



YOUTH VOICE PROJECT

An analogy: what we can learn from the Harry Potter books

In the Harry Potter series, JK Rowling writes with a great deal of insight about peer mistreatment. Her descriptions provide us with many interesting discussion topics to use with youth. Analysis of patterns of action in literature and visual media can help youth and adults make good decisions. The following discussion could be used with students as well as educators to help us analyze what motivates negative peer actions and what we can do to discourage these actions and prevent harm.

First we will hear from Rowling herself:

“Harry Potter creator JK Rowling has revealed how she was bullied at school, being branded ‘Rowling Pin’ by classmates. The Edinburgh-based writer made the revelation in a letter to an American fan who wrote to tell her that the Harry Potter books had helped her cope with a troubled childhood. The normally private author told [the fan that] being a teenager was ‘completely horrible...I know what it’s like to be picked on, as it happened to me too, throughout my adolescence. Being a teenager can be completely horrible.’ Ms Rowling has previously said of her teenage years: ‘I wouldn’t go back if you paid me.’” (cite)

Stan first became aware of the power of the Harry Potter books in helping youth address peer mistreatment when working therapeutically with an 11-year-old girl who was repeatedly cruel to her peers. A highly intelligent young woman, she watched peers to determine their weaknesses, waited for times of vulnerability, and delivered carefully designed doses of name-calling, peer exclusion, and threats in often devastating ways. She manipulated students into abandoning and mistreating their friends. She started rumors. This girl seemed to have few reservations about her own behavior, and rarely seemed deterred by school punishments. After trying a range of counseling techniques, Stan used a technique he had learned at a training workshop. He asked this girl, who was an avid reader, to name her favorite novel. Without hesitation she said, “The Harry Potter books.” He asked her which character in the Harry Potter books she would most like to resemble. Equally quickly she replied, “Hermione Granger.” He then asked which character in the books she had most acted like in the past week. There was a long pause, after which she whispered, “Draco Malfoy.” After an even longer pause, she said slowly and thoughtfully, making direct eye contact, “I don’t want to be Draco Malfoy.” Stan and this girl spent sessions over the next months analyzing her behavior through the lens of the Harry Potter books. She would create a list of times she had behaved like Draco Malfoy, and a list of times she had behaved like Hermione Granger. Through this ongoing reflection, the list of times in which she had behaved like Hermione grew and the “Draco list” shrank steadily in length. She



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reduced the frequency and seriousness of her cruel actions and grew more supportive of her peers through her positive identification with characters at Hogwarts School of witchcraft and Wizardry.

Before we discuss what the Harry Potter books can teach us about peer mistreatment, a brief plot summary may be in order (since Stan's assumption that everyone has read all the Harry Potter books over and over again has turned out not to be true). We ask the many devotees of the book to forgive the brevity of the following summary which, after all, condenses the content of 4,100 pages of fiction into fewer than 1,000 words.

The Harry Potter books overlay three interlocking stories. First, like Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, there is a story of an epic struggle between good and evil. The forces of racism and oppression are pitted against the forces of love. As in the *Lord of the Rings* books, a ragged coalition of outmatched fighters overcomes a ruthless enemy who has superior resources—in part because of their ingenuity, their noble hearts and their loyalty to each other.

Second, the Harry Potter books show us the day-to-day details of a world in which magic is real. In this hidden magical world, spells can be used for such mundane tasks as cooking and packing a suitcase, as well as for more exotic tasks like flying to remote locations or playing Quidditch (a team game played on flying broomsticks). In this world, students may be asked to transform a mouse into a snuffbox as part of a final exam at school. In Rowling's world, teenagers learning these skills sometimes use them in imaginatively immature ways, which is what we would expect.

Third, the books are set in an English boarding school (Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry) that, except for the content of the curriculum, feels like a real school. There are cliques, rumors, romantic troubles, and rivalries. There are steadfast friendships, self-sacrifice, and idealism. It is this third aspect of the books that we will discuss here. Let us introduce a few of the characters.

Harry Potter, Ron Weasley, and Hermione Granger are best friends from early in the saga. They sometimes break the rules and are sometimes mistreated by Draco Malfoy (about whom we will learn more in a moment) and others. Harry, Ron, and Hermione have central roles in the fight against evil. Within the school population, they are sometimes ostracized and sometimes appreciated. They have some conflicts, yet each always has the steadfast support of at least one of the other two. They encourage each other not to believe bad things that are said about them. They keep each other company.

Neville Longbottom is a friend of Harry, Ron, and Hermione's. He is clumsy, socially awkward, and easily flustered. Neville might be ostracized at school if not for the unceasing efforts of the three friends to include him, encourage him, and show him they care about him. Neville, presented early in the book as a clumsy and weak, grows increasingly heroic through the



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books. In the final book he is the organizer of resistance against the dark forces and he strikes one of the final blows in the defeat of the evil magician Voldemort.

Luna Lovegood is a young woman who we think may have Asperger syndrome. Luna has unusual social behaviors, marginally-unrealistic beliefs, and tells the truth at socially embarrassing times. She is unfailingly kind to others. Harry, Ron, and Hermione include her and disagree with others who criticize her.

Draco Malfoy is a young man who has grown up in a family that espouses racial purity and disdain for others who are “less pure.” For most of the saga, Draco whole-heartedly adopts his parents’ view that he is better than almost everyone else and is thus entitled to scorn and mistreat others. He uses name calling and physical (and magical) aggression toward peers; he spreads rumors and organizes ostracism and peer cruelty; and he recruits a group of student thugs (Crabbe and Goyle) to back him up. As we will discuss below, his key motivation for these behaviors seems to be his search for his peers’ admiration. This search relates to the basic need of acceptance, and he is successful in this quest through most of the books. Malfoy belongs to the Slytherin House at Hogwarts, a division of the school somewhat affiliated with the forces of evil.

Harry lives with his non-magical aunt and uncle. Their son, Dudley Dursley, is portrayed as an overindulged boy who is taught to take pleasure in hitting others, including Harry. Like Draco Malfoy, a good deal of Dudley’s aggression seems to involve his parents’ sense that he and they are better than others. Dudley imitates his parents’ scorn for Harry and their often expressed belief that Harry deserves mistreatment. Dudley learns how to treat others through his parents’ behavior.

Hogwarts has some good teachers. Two positive educators in authority at the school are Minerva McGonnagal, portrayed as a highly intelligent and powerful head of one of the school’s divisions, and Albus Dumbledore, the school headmaster, presented as a caring, competent, and involved administrator. Remus Lupin teaches at the school for one year and takes a role afterward away from school. Though he had a troubled youth, and was treated badly by his peers, Lupin is shown to be a caring, committed teacher of young people who goes out of his way to help and nurture his students. Lupin is the target of discrimination and ostracism as a child, yet grows to be an empathic, supportive adult who is one of the most nurturing adults at the school.

Severus Snape teaches at the school throughout the saga. Ostracized as a student and neglected by his parents, Snape has grown up to be a teacher who openly expresses hatred of some of his students. He treats students unfairly and retaliates against students even if they do nothing wrong. A target of repeated mistreatment by schoolmates as a child, Snape becomes a bitter and spiteful adult, taking out his anger and hurt on the child of one of his tormentors.



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Argus Filch is what we would call a paraprofessional—he is in charge of monitoring hall behavior and minor student offenses. A failure in his own study of magic at school (and thus jealous of the students at school), Filch insults and verbally abuses students, applies punishments out of proportion to student behavior, and expresses joy in being able to punish students.

Many other young people, non-school adults, and educators are important characters in this story, but we will stick with these for now.

Throughout the Harry Potter saga, characters are mistreated by peers and adults in a variety of ways. Rowling, like the students we surveyed in the Youth Voice Project, tells us not only about the mistreatment but about how mistreated youth respond to mistreatment and what effect it has on them. Let's start with the characters' reasons for mistreating others.

Dudley Dursley hits and torments Harry. As described above, Dudley's aggressive behavior is shown by Rowling as linked to pathological overindulgence by his parents and their failure to set any limits. The Dursleys are clearly amused by Dudley's narcissism and oppositionality, and they approve overtly of his cruelty toward Harry. There is no suggestion that Dudley was himself hit or teased by parents or anyone else. His cruel behavior imitates that of his parents toward Harry and toward others. In a theme that resounds throughout the books (and throughout many young peoples' school experiences), the Dursleys consider themselves better than others and believe that they are entitled to mistreat Harry. They are amused when a dog attacks Harry; they make Harry sleep in a spider-filled cupboard under the stairs; they blame Harry's parents for being murdered and they make it clear to Harry that he is no good.

Draco Malfoy, often described by people writing about the books as the archetypal bully, also seems to act from an inner certainty of his own superiority over others. This characterization parallels Baumeister's (2001) concept of violent pride – the idea that some people believe themselves to be superior to others and thus are quick to anger or aggression when others do not treat them with the deference that they believe is their due. It is notable that the youth Draco mistreats can not stop his mistreatment of them by any action or inaction directed at him. Sometimes the students he is mean to strive not to show that they are hurt or bothered by his actions. Sometimes they react angrily. Sometimes they retaliate. Draco continues his mean actions.

Draco mistreats self-confident students and students full of self-doubt. His behavior seems driven less by a need to injure others than by a belief that he is entitled to mistreat others. Draco's behavior also seems driven by a need to receive admiration from his friends. As with Dudley, Draco does not seem to be reacting to mistreatment or a lack of love from his parents so much as he seems to be imitating the scorn his father and mother often express for others. Draco's father abuses power and blackmails others into action.



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The core group of (often mistreated) friends at the heart of the Harry Potter books—Harry, Hermione, Ron, Neville, and often Luna Lovegood—speak to us about strategies that do and don't work for them in the face of peer mistreatment throughout the books. One example from The Sorcerer's Stone will help us frame this discussion:

*“At that moment Neville toppled into the common room. How he had managed to climb through the portrait hole was anyone's guess, because his legs had been stuck together with what they recognized at once as the Leg-Locker curse. He must have had to bunny hop all the way up to Gryffindor tower.
Everyone fell over laughing....”*

Neville has been attacked by Draco Malfoy. In a violation of school rules, Malfoy has used magic against him and left him to take the long, difficult journey back to his room by himself, with his legs stuck together. As sometimes happens in real life, Neville's peers' first response is laughter. There is no indication that the other Gryffindors wish to hurt Neville's feelings or that they approve of Draco's aggression. The laughter may be based on surprise. Yet it cannot make Neville feel better about his situation. Their laughter is unlikely to make him feel safer. Let us continue this episode.

*“Hermione...performed the counter-curse. Neville's legs sprang apart and he got to his feet, trembling. ‘What happened?’ Hermione asked him, leading him over to sit with Harry and Ron.
‘Malfoy,’ said Neville shakily, ‘I met him outside the library. He said he'd been looking for someone to practice that on.’*

Young people in the Youth Voice Project survey told us that one of the most helpful things peers can do is listen to their stories of mistreatment. Throughout the Harry Potter books, Hermione, Harry, Ron, Luna, Ginny, and many other characters ask “What happened?” and listen sympathetically. Interestingly, of the two adult characters referred to above who were mistreated in childhood—Snape and Lupin—there seems a significant difference in whether their own torments were heard with concern and affirmation. Snape, the character who grows to a bitter adult who imitates how he was mistreated, is presented as having no support from anyone (including parents), no one to talk to, and no one to hear him. Lupin, on the other hand, had the ongoing support of a small group of sympathetic, pre-delinquent friends. Snape grows up to be a wounded, tragic figure. Lupin overcomes his childhood torments to become a kind, loving adult.



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“Go to Professor McGonagall!” Hermione urged Neville. ‘Report him!’ Neville shook his head. ‘I don’t want more trouble,’ He mumbled.”

Only around a third of mistreated youth in the Youth Voice Project study said they went to adults at school for help. When young people did go to adults for help, things got better only 38 percent of the time. However, there was significant variation between schools in the outcome of going to adults at school, something we call responsiveness.

At Hogwarts School, students’ resistance to going to adults for help seems justified. One faculty member (Snape) often punishes students he doesn’t like even if they have done nothing wrong. Snape’s behavior could be seen as an aberration, except for one striking fact: the Headmaster and the other teachers are clearly aware that Snape hates some of his students and that he treats them unfairly and none of these adults address this behavior with Snape in an effective way. Filch, also, is allowed to browbeat and punish at will. Adults are also aware of Malfoy’s cruel behavior toward others, and –with the exception of one punishment—there is no indication that they address Malfoy’s actions at all. These Hogwarts students, unfortunately, see little reason to think that reporting unacceptable aggression to adults will make them safer.

“You’ve got to stand up to him, Neville!’ said Ron. ‘He’s used to walking all over people, but that’s no reason to lie down in front of him and make it easier.’”

This is a fascinating statement, echoing words that mistreated youth have heard for centuries: “They only do it because you don’t stand up for yourself.” In our perspective, these words are an expression of a hurtful stereotype of the victim. The “victim” is one who is passive, annoying, or both. Some professionals in trainings have told us that peer mistreatment is almost always an interaction between two participants in which one provokes and the other provides the mistreatment. We see no evidence that this is true in most situations. More to the point, we believe that this idea causes harm by encouraging mistreated youth to focus on their own inadequacies and thus blame themselves for the mistreatment.

A survey of adults who were mistreated as children done by the British advocacy group Kidscape found that some people surveyed continued to have negative effects into their adult lives. We believe that the answers given to one of the survey questions help us to see the ways that mistreated youth can blame themselves for what is done to them.

“Most adults thought they were bullied because they were: Shy, didn’t answer back; too short or too tall; good or bad looking; not interested in or bad at sports; too sensitive or cried easily; parents divorced or died or in prison; too



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intelligent or too stupid; a minority race or religion in their school or neighbourhood; skinny or fat; talented in music, art or poetry; too poor or too rich; posh or 'lower class' accent; wrong type of clothes" (cite)

When youth or adults inaccurately see others' cruel behavior as caused by some deficiency in themselves rather than being caused by some deficiency in the aggressor, they are poised to go on hurting themselves emotionally in the aftermath of the other's aggression. For that reason, the next exchange in Neville's story seems to us especially significant:

"'You've got to stand up to him, Neville!' said Ron. 'He's used to walking all over people, but that's no reason to lie down in front of him and make it easier.' 'There's no need to tell me I'm not brave enough to be in Gryffindor, Malfoy's already done that,' Neville choked out.

Young people in the Youth Voice project echoed Neville's feelings here, describing being told what they should do to stop the other person from being mean to them as one of the least helpful things adults did in response to mistreatment. Someone whose house had been burglarized would likely react in the same negative way to a series of people who criticized the locks they had chosen to install or their failure to install adequate lighting. The reality is that Malfoy chose his cruel actions and burglars choose to violate others' lives. In both situations, the aggressors own full responsibility for their own actions.

In the case of Malfoy, Ron's statement is especially hard to understand. Throughout the Harry Potter books, Malfoy mistreats many students. Some are quite confident and assertive while others are quiet and shy. He does not seem to choose who to mistreat based on their reactions, nor does he stop mistreating others if the targets of his aggression stand up to him.

The Youth Voice Project study shows similar patterns. Youth told us that standing up to peers who mistreat them rarely made things better, and this strategy often made things worse.

Fortunately, in this case, Neville's friends listened to his anguished response and shifted to the kinds of peer and adult responses which Youth Voice Project students said they benefited from the most.



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“Harry felt in the pocket of his robes and pulled out a chocolate Frog, the very last one from the box that Hermione had given him for Christmas. He gave it to Neville, who looked as though he might cry.

‘You’re worth twelve of Malfoy,’ Harry said. ‘The sorting hat chose you for Gryffindor, didn’t it? And where’s Malfoy? In stinking Slytherin.’ Neville’s lips twitched in a weak smile as he unwrapped the frog. ‘Thanks, Harry.’

These supportive, inclusive exchanges, which are repeated in one form or another throughout the Harry Potter books, echo Youth Voice Project’s mistreated students’ descriptions of the most helpful peer actions. When we asked students what peers did that helped them the most, Youth Voice Project students responded:

“They were there for me and helped me instead of ignoring me.”

“even though they knew I was being bullied they hanged with me.”

“distracted me with talking about other things or going out to keep my mind off of it.”

“listened to me. i had this one girl in my class. And she just listened to me vent. And i looked forward to that class.”

In the Harry Potter books, Malfoy does seem to be influenced by a specific type of action by his friends. As we have found often to be true in the real world, his mean behavior seems motivated by obtaining approval from witnesses rather than by getting any particular response from the target. This passage from The Sorcerer’s Stone shows an example in which Malfoy stops taunting Harry about an event when his friends do not find his taunts funny:

“I do feel so sorry,’ said Draco Malfoy, one Potions class, ‘for all those people who have to stay at Hogwarts for Christmas because they’re not wanted at home.’ He was looking over at Harry as he spoke. Crabbe and Goyle chuckled.

Harry, who was measuring out powdered spine of lionfish, ignored them.

Malfoy had been even more unpleasant than usual since the Quidditch match. Disgusted that the Slytherins had lost, he had tried to get everyone laughing at how a wide-mouthed tree frog would be replacing Harry as Seeker next. Then he’d realized that nobody found this funny, because they were all so impressed at the way Harry had managed to stay on his bucking broomstick. So Malfoy, jealous and angry, had gone back to taunting Harry about having no proper family.”



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As described above, the Harry Potter books present a pessimistic view of adult/educator intervention to stop cruel behavior—not because this intervention doesn't work, but because adults at Hogwarts often do not intervene.

Students in some of the schools in the Youth Voice project described similar patterns. They told us that adults say they will take action but do not, or witness mean behavior without doing anything. At other schools surveyed the situation is described quite differently. In a follow-up discussion at one of the schools where students described positive outcomes when they told adults, students told us that their teachers and principal take their reports of mean behavior seriously. They said that punishments are fair and reasonable, and that students are involved in creating behavior expectations. Staff interventions are based on a code of values, which is collaboratively-developed and consistently enforced. Outcomes were quite positive in this school.

Retaliation in response to peer mistreatment is often presented in the Harry Potter books as ineffective or as making things worse. Youth Voice Project students described similar negative effects, though the details of retaliation are different when students are trained in magic. The following is from The Chamber of Secrets.

“Everyone's just been admiring the brooms my father's bought our team. Ron gaped, open-mouthed, at the seven superb broomsticks in front of him. ‘Good, aren't they.’ said Malfoy smoothly. ‘But perhaps the Gryffindor team will be able to raise some gold and get new brooms, too. You could raffle off those Cleansweep Fives; I expect a museum would bid for them.’ The Slytherin team howled with laughter. ‘At least no one on the Gryffindor team had to buy their way in,’ said Hermione sharply. ‘They got in on pure talent.’ The smug look on Malfoy's face flickered. ‘No one asked your opinion, you filthy little Mudblood [note: this is an offensive racist term in the Harry Potter books],’ he spat. Harry knew at once that Malfoy had said something really bad because there was an instant uproar at his words...Ron plunged his hand into his robes, pulled out his wand, yelling, ‘You'll pay for that one, Malfoy!’ and pointed it furiously...at Malfoy's face. A loud bang echoed around the stadium and a jet of green light shot out of the wrong end of Ron's wand, hitting him in the stomach and sending him reeling backward onto the grass. ‘Ron! Ron! Are you all right.’ squealed Hermione. Ron opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out. Instead he gave an almighty belch and several slugs dribbled out of his mouth onto his lap.”



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Possibly the most important thread in the Harry Potter books is characters' potential to change and grow. For example, Neville Longbottom is transformed from an inept, clumsy, socially-excluded youngster to a charismatic leader of the resistance and (years later) a well-loved teacher at the school.

Professor Snape is revealed to us as a person of great courage who has fought his own personal demons and who has acted as a double agent against the forces of evil. He develops a conscience, and we learn of his positive actions.

Draco Malfoy becomes disgusted with the evil acts of the dark side and assists Harry at a crucial point in the saga. He apparently overcomes his racist attitudes and lives an honorable life as an adult.

The possibility of redemption and change in the Harry Potter books echoes the research done by Dweck, Yeager, and others at Stanford (2011) that found that mistreated youth who learn that people change are less traumatized by peer mistreatment than those who think that some kids are just "bullies" who will always be mean to others. In a similar study, Dweck, Carr, and Parker (2011) found that teaching young people that people who are prejudiced can change led to a reduction in prejudiced behavior. These two research studies were summarized in the American Psychological Association Monitor in October 2011:

"In the realm of bullying, Dweck, Stanford graduate student David S. Yeager and colleagues are looking at whether young people's mindsets about bullies and victims can be changed in ways that improve their emotional state and the larger school climate.

In preliminary work to test that concept published in the July issue of Developmental Psychology (Vol. 47, No. 4), the researchers found that some adolescents do have fixed mindsets toward bullies and victims, strongly endorsing such notions as 'bullies will always be bullies' and 'everyone is either a winner or a loser in life.' When those same young people read scenarios in which bullies excluded others, they strongly agreed that bullies deserved to be punished and that they would never forgive the bully. The team then had the young people read an article about how people are capable of change. Students who read it were less likely to prescribe revenge for bullies and more likely to endorse confrontation or education, the team found.

Based on that research, Yeager created a workshop designed to help students understand that people can grow and change. The workshop tells participants that the brain can change, that people's personalities can change, and that people



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act based on thoughts and motivations, rather than because they are ‘bad’ or ‘good’—again, features open to change.

In a not-yet-published study, the team found that after the workshop, ninth and 10th graders were less likely to want exact revenge on ‘bullies’ following a pre-programmed computerized lab game where a three-way game of catch turns into a two-way game that automatically excludes one child. They were also more likely to write friendly rather than vengeful notes to the youngsters who had ‘excluded’ them in the game.

These positive effects held up at three months. The findings suggest a way out of a negative trajectory that plagues many high schools, Dweck said.

‘Learning a growth mindset about yourself and your peers allows you to act constructively in the face of social challenges and to achieve a greater overall school experience,’ she said.

A new way to combat prejudice?

Dweck, Stanford graduate student Priyanka Carr and postdoctoral student Kristin Parker, PhD, are also tackling the complex area of prejudice. In a series of studies currently under review, the team again began by looking at whether people believe prejudice is a fixed or malleable trait. They also measured the conscious and unconscious prejudice of participants, all of whom were white. They found that participants who believed mindsets couldn't be changed were more likely to act in prejudiced ways, by, for example, placing their chairs farther away from an African-American participant during a discussion.

Next, the team assigned participants to read one of two sets of articles, one endorsing the idea that prejudice is fixed, the other that it's a malleable trait. According to independent raters, after reading the articles, both groups acted friendly with white partners, but those who had read the articles that said people's prejudices can change also acted friendly with a black partner—even those initially found to be high in prejudice. Participants who had read the fixed-mindset articles, however, did not act as friendly to the black participants.”

Many of our Youth Voice Project students echoed these findings when they said their friends helped them see that those people were acting immature. In a discussion Stan had with teens in Maine, one student said “When you realize that they are acting immature, you don’t have to think there’s anything wrong with you.” Another followed up by saying, “Yeah, and if they are acting immature you don’t have to hate them. You know that eventually they will grow up and stop it.”



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See also further research by Yeager and others available on line at

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