

ANDY DICKINSON

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PREPARING YOUR CHILD FOR A POWERFUL LIFE

# BULLYING: STRATEGIES THAT WORK



Leading martial artist  
Andy Dickinson talks  
with Felicity Garland  
from Evolve Counselling  
about strategies that  
can help to prepare  
children for life.



Andy Dickinson



Felicity Garland

**Andy Dickinson:** *I have the pleasure of being here today with Felicity Garland from Evolve Counseling, who specialises in working with children and young people. Welcome Felicity! It's nice to see you again.*

**Felicity Garland:** Hi Andy! Thanks for inviting me back.

**Andy Dickinson:** *Last time we met we actually discussed a lot of the intricacies of what bullying is, the effects of bullying and we briefly touched on some strategies that can be used to address the issue. Today I'd like us to take a closer look at some strategies that can help to prepare children for life in general, and to help children who are actually experiencing bullying.*

**Felicity Garland:** Sure. You mentioned two things there; firstly, how to prepare children for the challenges that life may bring and secondly, ways of addressing the specific issue of bullying should it occur. Perhaps we can also explore ways of supporting children who are choosing to bully others so that they might start making some different choices.

**Andy Dickinson:** *One of the things that often happens in my Martial Arts School, is that parents ask me what can they do if their child is being bullied at school.*

*So it might be helpful for parents to know some of the things they can do prior to the children even going to school and give them a bit of a heads-up, so to speak.*

**Felicity Garland:** Definitely. The saying that "prevention is better than cure" makes a lot of sense to me. There are certainly some preventative measures that parents might like to take with their children or young people, whatever age they may be, to help them to stand against bullying practices.

One such measure that springs straight to my mind is to instigate conversations with your children about respectful ways of treating others. I will stress here that adopting a curious approach rather than a 'lecturing' one often works well (when it comes to any conversations with your children for that matter!). In other words, try and ask them questions instead of barraging them with statements. So, it can be really effective to ask your child questions about what, for example, they understand respect to mean. Or perhaps how they even know if someone is showing respect. As a parent you may also wish to share some stories about your own experiences of giving or receiving respect from others when you were younger. You might also want to draw your child's attention to the ways in which you show them respect as people. Obviously it is important

to adjust the kind of language you would use, depending on the child's age and level of development.

**Andy Dickinson:** *So role-modelling is important too?*

**Felicity Garland:** Absolutely, it is crucial! By role-modeling respectful interactions with your children, and overtly drawing attention to them, the likelihood that the child will replicate these practices outside of the home is dramatically increased.

So, it might be worth having some direct conversations with children about how you would hope that they would be interacting with others outside of the home, and having some point of discussion around the kinds of behaviors that are respectful and okay, and the kinds of things that they might see happening at school, that they might be tempted to try out, that are really not okay.

It really helps to educate children and young people about respectful ways of interacting and having them feel some sense of commitment to those kinds of values by asking them to weigh up the pros and cons of these ways of being in the world.

**Andy Dickinson:** *So that could be something which is obviously got to be put into children's language and that could be a little bit hard for say, a five or six-year-old which is going to say pre-school for the first time*

and don't understand exactly what is happening.

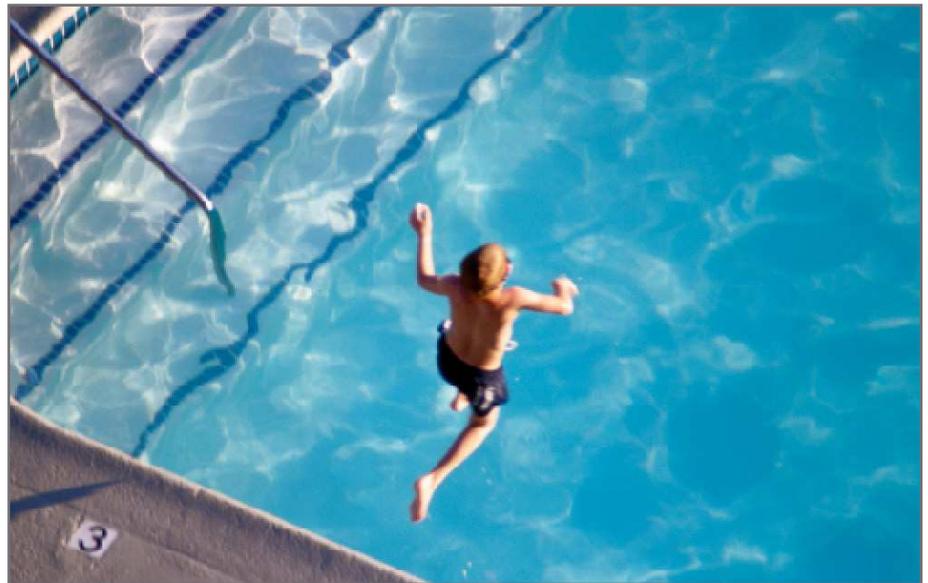
**Felicity Garland:** Yes, definitely that's a really important point, the idea of adapting your language to the level of your child's understanding. It helps to anchor the concept by discussing a few real-life examples with your child; "If you are in the playground and one of the kids started calling you nasty names, what would you do?" It is important to play out a few options & to discuss the pros and cons of the various responses they might give, so that you are bringing it to their level, so that they can really grasp the concept and feel skilled in the face of these situations. In other words, you not only want to talk to kids about respectful ways of being, but also to help them to understand what bullying is and how they might respond if it comes up.

**Andy Dickinson:** *So they can understand what it is happening to them?*

**Felicity Garland:** Definitely. Often, when bullying occurs over a period of time, some children form an understanding that they deserve to be treated like that. They may take it on as a fault of their own rather than being able to say that this is actually the other person's responsibility and that these behaviours are unacceptable.

**Andy Dickinson:** *So, the ability to be able to name the inappropriate behavior is important?*

**Felicity Garland:** Exactly, which is why it helps to run through some specific examples with your child, that physical force or pushing and shoving and things like that are just not okay. Basically to teach children that if they are feeling unsafe or scared or threatened by another child then that's really not okay and that's something that they need to tell teachers or other trusted adults about.



**Andy Dickinson:** *So it's important to emphasize that they talk about it to an adult as soon as possible?*

**Felicity Garland:** Some children come to think that if they are experiencing bullying that they need to be able to handle it on their own, and that if they tell someone either they are a 'dobber', or they are weak. But instead, it might be helpful to let kids know that telling others about it is actually a way of standing up to that behaviour. That can be a helpful distinction to make.

**Andy Dickinson:** *So, you've got the parents, obviously, these are strategies that can be used to prepare the child before they get to school. What about the actual child in the situation of being bullied?*

**Felicity Garland:** Once bullying is actually occurring, the number one priority is safety. So, ultimately what kind of ideas can families think about or children think about that are going to ensure that they are going to be safe. Secrecy and silence are 2 of the biggest factors that enable bullying to continue, so if a child is talking to you about the fact that it is occurring then they should be commended for this. Encouraging them to talk to the other children and teachers is another way of heightening their safety and

diminishing the power of the bullying in their lives.

It may also help to make some plans to ensure that the child is always with someone, not going off by themselves and potentially opening themselves up to being vulnerable to some sort of harm, especially if physical violence is occurring.

**Andy Dickinson:** *So staying mostly in groups might help to get a little bit of inner protection.*

**Felicity Garland:** Absolutely, that's right. Safety in numbers as they say. Often though, sadly for some kids where the bullying is at a really serious level, they may be quite socially isolated & don't have many friends. So, the safety in numbers idea might be a bit difficult for a child who is finding it difficult to make connections with the other children.

So this points to the importance of fostering trusting relationships with your children and opening conversation where at least they will be telling adults. Hopefully they may have a teacher that they trust, that's certainly just reiterating that message that these things really need to be spoken about openly, rather than kept behind closed doors and hidden because that's how bullying perpetuates itself. Bullying likes to

stay hidden, so then it can keep gaining more-and-more power.

**Andy Dickinson:** *So, this idea of always communicating is absolutely vital for the ongoing development of self-esteem and confidence within the child.*

**Felicity Garland:** Looking on the Internet these days, there is so much information and there are websites that are actually designed for children to educate themselves about bullying and to get some tips and strategies (eg: [www.kidshelp.com.au](http://www.kidshelp.com.au) or [www.reachout.com.au](http://www.reachout.com.au)). If you know that this is happening for your child, encouraging them to educate themselves might help to foster a sense of agency or ability, rather than them feeling like they are just the victim of this bullying and there is nothing they can do about it.

So, jumping online and reading some stuff or making some notes, that will help to foster the child's sense of autonomy – they are not just a victim.

**Andy Dickinson:** *So, parents can work together with the child to help them educate themselves and to think about how they are going to respond.*

**Felicity Garland:** Exactly. When bullying is exposed, parents might feel that they need to jump in and fight the battle for the child and tell the child what they “should” do. But this may reinforce the child's sense of not being able to know or to respond. I always ask children experiencing bullying who are coming to see me for counselling “What ideas do you have about what to do in this situation?” They often are able to list a number of things that they have already tried and so it's a great starting point to acknowledge that they already have some skills and knowledge in the face of this problem.

So, it is important to foster a sense of capability when bullying is trying to rob them of this sense. Ask your child to come up with some things



they might like to say to the person who is using bullying at a time when the bullying isn't happening. And they might want to practice this with you --

**Andy Dickinson:** *So, kind of a dress rehearsal for the actual situation.*

**Felicity Garland:** Yes, exactly like a dress rehearsal.

**Andy Dickinson:** *In Martial Arts School we often call it inner rehearsal, so you've got some dialogue that you can use when you are under these stressful situations. I would say that preparation is quite important. You really need to have the support of the parents with that one, because what happens in a situation where you may get the father or the mother that wants to take a more of an angry approach? Like for example telling their child that the best response is to actually strike out at the person who is bullying them.*

**Felicity Garland:** Yes. Well, obviously, that's a difficult one because giving a child mixed messages that on one hand you are saying that they shouldn't be treated like this by the other child that this bullying isn't okay, yet to encourage your child to use some form of violence or threatening behavior, then you are condoning the very thing that you were condemning in the first place.

**Andy Dickinson:** *It's a really good point, so you are battling fire with fire as opposed to fire with water.*

**Felicity Garland:** Exactly, that's right. So encourage your child to think of non-violent or non-abusive ways of responding. I know violence is a strong word, but ultimately acting with the intention to threaten or intimidate another, that's abusive behavior. So, thinking of ways that you can support your child to, as we said at the very start, draw back on those values you would want to instill in them as human beings, like that of respect. Ultimately what kind of values do you want your child to hold onto in life and how can you find a response that's going to fit with those values?

**Andy Dickinson:** *I think that at the end of the day, the parents must be very proactive and assist the child with this as much as possible. It may call upon the need to want to distance yourself from the bully completely. So, parents may have to change the child's school in order to prioritise the safety of their child, but of course this is quite a drastic measure that should only be considered in certain circumstances. I remember my younger sister was bullied so badly that they ended up changing her school and this really helped. Sometimes that is the sensible thing to do because the problem couldn't be solved because of the culture within the school. Of course, what will work for some children might not work for others so it's about finding a response that fits for your child.*

*Felicity, I know this is a bit of broad question that you may not be able to answer, but in your experience have you found that schools quite proactive when it comes to bullying strategies? And is it really worth reporting bullying to the schools? Does it inflame the issue?*

**Felicity Garland:** As you say, I can only speak from my experience and certainly, I have seen mixed evidence

in relation to that. There are some schools that I know of, where they are very proactive and they do their best to actively prioritise the safety of their students, but certainly there are lots of other stories I have heard where families have been quite disappointed by the response from the school. Ultimately the message we want to get across to everyone is that everyone has a right to safety.

And if that means, like with your sister changing schools, some people might say, well, that means the bully has won. But ultimately your sister now has found a space where her safety is prioritised, and ultimately that's what's most important.

I think, absolutely to tell as many relevant people as possible, including staff at the school, I would certainly support any family to do that, because that is giving the message to your child that their safety is a priority and that this violent behavior is not okay.

Even if the school doesn't respond in the way that you had hoped, continue to keep telling. I mean, I've had families who've ended up going to the police, it's quite serious stuff going on, or families who've reported to the local mall security where their daughter was being bullied outside of school, it was happening at the mall. So just tell, as many relevant people as you can because I guess the more we do that, the more we are giving a consistent message that this behavior requires a response, it can't go on as is.

**Andy Dickinson:** *That coupled with the support and help with the parents is very important.*

**Felicity Garland:** Yes. When bullying is a daily experience, it can really colour a child's sense of their own identity, they may come to define themselves as 'as a victim of bullying'. So whenever I am providing counseling to families, where there is a child who is experiencing bullying,

or indeed a child who is using bullying, we place the bullying at the center as the problem rather than 'labelling' the person as the problem.

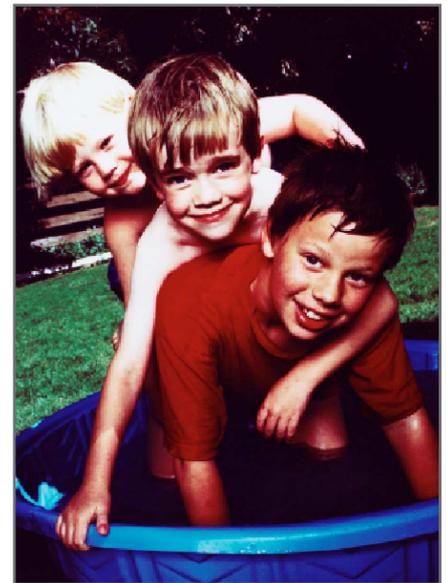
I might ask, "How else does your child know themselves outside of being the one who is bullied?" or "What do you notice about your child that shows that they have useful skills or knowledge about life?" or "In what areas of life do you see them standing up for themselves?"

Similarly, with a child who is choosing to use bullying against others, I always avoid labeling them as 'a bully' because always there are exceptions to that. It's usually the case that that child actually would prefer not to be known as the bully but they find themselves using bullying strategies because they have been very effective in getting them what they want. But I think it's important to make that distinction and not to define children as "a victim" or "a bully" because these mentalities will simply serve to keep them stuck.

As I mentioned before, what's going to work for one family or one child might not work for another. If we gave a dot point list of everything that someone should do, well, it may not work for everyone.

So it's about try something out, if that doesn't work, try something else. If your child is feeling really stuck and if everything is kind of in a cycle and it's continuing, find something else to shift that cycle. Even if it does mean using your own support networks, this is great, families, friends, teachers, adults that are trusted. But if the family feels really stuck then counselling is certainly an option too that might just bring that slight shift or a new perspective. So to consider lots of different options is certainly important.

**Andy Dickinson:** *Quite often when bullying is going on, there are a lot of people standing on the sidelines watching the actual bullying*



*take place. There can be a lot of responsible children that have never been bullied, but they are fully aware of what's going on. So in a way that these by-standers also have the power to either help or hinder the situation.*

**Felicity Garland:** Yes, absolutely. And when we first began talking today about preparing kids, your child may never experience bullying or choose to use bullying, but they are still a key part of this problem. Every bit of bullying that goes on, someone's always watching. So, for those kids who maybe indirectly involved they can still play a key role in either reporting it or banding together and stepping in to help the child who is being picked on.

So everybody really plays a part and every child can really make a difference in this issue.

**Andy Dickinson:** *Let's discuss cyber-bullying, since it is often in the media. What are your thoughts and ideas around that?*

**Felicity Garland:** Sure. With the increase of technology, children are being born into a technological age; computers and cyber-space are familiar elements of their life. So, certainly more and more children of younger and younger ages are communicating over the internet or

via mobile phones and the like. So the bullying phenomenon seems to now be translating across to those kinds of media as well. Cyber-bullying involves someone who may be known or unknown to your child sending threatening or intimidating messages via any form of technology.

So, with cyber-bullying again there is lots of literature out there. There are Police who go around and do presentations in schools about cyber-bullying and keeping yourself safe online.

**Andy Dickinson:** *Could be text messages, could be Facebook messages.*

**Felicity Garland:** *Yes, or on MySpace and forums like that. It usually involves some kind of humiliation, threat or intimidation. That's a very powerful way of having children feel threatened or scared.*

**Andy Dickinson:** *It can be quite insidious because it's actually bullying from a distance, isn't it?*

**Felicity Garland:** Yeah, that's right. It's possibly even easier to carry on because you are not there in the flesh, you can just push the buttons and go with it. But, I guess there is the other issue of safety online in terms of adult predators, of using their power over children but that's a whole another story and is not as common as bullying from peers.

So, today in terms of bullying between peers, there are certain things that children can do to try and keep themselves safe. I know that for some parents who see me for counselling, they are not very computer-literate and they feel really out of their depth when it comes to addressing their child's use of the computer.

But I guess if parents try at least to educate themselves a little bit, then that is really helpful. Actually, this is a great opportunity to say to your child, "Hey! Can you teach me about this



stuff?" Children are commonly put in the position of not knowing so this might be a nice way of acknowledging your child's knowledge and strengths and asking them to let you know a little bit about what happens.

**Andy Dickinson:** *I am able to check some of the messages that my own son writes from his Hotmail account, because it's directly tied with my account.*

**Felicity Garland:** Alright.

**Andy Dickinson:** *I noticed that the couple of the comments that were being passed back and forth between some of the people were quite unsavory and I actually pulled him up on it, and said, "This is not the go, this is not cool at all. Do you understand what this is? This is actually a form of bullying, are you aware of that?" He actually didn't have any idea. He thought it was just messing and joking around, laughing along with the crowd. So whether it be cyber-bullying or bullying in the flesh, the basics have to be applied to both.*

**Felicity Garland** So do not delete them if your child is receiving threatening messages; keep a record of those things if you feel it is necessary.

Similarly I've had families where the bullying is happening face-to-face and they've kept a journal of what's going on. This is recommended only if it's at a particular level, you don't want to become hyper-vigilant and let it take over your whole life, but think about what kind of response is warranted in your own unique circumstances.

**Andy Dickinson:** *In terms of the cyber-bullying it might even be tempting for your child to reply to a threatening or intimidating message with the same kind of thing.*

**Felicity Garland:** So wherever possible the key is to not reply at all, just simply to keep a record of it and take action via other avenues. Parents can certainly talk to their kids about helpful ways of expressing anger. Maybe the temptation is to threaten someone back when they have threatened you, but this is not a helpful response. So it is important to have conversations about constructive ways of expressing anger.

**Andy Dickinson** *So this idea of not expressing anger in unhelpful ways is important. Sometimes turning and walking away is one of the best strategies but this can be hard for a child especially if they are being taunted and teased, anger can be a normal reaction. The idea of having dialogue they can work on, and do some prior practicing of what to say to the person when in various scenarios.*

**Felicity Garland:** Exactly. That rehearsing we were talking about before, having some pre-prepared ideas can really make a difference. So they are not just reacting 'in the heat of the moment' so to speak.

**Andy Dickinson:** *So one of the good ways to respond might be just to simply say, "Well, that's your opinion, that's what you think". Simple*

strategies like that, as opposed to telling them where to go!

**Felicity Garland:** Absolutely. Yeah that's a great example for sure. But as you also mentioned, that isn't always easy to do when someone is taunting you.

**Andy Dickinson:** *I remember seeing some bullying when I was at school and just turned around at the bully and said to him, "Oh you've got such vicious words!" And it stuck with me because there was nothing that the bully could think of to say back to that! This person said it with full confidence and full awareness, and he obviously had self-esteem. He had obviously done some inner kind of rehearsal when it came to actually responding to that situation. It was perfect. There was nothing else that needed to be said.*

**Felicity Garland:** Wow, that would have been very powerful to witness, I imagine.

**Andy Dickinson:** *Yes, because an angry or aggressive person is looking for something to react against. When they push, they want the other person to push back so they can actually push back more.*

*So this concept of being still and neutral and moving away from it, in a way turning the other cheek with strength, is something which is very, very important.*

**Felicity Garland:** I agree. And look, if bullying occurs and your child does react in an inflamed kind of bullying manner then that's not the end of the world, but there needs to be a conversation about that (and remember, conversations work better than lectures!). Parents might like to ask questions like "Okay, this wasn't the ideal way to respond but I'm glad you've told me about it. What was it like for you when you acted like a bully too? What do you think needs to be done about this? What might you do differently next time? How come you didn't try out X, which



you told me was your favourite way of responding?" So then there is rehearsal made for the next time.

**Andy Dickinson:** *So even though the child initially may have reacted out of anger and may have used violence against the bully, for the child to still have enough confidence to tell people that, is a good thing. Parents can then open some dialogue around that.*

**Felicity Garland:** Definitely. Supporting your child to be accountable for their own choices is crucial too. So maybe that means despite whatever the other children have done, some kind of apology may be warranted or something like that. This gives a clear message that everyone is responsible for their own choices. Choosing to use bullying is a choice, bullying, also the way we respond to bullying is a choice. Everyone is responsible for the choices they make for themselves and children will benefit greatly in life by learning this.

Parents also need to be responsible for how they are choosing to respond to the bullying that is happening in their child's life. Children need to take responsibility for their own responses as well. We need to own our own actions, so then we can feel that we have autonomy or abilities to make

different choices that might fit more with what we want next time.

**Andy Dickinson:** *In regards to on-line bullying, were there any other key points? What about things like not having passwords, and maintaining a sense of privacy about who you are, and who sees your information online?*

**Felicity Garland:** Yes absolutely. I have certainly met parents where they insist that they know all their children's passwords, maybe for younger children that might be something parents want to do but certainly as children get older and move into the teenage years, I guess there is that element of needing to adjust your parenting a little and to acknowledge that they are growing older, perhaps they are earning the space for more trust and they need more opportunity to maintain trust. So I have met families where there is a 14 or 15-year-old son or daughter and a Mum and Dad want to see everything, know all their passwords and that can really create conflict and an air of mistrust.

However, that's for each individual family to ascertain for themselves. Most importantly, it's important to be involved to some degree and that there is conversation about what's happening online, and supporting

your children to have a relationship where they feel they can discuss these things with you.

**Andy Dickinson:** *From the way that we have been discussing this huge topic on bullying, it appears that there has to be quite a global approach to the actual problem. It's not something which is going to go away. The last thing we want to do is create band-aid measures in order to try and sweep it under the carpet.*

**Felicity Garland:** Bullying is without doubt a societal issue that needs to be addressed on every level. So we can't just focus on the little one in the playground who is experiencing it on that micro level. Yes it is important to address the issue individually in the micro family unit, but also then at the level of schools, within our broader communities, and even at the level of government; this issue needs to be addressed on every level and everybody needs to have a part.

So as you say, creating little band-aid measures, sure, maybe that will really increase the safety for some kids, but as we've said today, there are things you can put in place, conversations to have, where hopefully people will be standing in a place where there is less likelihood for it to occur at all.

**Andy Dickinson:** *So that's an interesting point, because most forms of violence against human being is some kind of bullying.*

**Felicity Garland:** Absolutely.

**Andy Dickinson:** *Whether it would be someone arguing over a parking space, whether it would be someone that's pushing and shoving someone in a bar, we can narrow it down to it being some kind of bullying.*

*So it's something which is reflected right through society and it's something which comes back to an individual approach. How you feel about the bullying situation and how you can prepare yourself to act and respond to the situation in the future.*



**Felicity Garland:** Yes, coming full-circle for me personally, I very much have the view that it's about being more connected with our values in life, whatever those values may be. I don't prescribe what values people should have, but ultimately, as parents and as individuals, what are we committed to in terms of how do we want to be, in this life, and how do we want to be with others?

What are our preferred ways of being and how can we keep connected with those values when things do not go as we want.

**Andy Dickinson:** *That's really, really interesting as well, because by teaching the children at very young age about these strategies around bullying we are setting a blue-print that they can relate to for the rest of their lives which in turn creates a real ripple effects with the rest of society.*

**Felicity Garland:** Definitely.

**Andy Dickinson:** *By giving four, five or six-year-olds a value system about what is helpful and unhelpful, knowing that behavior can create amazing changes within society. So that's why the roles of people like yourself and myself can be very, very important for creating change within the community.*

**Felicity Garland:** Definitely, I completely agree with you there Andy.

I want to also acknowledge that much of the information that I have drawn on today comes from all the families that I've had the privilege of working with in my work as a Counsellor. So certainly I know I have training and experience, but my biggest asset I think is the ideas from all the children that I've worked with, the young people and the families. So a full credit to them as well!

**Andy Dickinson:** *So it's not necessarily a textbook response that we're getting here, it's more of a life-response based on the experience which you've had with other people.*

**Felicity Garland:** I'd like to think so, yes. Thank you Andy.

**Andy Dickinson:** *Thank you Felicity.*

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