

CPI *Unrestrained* Transcription

Episode TBD: Signe Whitson

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Host: Terry Vittone

Terry: Hello and welcome to Unrestrained. This is your host, Terry Vittone. My guest today is Signe Whitson, one of our featured anti-bullying difference makers. And today she joins us from Allentown, Pennsylvania. She is an author, licensed social worker, school counselor and internationally recognized speaker with more than 15 years of experience working with children, teens and families. I should jump in. Good morning, Signe. Thank you for joining us.

Signe: Good morning. It's my pleasure to be here. Thank you for having me.

Terry: You're welcome. She's also the Chief Operating Officer of Life Space Crisis Intervention Institute, a nationally recognized professional training and certification program for turning crisis situations into learning opportunities for children and youth with chronic patterns of self-defeating behaviors. Signe is also the school counselor at Circle of Seasons, a public Waldorf methods charter school.

She is a featured blogger for Psychology Today and The Huffington Post, as well as the author of four books, including the two we're going to talk about today. That's *8 Keys to End Bullying: Strategies for Parents and Schools* and *Friendship and Other Weapons: Group Activities to Help Young Girls Age 5-11 to Cope with Bullying*. I'm going to begin with our first question today coming from *8 Keys to End Bullying*. Why is it so important to properly define bullying?

Signe: Certainly when I was growing up, I grew up with the whole sticks and stones mentality, and bullying was something that no one talked about. If anything, it was a "kids will be kids" rite of passage sort of thing. I think about a decade ago people like Rosalind Wiseman and Rachel Simmons, who wrote *Odd Girl Out*, started to first shine a light on bullying behavior as something that is not just a normal part of childhood. And it was a wonderful thing to start talking about this phenomenon that people had ignored for so long.

But I also think that we have a culture now with 24/7 news cycles and social media sound bites, and while we do have a better opportunity than ever before to bring attention to important issues, when we over-label any type of bad

behavior by children as bullying we start to run the risk of making people so sick and tired of hearing about this issue that it starts to lose its urgency as quickly as it rose to prominence.

And I am really seeing that in my work. Finally, we are paying attention to bullying; finally, we're taking it seriously. But at the same time we have people that just roll their eyes and they groan and they just don't want to hear about it anymore. So one of the things that I try to do, really at the beginning of every presentation that I do, and in fact, as you mentioned in it's in the very first chapter of my *8 Keys to End Bullying* book, is to make distinctions between rude, mean and bullying behaviors so that adults and parents know what they're dealing with and they know when to intervene. Because what we don't want is for bullying to go back into the shadows again or become a little boy who cried wolf issue.

Terry: So you think we're honing in on a precise definition for the advocacy world of anti-bullying.

Signe: I think that helps quite a bit. There's a whole continuum of behaviors that kids show that we don't necessarily like, that we want to help kids change. But that doesn't mean that every time someone calls someone else a name that's bullying.

Terry: Excellent.

Signe: That is rude behavior. We want to address it, we want to help kids change but we don't want to call everything bullying because then we won't know what to pay attention to and we will really waste all of our important financial resources and time resources chasing things that could be handled at a different level.

Terry: I see why that focus is so important. Also from your book, *8 Keys to End Bullying*, you have something called a bullying hat exercise that has to do with perspective. Would you describe it for us, and how anti-bullying advocates benefit from this activity?

Signe: Sure. This exercise is named for a line from a book by best-selling children's author Judy Ludwig. This particular book is called *Confessions of a Former Bully*. In this book, Ludwig explains all types of kids wear bully hats on certain occasions. In other words, a child can misbehave at one time or another. And I often find that adults who are really eager to do something to change the culture of bullying in schools, they're looking for a clear cut answer or a precise profile to the question of who bullies.

But really, the truth of the matter is that we're working with kids and by their very nature, they're works in progress. So their behavior on any day or even on repeated occasions is subject to guidance and to improvement. I think that when we as adults open our eyes to this and stop placing kids in harmful categories, such as bully or troublemaker, and instead think of them as young people who deserve to be taught better ways to behave then we're really doing kids a service. This bully hat exercise is designed to help adults understand that word "bully" is a verb as opposed to a noun and that we shouldn't judge or label kids based on these single incidences of bad behavior.

Terry: And that ties into a question of identity that you speak of in your book. You talk about something called the bully-victim and how they differ psychologically from other kinds of bullies. Could you talk about that psychological profile of that character type?

Signe: Sure, absolutely. Bully-victim is a term that's used to describe kids that show aggression toward their peers but also tend to be frequent targets of aggression by others. And research tells us that up to one-third of bullying is carried out by bully-victims, so this is a really important group for us to pay attention to. I think, in terms of the psychological profile as you said, I think it's important for us to realize that the bully-victim tends to be a child who struggles to regulate their emotional responses. They're volatile; they're easily overwhelmed by emotions. They also tend to be more anxious, more depressed, and lonelier than the average child.

I guess what it really comes down to is a phrase by Nicholas Long, who is the founder of the Life Space Crisis Intervention Institute. And he taught me and taught many others that the problems kids cause are not the causes of their problems. And it's easy to take this sort of bully-victim profile and think this is a troubled kid, this is a bad kid. But what's really important for healthy adults to do is to look beyond the behavior and see beyond the psychological profile, understand the thoughts and feelings driving that behavior and try to start there with the child to help them change, rather than just addressing this surface behavior that really doesn't reveal enough about what's going on with the child underneath the surface.

Terry: Could we see every child engaging in bullying behavior as a bully-victim?

Signe: That's a great question. That goes back to your first question. What is the difference between rude behavior, mean behavior and bullying behavior? I don't think that every child bullies. I think that bullying is something very specific that has to do with an intention to harm, repeated behavior over time and an abuse of power. I think that all children are rude on occasion. I think that most children are mean from time to time, especially when they're angry or in a conflict. But I

think that bullying behavior is reserved for a smaller group of kids that engage in that relentless cruelty that also lacks empathy.

Terry: Well said. One of the things in *8 Keys to End Bullying* that you talk about is where kids don't feel safe talking about when they're the victims of bullying behavior. You have some good advice there about ways to make kids feel safe, to talk about the bullying that might be enduring. Could you share that with us?

Signe: Sure. Your first point, I think, is a really important one for adults to understand. Kids are hesitant to talk about bullying. And there are a lot of good reasons for it. Kids are embarrassed, they're humiliated, and they're worried that if they reach out to an adult they're going to be called a tattler, that their life is only going to get worse. I know a number of kids that also have told me that they're really terrified that their mom or dad is going to rush into school, demand a meeting with principal, demand a meeting with the teacher, and again create more embarrassment and things are going to get worse for them.

Terry: Unwanted attention.

Signe: Absolutely. Yeah. So I think it's really important for us as adults to understand barriers that kids have about talking to us and those barriers are very real. And then to think hard about how we make it safe for kids to talk about bullying. I think some of the schools that are most successful in creating positive cultures for kids are ones that have anonymous reporting systems built-in.

Besides systems, there are some very human things that we as adults can do, like just listening to kids. And I always remind myself that that the letters in the word "listen" are the same as the letters in the word "silent." Sometimes we just need to let kids talk without letting our own anxiety kick in so that we're interrogating them and asking a million questions. I think we have to believe kids and we have to be willing to listen without rushing in to solving.

As adults, we want to help, we want to make things better and solving is important. But even more important is empowering kids to feel like they can get a handle on this themselves. What we really want is for kids to feel like they can do something about conflict, they can manage it themselves, independently and with some dignity, but of course with adult support as well.

Terry: That's a great goal. It ties into the next thing I was going to ask. The environment that starts to engender a feeling of safety for expressing difficult kinds of things. In a classroom, you talk about ways in *8 Keys* to make kindness a classroom norm, as something to mean fostering a lot more immediate communication as if you were in a caring environment. What are some of the ways that you talk about making a classroom a kinder place for all kinds of students?

Signe: The good news here is that there are so many things that adults can do. And one of my favorite things as I travel around the United States and talk to different teachers is to hear all of the creative things that great teachers are doing. The key to it is that it doesn't have to be big, grandiose, time consuming things. It's really the little things that teachers do on a day-to-day basis that makes kids feel safe.

And it really all begins with, I think as you started to say, the relationships that adults form with students. I'll give you one great example I'll never forget. A nine-year-old girl ran up to me, and I think it was Friday or a Thursday, the end of her first week of school. She said, "Signe, Signe! My teacher really likes me this year."

And she was just gleeful is the only way I could describe her. And I told her that was great and I was happy for her and I said, "How do you know that your teacher likes you so much?"

And she said, "Well every day she stands at the door and she smiles at me when I walk in and she already knows my name. Last year, my teacher just sat at her desk and the only time she talked to any of the kids was when she yelled at us to be quiet. But this teacher smiles at us and I just know she likes me. I know it's going to be a great year."

And I thought maybe that teacher was missing out on 10 minutes of paperwork they weren't getting done, but the time they were saving by having these real relationships with each student, and making kindness and concern a classroom norm, that's more important than, really, any of academic learning those kids are going to do. Or at least it makes possible the academic learning because these kids feel safe emotionally and socially.

Terry: That's a great example. One certainly every teacher could . . . well, like you said, except for the time the investment is just recognizing the child and smiling and calling them by name. That's great.

Signe: That was just the beginning of every day but that set the tone for how the students taught each other. And I actually told this story in a training once, and I had someone kindly doubt me and say, "Are you saying that a smile is all we need to prevent bullying?"

I said, "No. I'm not saying it's just a smile. I get that the problem of bullying in schools is much, much deeper than something that just a smile from a teacher can cure. But what I am saying is that that smile, every day, making a child feel welcomed, and heard, and understood is the foundation of a relationship with a

young person. And within that relationship, a child feels safe to go to that adult when bullying is occurring. And with that relationship, other kids will feel like, 'You know what? I don't want to hurt my classmate because I really like this teacher and I don't want her to think less of me.'" That relationship makes all the difference.

Terry: Excellent. Do you think that sort of climate, that culture you're talking about, the teacher building, do you think, Signe, that relates into some of the S.E.L. programming that you talk about and how it relates to bullying behavior? And I should make that acronym clear. That's social and emotional learning, is that correct?

Signe: I absolutely do think that there's a connection there, and I think the teachers that are focused on relationships and these norms of kindness are the teachers that are also making time for the social-emotional learning to happen in their classrooms. Research is pretty clear in showing that effective S.E.L. programming drives important social outcomes, such as positive peer relationships, increased levels of caring and empathy and also a reduction of problem behaviors such as bullying.

And what we're also seeing is that kids who received social-emotional learning in their classrooms outperform their peers academically and graduate at higher rates. So there's that question of time again, "Can I infuse these socials skills into my curriculum when I have so many pressures on me for standardized testing and benchmarking?" But the truth is the time spent on the S.E.L. learning is time saved on conflict and alienation and parent conferences. That's the time you sort of frontload the kids with the social-emotional competencies and then it's time that you don't have to spend on the other things that take away from academic learning.

Terry: I see. Signe, you've got a new book out, a provocative title by the way, *Friendship and Other Weapons: Group Activities to Help Young Girls Cope with Bullying*. Congratulations.

Signe: Thank you.

Terry: You're welcome. You write that the group activities included in there are designed to provide an open, safe and fun format for girls to talk about the nature of conflict and learn skills for fostering real friendships. Tell more about the book and which activities in there have been really popular that girls and their parents, I imagine, have latched onto and said, "This is really effective."

Signe: Well, I'll tell you, the inspiration for the book came because studies show that bullying peaks in middle school. And I just couldn't help think if we're seeing the

behavior in 6th, 7th and 8th, grade, what can we do to offer some protection, some inoculation to our younger kids so that they know bullying when they see it? They know how to choose positive friendships. They're learning skills for how to treat each other, how to stand up for themselves, how to stand up for other people in these earlier years so that it is not peaking in middle school. Sort of an idealistic pie in the sky, how can we save this generation of kids and start a very young age?

So that was sort of my inspiration to write this book targeted at social and emotional competencies for young kids. What I've been really excited to find out is that people are using the book with boys as well. They're using through the upper elementary and even middle school years. And I think the things that people tell me are most effective are the activities that really focus on giving kids a voice and giving them concrete skills for know what to do in bullying situation.

So if they are the targets of relentless cruelty by their peers, what they can do, what they can say, who they can go to, very specifically. And also looking at role of the bystander. There are so many different roles the bystander—the hero, the ally—but the other kids that are around that are observing the bullying, we know that that's where the social power is. So what can we do to empower bystanders to stand up for their peers, to speak up, to make their voice heard and stop bullying in its tracks?

Terry: Bystanders are certainly a very prominent topic among a lot of anti-bullying advocates, and it certainly seems to be a critical moment for arresting the behavior or the group dynamic that seems to permit bullying to happen.

Signe: Yeah, absolutely.

Terry: Can I ask you, Signe, in these multifold ways that you've worked with anti-bullying who was your biggest inspiration to take up this quest, if you will, to really reinforce anti-bullying?

Signe: Oh, boy, just when you asked that question I think four or five people all came to mind right away. I think my interest in this work initially was really captured by Rosalind Wiseman, who wrote *Queen Bees and Wannabees*. Her book was made into the movie *Mean Girls*. I mentioned Rachel Simmons before, who wrote *Odd Girl Out*.

I'm also inspired because I have two young daughters. I have an elementary school daughter and one who's just going into middle school this year. So I'm a mom who wants to make their lives better. I'm also a school counselor in an elementary school, so I've got about a 160 students right now that inspire me.

I think the other person that comes to mind, for me it's a specific teacher who just embodies this creation of warm classroom cultures. It's her in my life, but in general it's the educators that are out there that inspire me. Our teachers are the ones who are with our kids six, seven, eight hours a day, and that have this awesome responsibility and also opportunity to change the culture of cruelty for kids and create these cultures of kindness. So they inspire me. They're doing the work and I want to give them some skills to make their jobs a little easier.

Terry: Well said. Thank you, Signe. And I want to say that my guest today has been Signe Whitson, and she is an author. We talked about two books today, *8 Keys to Ending Bullying: Strategies for Parents and Schools* that's published by Norton. *Friendship and Other Weapons: Group Activities to Help Young Girls 5-11 to Cope with Bullying*, that's from Jessica Kingsley Publishing. Both are available on Amazon. Signe, do you have a site that you would like to invite people to so that they can learn more about anti-bullying efforts?

Signe: I sure do. It's www.SigneWhitson.com. I know my first name is not an easy one, but if your listeners can find it on the website I would love for people to go there and find out about the books and the workshops I offer. And then I'm also on Facebook and Twitter as well. Easy enough to find me by name, Signe Whitson.

Terry: All right. We're grateful to have you today on Unrestrained. Thank you for being one of our difference makers.

Signe: Thank you so much for having me. It was really a pleasure.

Terry: You're welcome.