

Recognize, Respond, Report: Preventing and Addressing Bullying of Students with Special Needs

reviewed by [Kelly McFaden](#) — July 20, 2016

Title: Recognize, Respond, Report: Preventing and Addressing Bullying of Students with Special Needs

Author(s): Lori Ernsperger

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Lori Ernsperger's *Recognize, Respond, Report: Preventing and Addressing Bullying of Students with Special Needs* is timely and relevant. The book addresses research-based strategies for combating bullying as it applies to students with disabilities who are often overlooked in the wider research on bullying and prevention. The author does not purport to introduce new strategies but rather distills the available literature into a cohesive strategy shaped by her own experience and expertise as a 30-year veteran of public schools and academia.

Ernsperger breaks her analysis into three general categories outlined in the title to meet her goals. Under *recognize* she outlines several fundamental understandings one must have to fully address bullying. These include understanding who is captured under the umbrella term of students with special needs; being able to differentiate between bullying and normal childhood conflict; and understanding the social, emotional, and academic consequences of bullying behaviors on both parties. Moving into *respond* she significantly details research-based interventions that can be implemented at the district, school, classroom, and individual levels. Ernsperger admonishes herself and others who participate in a cult of silence surrounding bullying. Prompted by a conversation with a woman she calls Michelle, the author acknowledges the pervasive inaction of parents, teachers, staff, and administrators regarding bullying. Ernsperger addresses this phenomenon by advocating for educational training to mitigate this bystander effect. Finally in *report* Ernsperger addresses the need for accountability in anti-bullying efforts. It is important that schools track and evaluate the efficacy of the strategies they implement if they are to ensure fairness and equity in the investigation and consequences process.

I found Ernsperger's book to be a well-written primer on identifying and addressing the issue of bullying students with disabilities. It is suited for parents, teachers, staff, and administrators who are looking to become more educated on the topic or develop strategies for addressing bullying at multiple levels like individual classrooms or schools as a whole. The author does an excellent job distilling the available research into a concise and readable manual with clearly delineated strategies and action items. One example of this is the checklist reinforcing the essential understandings one should come away with found at the end of each chapter. Ernsperger similarly provides clear and replicable examples of anti-bullying reports and strategies in the appendices. Including these examples with permissions to copy increases the likelihood that readers will implement their learning. In addition, the author provides a wealth of resources including websites and sources for further reading. She suggests that exploring each resource would more than double the information given in the text itself providing for differentiated strategies based on individual district, school, and student needs.

There are some areas of the book that merit pause. While Ernsperger meets at least a superficial level of acknowledging intersectionality she largely ignores the fact that students with disabilities have a multitude of identity categories impacting their social relationships with peers. While the stated focus of the book is students with disabilities, it does a disservice to these individuals by not dealing deliberately with the complexity of identity. The author argues that students with disabilities are more likely to be bullied because of their disabilities yet she simultaneously contends that they enjoy greater protection against such harassment because of the expansiveness of educational policy governing special education in the U.S. While she is correct that students with disabilities have legislation to address equity of educational opportunity including Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and Individual with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA), she does not build a strong enough case that these policies have a demonstrable impact on the response to the bullying of students with disabilities. All students should be entitled to educational spaces free of harassment and addressing a climate of bullying should not be predicated on the fear of federal punishment. This is where introducing intersectionality could strengthen the foundation of her argument.

As another example, Ernsperger addresses the topic of zero tolerance policies. Such policies were originally targeted toward more serious criminal offenses in schools and have now been applied to situations of bullying and harassment. While she problematizes the use of such policies as an unthinking cookie-cutter response, the author fails to acknowledge the very serious racial disparities that emerge under such totalitarian policies.

More problematic are the student quotations sprinkled throughout the text. These quotes are inset in the text with a special icon indicating that they were excerpts from the lived experiences of middle and high school students. According to the book's preface, 250 middle and high school students replied to fictional Dear Abby letters with responses on coping with bullying in school but they are presented largely without context. Some of the advice is positive, progressive, and helpful but an equal portion vacillates between unhelpful to downright dangerous. Many of the quotations perpetuate the idea that bullying is inevitable, unending, and suggest that it continues into high school and beyond. Several passages indicate the futility of reporting the bullying and imply a disturbing level of helplessness. Other quotes reinforce the bootstrap mentality that one should ignore bullies, believe in oneself, and rise above the harassment. Giving this message to vulnerable students who are victims of bullying could lead to victim blaming where the inability to *get over it* is a result of the target's weakness. While I do not believe this is the intention of sharing these student quotations, presenting these ideas without commentary or analysis denies the author the opportunity to respond to some disturbing trends. The inclusion of these quotes could have been quite valuable if they had been presented with constructive critique.

I recommend that parents, teachers, staff, and administrators read *Recognize, Respond, Report* as a first step in addressing the complicated question of bullying as it relates to students with special needs. I suggest combining this text with additional resources centered on intersectional approaches to address bullying and harassment in modern educational settings for a more holistic approach to recognizing, responding, and reporting.

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