a lot like their typically-abled peers. And so, to be talking about, "What is ADHD? What is autism? What is Asperger's?" I think that just builds that acceptance, because then kids can say, "Oh, now I get it. His behavior is part of who he is." Just having that acceptance. Understanding really breeds acceptance, especially with kids.

Terry: That's a great lesson. And it leads in to another question about verbalizing and defining these things. In your video, "Bullies and Bystanders: What Experts Say," you say, "So much of bullying is about silence." That seems to relate to what you are speaking to now.

Julie: Yeah. I think, again, just historically Terry, when we look at this issue of bullying, there is a lot of talk about it now and a lot of awareness being raised. But one of the reasons that it has been perpetuated for years is that, again, if we look back at some of those statements that we have, like, "Sticks and stones will break your bones, but words will never hurt you." You know, we have rationalized this behavior for so long. And we think about those times when kids have come up and maybe told their parent, or another adult, "So-and-so is being picked on." What was the advice that we gave kids?

It was to "mind your own business." Or, "That behavior is not that bad." Or, "That is just kids being kids." When kids hear that, they're much less likely to want to intervene, or want to support that person, because they are being sent that message that, "This is not something that we talk about. This is just the way it is."

Terry: You know, it is interesting you mentioned it, because it comes to my mind that the expression that has been current, maybe not so much any more, but, "Man up," you know? "Man up" is a way to say, "Don't articulate what you're feeling. Just sort of take it." The residue of that kind of thinking is still in the society, it seems.

Julie: Absolutely, it is absolutely there. And again, that has been what I know my parents said that to me. There are still parents saying it. There is also the expression, "Oh, bullying will make you tougher." What we want to do is help people understand that it doesn't make you tougher. It tears kids down. It tears them down not only short-term, but also long-term. There's longitudinal research out there now that shows how devastating the impact of bullying is, well into adulthood.

But kids who are bullied and are going through school right now are more likely to suffer from anxiety, depression. And they also don't want to go to school.

They simply don't want to go to school. You can imagine, as an adult, we have all had those experiences in the workplace with that person who just made our lives miserable. Well, imagine as a kid, going through that every day and no one helping you. That's the impact.

And if kids could stand up to that person bullying them, they would. They absolutely would, but bullying is about an imbalance of power. The kids who are doing the bullying are finding that vulnerable person who is not able to defend against the behavior.

Another thing that we tell our kids, too. And again, Terry, I say this because it is well-intentioned advice. I don't want any parent who has ever said it to feel bad. But a lot of times parents will say, "Oh, just ignore it. It will go away." Well you know what? If it were that simple, we simply would not have a problem with bullying. But ignoring it won't make it go away. In fact, when kids try to ignore it, that is often times when they find they become more and more a target of it because they are perceived as being even more vulnerable then.

Terry: In *Bullies and Bystanders*, you also say, instead of having bullying be this accepted kind of behavior, or this behavior that we are tacit about, and say, "Well, maybe if we ignore, or YOU ignore it, it will go away," you say, "Why don't we make kindness, and tolerance, and inclusion become the norm." How can educators, and parents, and people surrounding the bullying issue begin that transformation?

Julie: I would strongly say that transformation has already begun. There is so much more awareness about this topic, and most importantly, about the impact. Because that is why it really matters. You know, why are we talking about this? We are talking about it because it impacts kids in such negative ways. It's an unhealthy behavior, and it also is setting the stage for some long-term behaviors.

So we really start to teach kids about the word, even I will use the word "advocacy." It is about a lot of bullying could be prevented by the bystander being supportive of the kid who is being bullied. And we talk about, "That is what we call 'advocacy'." It is about looking out for other.

And self-advocacy is about being able to look out for yourself. We always tell kids, "If you are being bullied, it is not up to you to fix it. It is never up to you just solely to fix it. You need adults. You need your parents. You need a supportive school. But you can certainly have a role in it."

I think that is so important. Say for example, even with David, what we did for him with self-advocacy, even with a kid who is non-verbal. We taught him, "If something doesn't feel right to you, if somebody is making you feel sad, you

need to go and identify that to a teacher.” And so again, it is not about him fixing it, but it is about making sure that he is not silent about it, that he is not just feeling at a point where he needs to accept that behavior. He needs to know that he has the right to be safe. He needs to know that he is not alone, and he needs to know he can develop a plan and a strategy to make sure that behavior doesn't continue.

Terry: Excellent. So now, you guys, PACER, founded October as National Bullying Prevention Month. Is that correct, yes?

Julie: We did! We did!

Terry: Can you talk about that a little bit?

Julie: Yeah, way back in 2006, so it is coming on 10 years here already. We, as an organization, I would say we're risk-takers. We also like to push conversations forward, and we felt that the way you can do that is to create an awareness-raising event. So in 2006, we started at a week, and there was such tremendous interest in it, and such tremendous support from people like National PTA, National Education Association, and other organizations, as well as just the community in general wanted to have this topic, wanted to bring it in to the schools.

And so, in 2010 we expanded it to be the month of October. We purposely chose October because it was early in the school year. So we wanted to make sure that the conversation was jump-started so it would continue throughout the year. Then we just continued to expand on opportunities and resources for schools to get involved. And so there are a couple of great events. There is PACER, along with maybe about 50, maybe even more than that, organizations, hold what is called Run, Walk, Rolls Against Bullying throughout the country.

Again, those are family-friendly events to be talking about the topic, to let kids know that they are supported if it is happening to them. It's a way to make the conversation very public. And then, we also have a wonderful event called Unity Day, which is Wednesday, October 22nd. That day has a very simple call to action, to wear the color orange, or to display the color orange. And what that does is, again, just show solidarity around this issue, that it is something we care about.

And, I would also add, Terry, that as an organization, we don't use negative words. You know, where it is “against the bully” or anything. We always talk about bullying as a behavior, because a behavior can change. So when we talk about Unity Day, what we are saying is that we want to come together as a community and show that all kids need to be safe; all kids deserve to be safe. That's really the core message.

Terry: We share that message of inclusion at CPI. In fact, I continually have to correct my language. Instead of saying “anti-bullying” we want to say “bullying prevention” and those sorts of things.

So we are totally working on crafting our message so that we talk about the behavior and never the child, or young adult as it may be, or an adult, who is doing the bullying. Hopefully by that point it is not the adult, but we know that is not always true.

Julie: Yeah.

Terry: Julie, could you tell us about the sites I mentioned in your introduction? Maybe how people can get to them and what they might find there?

Julie: You can go visit PACER's National Bullying Prevention Center, and the shorthand URL for that is [PACER.org/bullying](https://www.pacer.org/bullying). You can also go in to Google and search us, and we will come up very high in the rankings, so you can find it that way as well. That is our portal page that provides information to parents and professionals. And everything on there, the majority of our resources are free. They are set up to be implemented in the school. They are set up to provide parents information about how they can work with their school if their child is being bullied.

And then also, we have two outstanding websites that are audience-specific. As an organization, we really first started working with the kids themselves, and these websites were developed even before our other websites were. The first one is for elementary school students, and it is called [KidsAgainstBullying.org](https://www.kidsagainstbullying.org). It can be found at [PACERKidsAgainstBullying.org](https://www.pacerkidsagainstbullying.org). You can also access it through our portal page, at [PACER.org/bullying](https://www.pacer.org/bullying).

And the second one is for middle and high school students. It is just a sibling site to the other one. It is [PACERTeensAgainstBullying.org](https://www.pacerteensagainstbullying.org). But those sites, Terry, are for kids too. Because we find that kids are passionate about this issue. They want to get involved. They want to know what they can do. So there is great, age-appropriate information about activities for them, what they can do in their community. Because we always say we as adults are thinking a lot about this issue, but kids are thinking about it even more.

They think about it in slightly different ways than we do, but we also say to kids, “This is your issue, and you can also be the solution to it.” You put those tools in their hands and they are a very powerful influence on their peers. And we want to make sure they are having a positive influence on their peers.

Terry: That is a great message; that is a great takeaway. I appreciate it. And Julie, I want to thank you, and congratulations on all the success you have had with your bullying prevention initiatives at PACER and at the National Bullying Prevention Center.

I want to thank you for joining us today on Unrestrained. Are there any last thoughts you would like to leave with? You are kicking off our Month of Difference Makers and we appreciate your doing that. Any last words of wisdom or advice for people out there who are looking to make a difference against bullying?

Julie: Yeah. A takeaway would be, "The end of bullying begins with you." We have had that tagline since 2006 and it's really just about that everybody has a role to play here, and everybody can do something about this issue. One of them is just recognizing that a little kindness in anybody's day makes a huge difference, but especially to somebody who you can tell has been hurt or harmed. It is so important to reach out to that individual and say, "You're not alone." I think that is really important.

Terry: Excellent. Well, thank you. My guest today on Unrestrained has been Julie Hertzog. She is the Director of PACER's National Bullying Prevention Center. Thank you, Julie.

Julie: Thanks, Terry.