

# The Silence of Others

By Lori Ernsperger, Ph.D., BCBA-D

**T**here are a variety of reasons why people are passionate about bullying prevention in schools. Some school professionals have had personal experiences that have driven them to become vocal advocates for at-risk populations. Other educators focus on creating a positive school climate, and still others may have been assigned job responsibilities within the school to address school safety and harassment. Whatever the reasons for the upsurge of national attention by educators, bullying prevention in schools has become an important safety issue across the globe. For me personally, the reason for writing this book and sharing my message is because of Michelle. I met Michelle several years ago while writing another book, *Girls under the Umbrella of Autism Spectrum Disorders*.

“ I saw lots of other kids teased and pushed around. It wasn't just me, and I forgive the bullies. However, what I cannot forgive is the *silence of others*. ”

I interviewed Michelle when she was in her early 20s, and she was eager to share her life story about growing up in the Midwest with mild autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Michelle spoke lovingly of her siblings and her interest in ballroom dancing. The conversation was insightful and portrayed a young woman with many positive life experiences, but the mood and tone of the conversation changed dramatically when the topic switched to her school years after the family moved to the West Coast when she was 12. Michelle shared the horrific stories of bullying that occurred for several years at her new

school. She was the target of social exclusion, verbal assaults, and constant rumors through no fault of her own. Although Michelle was able to recount in detail some terrible personal experiences that might cause one to feel singled out, she had come to understand that she was not the only target for bullying in her school. She recognized that bullying often occurs during middle school, and it was not something she could control. According to Michelle, “I saw lots of other kids teased and pushed around. It wasn't just me, and I forgive the bullies. However, what I cannot forgive is the *silence of others*.” I asked Michelle to explain what she meant by the *silence of others*. She said that she made many attempts to report this daily bullying to teachers, but they simply told her not to worry about it and just ignore it. She also had the courage to meet with the principal to share her story, and he said he “would look into it.” Even her parents were unable to make a difference and stop the bullying. The lack of action and intervention by all of the adults and other students is what Michele referred to as the *silence of others*, and it is something that she is unable to forgive and forget.

After our interview, I sat down to rewrite my notes and summarize the insightful information shared with me. I continued to ponder her statement about the *silence of others*, and I realized she was talking about *me*. I had worked with individuals with disabilities for almost 30 years, starting as a Special Olympics volunteer in high school, then as a special education teacher, behavior specialist, administrator, college professor, and ASD consultant. Not once in all those years had I addressed the issue of bullying and individuals with disabilities. I even held a job with the Indiana Department of Educa-



tion that oversaw special education services for the entire state and never was there a discussion of disability-based harassment. I have traveled extensively both in the United States and internationally, speaking to large groups of school personnel for professional development, and yet I had never included evidence-based interventions for bullying prevention in my presentation. I had to face reality: *I, too, had remained silent for years*. That is when I made a promise to Michelle to increase awareness and disseminate positive and proactive educational interventions to stop bullying in schools. As a part of my promise, I came up with the framework of *Recognize, Respond, Report (3 Rs)*, which details practical and powerful measures for bullying prevention of students with disabilities. My book focuses on each of the 3 Rs in three distinct parts, helping school personnel and parents effectively work together to address the issue of bullying and its effects on student well-being and end the *silence of others*.

This article has been adapted from *Recognize, Respond, Report: Preventing and Addressing Bullying of Students with Special Needs* by Lori Ernsperger, Ph.D., BCBA-D. Copyright © 2016 by Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co., Inc.



**BROOKES**  
PUBLISHING CO.<sup>®</sup>  
www.brookespublishing.com  
1-800-638-3775



**Lori Ernsperger, Ph.D., BCBA-D** has more than 30 years of experience working in the public schools as a classroom teacher, administrator, and education consultant. Dr. Ernsperger currently provides professional development to school district personnel with a focus on bridging the gap between research and everyday practice in the classroom.

▶ **FOR INFO ABOUT HER BOOK, GO TO [bit.ly/bullyingresponse](http://bit.ly/bullyingresponse)**

Follow @drlorierns