

# Why Telling Your Kid to 'Stand Up for Themselves' Could Backfire Spectacularly –and What to Teach Them Instead



Dr. Brooks Gibbs

## **Spela [0:06 - 0:39]**

Hi everyone, and welcome back to the Summit. My guest today has spent over 20 years studying aggression and has come up with some incredible tools to help handle conflict and build emotional strength against the hurtful stuff we all really face. And today he's not here to tell us, you know, just to be nice, but to share powerful strategies we can use to respond when people aren't being nice.

Please give a warm welcome to Dr. Brooks Gibbs. Hi, Dr. Gibbs, welcome to the Summit.

## **Dr. Gibbs [0:39 - 0:43]**

Hey, Spela, thank you so much for having me. And it's wonderful to be on your Summit.

## **Spela [0:43 - 0:54]**

It's a pleasure of having you. Before we dive in into our interesting topic, could you take a second and introduce yourself, tell our viewers more about who you are and what you do?

## **Dr. Gibbs [0:55 - 1:53]**

Sure thing. Twenty five years ago, I was asked to speak at a school by a girl named Jill. I eventually married her.

I was 19 years old at the time and I spoke and I was traveling with some of my friends from Littleton, Colorado, where I lived at the time. And they were survivors of a terrible shooting called the Columbine High School shooting. And it was a time, we call it the birthplace of the anti-bullying movement.

It was a time when schools all over the world were trying to figure out how to help kids who feel like victims because the two shooters not only hurt other people, but they turned guns on themselves. And 15 died that day at that horrific tragedy. And so that was really the trajectory of my life's work, which was to understand aggression and how to minimize it and ultimately cure children from their victim mindset.

## **Spela [1:54 - 2:22]**

Yeah, we're super excited to have you here to share your thoughts on that. But let's first maybe start with your childhood. Back in elementary and middle school, you experienced a lot of bullying.

As a child, you didn't have, probably didn't have the tools to cope with all of that. You'd simply react because it hurt you. Can you share what was going through your mind during those moments?

How did you perceive what was really happening around you?

**Dr. Gibbs [2:23 - 4:32]**

Right, I don't think I'm any different than any other person because all of us have to deal with sibling rivalry if we have brothers or sisters. And sometimes our parents don't get along and there's fighting there. My dad's had five wives.

And so as I would visit him on the weekend, he would be arguing with my stepmother and so aggression was sort of, you know, kind of what we all have to endure. I think what made me unique is that I was probably more empathetic than your average person. So I had big feels, if you will.

You know, I would feel these emotions and I made the mistake that so many kids make, which is I feel, therefore it's real. You know, I believe that, you know, it felt bad when you called me a name, made fun of my insecurities or my disabilities. I had a terrible stutter or stammer and my insecurities only inflamed it more.

I wasn't very good at school. We'd get very distracted. I had a vivid imagination and daydream.

But the teacher was, I would perceive this mean because I wasn't performing like the other students and I would get easily distracted. So I think looking back, it was just my sensitivity and my explosiveness. I would always explode in anger, upsetness or I would cry and that seemed to be fun for other kids because they could trigger me, you know.

And so I try to help kids now looking back, you know, that are similar to me. You know, the reason why people are mean to you is because they want to upset you. They're not trying to make your day awesome.

They're trying to ruin your day. And so the more upset you get, the more fun they have. The more fun they have, the meaner they are.

The meaner they are, the more upset you get. So the secret is to build emotional resilience, not get so easily upset by words or insults. And next thing you know, people start leaving you alone because it's no fun to mess with you anymore.

So that kind of my past and the pain in my past has really leveraged into purpose. And it has helped me tremendously relate to kids who are struggling.

**Spela [4:32 - 5:00]**

Hmm. And Dr. Gibbs, help us, you know, define. I think it's really hard to define what truly counts as bullying because kids, you know, tease, they nag, they mess around with each other.

Sometimes they'll say the meanest things to their closest friends. And up to some point, you know, that's just a part of growing up. But how can we really distinguish between harmless teasing and a behavior that really crosses the line into bullying?

**Dr. Gibbs [5:01 - 5:25]**

Yeah, there is no translation in any other language on earth for the word bullying as it's defined in English. This makes it very difficult for people all over the world. And so many times they use other words like abuse.

Well, that doesn't really fit per se. Intimidation, they'll try to use. I'm curious what I'm sure you speak another language.

**Spela [5:26 - 5:28]**

Yeah, Slovenian. We don't have that word.

**Dr. Gibbs [5:28 - 5:31]**

You don't have the word bullying or a translation for it?

**Spela [5:31 - 5:32]**

No, we use intimidation.

**Dr. Gibbs [5:33 - 9:39]**

Intimidation, yeah. And so, you know, the same thing in other cultures. And if you use the English word intimidation in the United States, that would not get anyone worried.

They'd be like, just don't be intimidated. Like, are they physically threatening you? Is your life in danger?

No, it's just, well, then don't let them intimidate you. But unfortunately, the Western world, the English speaking Americas have really idolized this word bullying, and it has been the absolute source of confusion. If you ask a kid today, hey, what is bullying?

They'll say any unwanted behavior. But if you ask an administrator who's gone through years of training, they would say, well, there's three criteria for bullying to be defined legally. Number one, there's an intent to do harm.

So the person must want to do it on purpose. Number two, there's an imbalance of power, not size, but psychological power. Someone has more power than you.

And the third is it's pervasive or it's repeated over time. And each of the three have massive problems with it because intent, the only person that knows the intent is the person who's doing the behavior. So you have to ask the aggressor, why did you do what you did to determine that there was malintent?

And they'll usually say, I was joking or I did this because she did that. And so they identify as a victim. They're simply retaliating out of a victim mindset.

And so they don't see themselves as the aggressor, but rather the aggrieved. The second one is imbalance of power. There's no objective way to measure someone's psychological power levels.

You can't give all parties involved a psychological instrument, a scale that measures a certain percentage of power over another. It doesn't even exist. So that is completely irrelevant.

All we know is that a kid is hurting. And so we assume they have less power, but actually psychologically power, they may have more, you know, they may have more in a certain area. So we can never determine what is bullying because we have no tool to do so.

And the third is pervasive. A lot of times kids are not mean the same way, but they find other ways to be mean. They'll call them a name.

They'll leave them out of a group. They'll give them a push or a shove. And sometimes it can even be a one time event that a kid wants to kill himself because he was horrified by a one time experience, an acute trauma, so to speak.

And so really, I don't use the word bullying. It has only helped me for Google results or YouTube titling for videos. I wrote a book called Rethink Bullying that draws a lot of research from school psychologist Izzy Kalman that really disassembles the word, the legal standard.

It disassembles it to nothingness. And I have attempted in my work to go back to what we do know, which is the psychology of aggression. That has never changed since Cain and Abel, the first siblings.

So I stick to the science. I don't chase popular culture because I'm trying to solve problems with schools. So I let people get away with calling it bullying.

I don't mind that. I'm not triggered by that word. But if I'm working with a kid, I don't let them call anyone else a name like a bully.

And I don't let them call what happened to them bullying because it tells me everything and nothing. I need to know specifically what happened. Did they call your name, push you around, tell your secrets to the new kid in town, leave you out of a party with no friend to be found?

What the heck happened? So I always, specificity seems to be the thing that helps deescalate the hysteria in a child's heart.

**Spela [9:40 - 9:52]**

And how do you help them? How can you help them recognize what is acceptable, you know, especially when they're in this sensitive stage, still building their self-worth and confidence? How do you determine that?

**Dr. Gibbs [9:53 - 10:55]**

Well, is there objective harm to body or property, meaning did someone steal your stuff? Did they break your things? Did they cause pain, physical pain?

You know, these are unacceptable behaviors. We have laws for them. We could actually write police reports on these things.

But the things related to hurting feelings, you know, there's no law that says your feelings can be protected because you're the only one that can protect your feelings by the way that you think. So no police can protect your feelings. No parent, no principal, no policymaker in some capital city.

You are the only person perfectly positioned to protect your own feelings. So what is unacceptable is objective harm to body or property. I'm not saying that feelings being hurt are acceptable, but they are a reality and you're the one responsible.

So I put responsibility where it's due. And that's on the student who's suffering to stop their suffering.

**Spela [10:58 - 11:25]**

And to stop this suffering, they need to speak up. But kids often stay silent because, you know, they don't want to be labeled as a snitch. They don't want to be seen as a victim or something.

So how can parents who are suspecting something is happening with their kid, you know, how can they approach a child who's probably really upset over it, approach him in a way that, you know, encourages them to open up, not to shut down?

**Dr. Gibbs [11:26 - 13:43]**

I go by four E's. Empathize is always the first one. I want them to know that I feel for them.

I don't feel what they feel, but I feel for them because I've probably been in a similar situation of being excluded or criticized or made fun of or someone's trying to just bother me. You know, I know what that's like. And so I show empathy and then I encourage them and I encourage them by saying you're stronger than you think.

I, you know, my encouragement is always to build them up, to remind them of just how strong they are, because ultimately that's the solution, emotional strength or resilience. I need them to start feeling strong. So I need to speak that into them.

I need to call them to that. So I empathize. I encourage by saying you're stronger than you think.

And then I educate them and I educate them by explaining why that person's being mean and then I empower them with how to respond to that mean person. So empathize, encourage, educate and empower. So the first thing I want to do is figure out, first of all, what happened with specificity, but I want to ask why.

Why do you think they did that? If I can understand the motivation behind it, there's only four motivations. They're trying to bother you, joke with you, they're hurt by you or they're criticizing you.

And if I can understand why, then I'll know the empower part, which is, well, how do you respond? If they're bothering you, brush it off. Don't be bothered.

If they're joking with you, laugh it off. You need to learn to take and make a joke about yourself. If they're hurt by you, apologize.

Simply say, are you mad at me? I'm sorry for that. And if they're criticizing you, appreciate it.

You know, even if it's delivered in a spiteful way, it might help you improve so you can thank them. You don't have to take their criticism to heart. You can just note it and consider it as you seek to improve yourself.

So a bullying complaint is always an opportunity to build emotional resilience in children who are psychologically weak and need the social skills, not only to guard their heart, that's an emotional skill, but social skills to respond appropriately based on the motivation.

**Spela [13:44 - 14:14]**

And as someone with a PhD in social psychology, you've studied bullying from academic perspective, really. And it turns out it is not as random as people might think. In fact, there are some clear psychological reasons behind why people can be mean to each other.

Could you maybe share more about that and explain where bullying actually fits into this bigger picture?

**Dr. Gibbs [14:15 - 20:21]**

Yeah, if bullying could fit into any of the motivations behind aggression, it would be bothering, bothering. Someone likes to have psychological power over you, power to see you upset, power to see you angry, power to see you cry. If they can have that psychological power, then they dominate.

And sociologists would never use the word bullying, but they would use words like dominance behavior, the desire to dominate another. School psychologist Izzy Kalman has spent so much time writing about this. And he points back to the animal kingdom, how back when we were living in the wild, it was might that makes right.

It was the strength. And so we are built biologically with the desire to survive and the willingness to submit to someone who we know can hurt us. And that's how basically the hierarchical structure of, let's say, a gorilla tribe is forged.

Whoever's the biggest, the strongest, the baddest, the toughest who can beat everybody up in the tribe will dominate. And they will use might or force just to prove the dominance. Now, why does the whole tribe accept that?

Because they realized once they could submit to the leadership and that's really bullying or dominance behavior is really a study of leadership and you see it in corporate America clearer than anything else, who is the biggest, the baddest, the one with the biggest threat to everybody else in society where we don't live in the wild, we have laws. And so typically these people are very good at law. They're very good at threats of litigious threats, you know, equal threats.

And so they have, they're very smart and they can threaten your position, your job, not your safety, because that would be illegal in civilization, but certainly they'll try to find through a carrot, which is incentivizations or a stick, a threat. These are just tools that we use in the wild. And that's the tools that we use in civilization, but we do it more sophisticated now.

So that's where bullying would fall. The cool thing about, let's say, a guerrilla tribe is that whoever made it at the top of the hierarchical structure of leadership, I

guess the queen bee or the alpha male or whatever it's going to be called, they will be on the front lines to protect you from other tribes trying to attack you. This is why all animals, you know, allow this to happen because they know, yes, you can beat us up, but you could also beat up our opposing tribe.

And so that's why we need it to be like this. So because we're still wired for that type of environment, we have that in us and we just are a little more sophisticated, but I'd like to add three more things very quickly. That's not really the motivation of the aggression I see for the 3,000 schools I've worked with over the last 25 years.

It's not dominance behavior. You see that in sibling rivalry, for sure. You know, who can get mom's approval?

Who can get the larger slice of the pie? You see that happen. But at school, it's usually humor.

You know, I was just joking and kids don't know how to take and make a joke about themselves. So you can't call them a bully. You can't call them a dominator.

You can't call them a leader. You call them comedians. The kids that are being mean through humor are doing it at your expense.

They're comedians, not bullies. They're comedians. So they need to be taught the appropriate boundaries of humor.

Another thing that we might see is criticism, which is kids telling each other, you've got a zit on your face. They're not bullying you. They're pointing out a perceived flaw or they're saying, you're annoying.

Gosh, you're annoying. You talk all the time. You're like a mean monster.

Why are you always bragging all the time? We know that's an overcompensation of an insecurity for that child. And so they, but the kids don't, aren't sophisticated enough to know that the kid who's bragging is really insecure.

And so all they know to do is point out you're annoying. And so it helps a smarter parent or teacher or counselor to be able to say, well, why do you think they're annoyed by you? Is there something that you can do that would be more socially acceptable?

Like shut your mouth and ask more questions than you tell them. You're entering the room saying you're better than everyone. And you're going to tell them how you need to enter that same room, believing that everyone's better than you at something, and you need to find out how through questions, what will make you

way more socially acceptable and people will actually love talking about themselves to you, and they will find you fascinating because all they do is talk about themselves, but the fourth and final motivation, not dominance behavior, not humor, not criticism, but the fourth and final one would be hurting.

A lot of kids are simply hurt. You know, they perceive that you said something or did something that they took offense to. And so they're retaliating.

They're being mean back at you because you took their boyfriend or you, you know, got an A on the class and they feel like, you know, I'm less than I want to be. And so they're treating you with contempt, anger, hatred, and desire for revenge. And so you need to find out why they're mad and apologize.

So if they're bothering, brush it off. If they're joking, laugh it off. If they're criticizing, appreciate it.

It might help you improve. And if they're hurt by you, apologize. These are scientific four motivations behind aggression.

And if you give me a video clip of any aggressive situation, I will be able to just through observation, be able to point to the real motivation behind the aggression and inform the person on how to appropriately respond.

### **Spela [20:22 - 20:35]**

So those, those four strategies that you shared, those are actually the best ways for kids to stand up for themselves or, you know, I don't, I don't prefer this concept of standing up for yourself.

### **Dr. Gibbs [20:36 - 22:55]**

That's called assertiveness. And I think it's a appropriate, but not for all motivations behind aggression. So, you know, if someone's trying to bother you, let's just say that's the motivation, assertiveness is, will have a counterproductive effort because what you're trying to do is make them stop, right?

Make them stop. Assertiveness works for physical aggression. You know, when someone's trying to physically attack you or they're trying to sexually assault you, you know, these, these are crimes and you need to be assertive.

I teach my littles, this is my body from my toes to my top. When I say, no, you better stop. And they believe that they believe that no one has the right to cause personal pain or touch private parts.

That's good assertiveness where you can protect your body from a evil perpetrator. But that doesn't work when someone says they don't like you or they're not inviting you to a party. What are you going to do?

Make them like you and make them invite you? No, that's foolish. In fact, that's why they're mean to you.

They, they see you get all worked up and angry and upset and assert yourself. And that's just joy for them because they're pushing buttons and you're paying out a jackpot of anger. So, we have to be careful and really think critically.

I think about what it means to stand up for yourself. In fact, I show the opposite of standing up for yourself. I, I teach, yeah, let them criticize.

Oh, you think I'm fat? Yeah. Yeah.

I enjoy food. I'm hot. Like literally all the time.

I don't have to wear a sweater in the winter. Come get a warm hug. You know, like that's not standing up for yourself.

That's self deprecating humor. And it may look weak, but it actually shows that it's meek, which is strength under control. There's nothing you can do to upset me unless you hurt my body or property or the threat in my livelihood.

Oh, game on if you're going to try that. But if you're just trying to hurt my feelings, feel free to say whatever you want, you cannot possibly trigger me. I promise.

### **Spela [22:56 - 23:11]**

And how can we help kids, you know, practice this in a way that actually feels doable because not every kid is born to, you know, approach or might not feel comfortable, you know, they might be a bit shy. What would you say? How can we help them?

### **Dr. Gibbs [23:12 - 25:39]**

Well, I think it's cognitive and behavioral. So it's number one, understanding the, the psychology behind what I teach. You know, when someone's bothering you, brush it off.

They want you to be bothered. You know, so like if, if they're being mean and you get upset, you lose their game, but if they're being mean and you don't get upset, they lose their game. So that's a cognitive process.

There's education. I have videos, of course, on my website, raise them strong.com, or you can just go on YouTube, Google my name. And you'll see me do these teachings that demonstrate the psychology.

So that's a cognitive process. But then you'll see me also teach behaviorally. I learned through Izzy Kalman how to role play with kids, you know?

So when, when we're role playing, we're giving them game day scenarios of what they might face. I have so many games. One game that I recently came out with was, is called LOL, which means laugh out loud.

And it's basically learning to take and make a joke about yourself. So, you know, you play a card and I'm supposed to read that card. It says, when I was born, the doctor said blank.

And I have to make, make fun of myself. And I say, when the, when I was born, the doctor said, I look like I got hit by a Mack truck. You know, you might as well turn me into a zoo.

I'd fit into the monkey cage perfectly. And then the other person now makes fun of me. And it says, yeah, you know, your mom probably gave you up for adoption.

That's how ugly you were. She wouldn't want to have anything to do with you. And someone might say, that's, that's horrible.

But this is how kids talk to each other. Now, the more slanderous or scandalous or extreme it is, the better payoff of the punchline. Sometimes it goes too far and kids get hurt by it, but the goal is to expand our ability to laugh at ourselves.

And finally, the other thing I'll say is, we'll roll, that's just humor. I'll role play criticism. I'll role play hurting and apologies.

And I'll also role play dominance behavior or bothering. You know, I'd say, call me an idiot. And first I get upset and then they keep on having a good time being mean to me.

And then we play again, call me an idiot. He calls me an idiot and I don't get upset and I treat him like a friend. And then he's not able to continue to be mean to me.

So cognitive behavioral, these are all kind of a playful approach to a painful problem. And I've found it to be extraordinarily effective.

**Spela [25:40 - 26:03]**

And I've seen a bunch of those and they're, they're amazing. I cannot, you know, recommend them enough, but maybe for parents who want to try something like this at home, but they feel awkward playing the bully or, you know, whose kids get upset by the role play, what would you say? How can we, how can we suggest them to play, to, to approach that, that strategy?

**Dr. Gibbs [26:04 - 28:35]**

Sure. So if, if your child has a poor sense of humor, that's poorly developed, they can't take and make a joke about themselves. I would not allow them to have dessert until we play a little game called the family roast.

And everyone's going to make fun of everyone in a spirit of fun and play. No, one's going to get upset. If you get upset, you don't get dessert.

All right. The goal is to be able to take and make a joke about yourself. So everyone's going to start with dad.

Let's make fun of dad. Hey dad. And just let them say whatever they want and let dad laugh.

Okay. Now it's mom's turn. Let's make fun of mom.

Oh, I just can't stand it. That look that mom makes when she's like all angry and upset. Like she gets all internet Karen on you.

Ooh, watch out. All right. When it comes to the kids, we say, what would you like me to make fun of?

We don't just start making fun of them cause they may be weak, but we say, what would you like? Oh, my high forehead. I hate it.

Okay. Wow. That looks like a five head.

That's not a forehead. You got your mother's disability that starts right here. Mom says, Hey, we're not making fun of me.

We're making fun of them. So we just, we just role play that. Okay.

Everyone did a good job. No one's hurt. No one's upset.

Let's enjoy dessert. You can do the same thing with irritabilities or bothering. You don't let sister have a dessert until brother choose for 30 seconds, something very crunchy in her ear while she keeps a smile and doesn't look irritated.

Right? So brother's crunching something very nasty in her ear. And she says, smile for 30 seconds.

You might want to start with 15 seconds. And then she realizes, Hey, you know what? I can do it.

I don't have to get all irritable and stop it. You know, upset. I I'm stronger than I think.

And so it's just through micro games like this. You know, uh, we, we it's, this is, I guess, really testing their frustration tolerance. And that's what's, that's what resilience education is.

It's an attempt to raise their frustration tolerance. And we do that by lowering the importance of an offense. It's really not that big of a deal.

And when you lower the importance of the offense, all of a sudden accompanied with role play or practice, their resilience margin expands and they're less irritable. That's just one example of how I do it.

### **Spela [28:35 - 29:06]**

Yeah. Thanks for sharing that. Um, and this is brilliant when it comes one-on-one, you know, or for physical, but sometimes bullies won't, you know, come straight at you, they'll talk behind your back, they'll spread rumors or, you know, try to leave you out of something.

Um, and in those moments, um, kids might just let it slide, you know, because they don't want to, they want to avoid the drama, but what's the best way for them to handle it so, you know, they don't start doubting themselves or their worth.

### **Dr. Gibbs [29:07 - 33:43]**

Mm-hmm. You, you have a two layered question and I want to reverse it. Please.

Self-worth is the value that I provide the world around me. Self-esteem is the admiration that I feel towards myself. And self-confidence is the belief that I can do it all by myself.

Those are three very important self-complex, uh, self-worth, self-esteem, and self-confidence. That doesn't come by making the world around the child celebrate them and, and, and accept them and love them and approve of them. That actually, I think psychologically cripples the child when they're in a vacuum environment of utopia, kindness.

Uh, the only way we can grow in self-worth, self-confidence, and self-esteem is when we do things by ourselves and we do it well. We admire ourselves, we gain proficiency, and now we have value to present to the world. Uh, so that means we have to do hard things.

That means we have to learn and struggle and ultimately strengthen ourselves. Uh, so to connect the niceness of the world around me with my sense of self, I think is, is wrong. We need a hostile world around us to prove my sense of self.

Right. And so that's what parenting is. It's a harsh world.

You need to wear a helmet and you need to go through it. So, but the, the, the heart of your question is, you know, um, how do we help a kid who, uh, who, who can't really seem to control the indirect aggressions? You mentioned gossip, rumors, online trolling, or maybe, um, uh, exclusion ignoring or avoiding, you know, those are the exclusionary, typically this doesn't become a problem until grade six, mid-year from all my research.

The grade one, two, three, four, five, and first half of six grades. Those are direct aggressions that bother kids the most. You call me something to my face or you push me or shove me or direct physical or verbal aggressions, but it seems to be the older they get now, the secondary or the indirect aggressions, the things that they really can't control and now their vivid imagination invents what might be happening.

And so they kind of become extreme. Everyone's talking about me. They're telling all my secrets and none of this is true.

That's a cognitive distortion, but they feel therefore it seems real. And well, I always go back to lowering the importance of the offense, which in the result raises their frustration tolerance, which gives them resilience, margin, the flexibility to endure hardship like a good soldier. So someone's talking bad about you, big whoop.

You're like a celebrity. People are talking about you. Celebrities need gossip magazines.

You're famous girl. I mean, that's incredible that they're talking about you. Now, if they're saying something that you need to change, maybe try to ask a real friend what they're saying and maybe that'll help you improve.

But if they're just saying lies and spreading rumors and stuff like that, then look, you can't control it. I know you want to, but you can't control it. Let them talk.

If they're leaving you out of a group, you leave people out of a group all the time. Why are you all of a sudden being a hypocrite and thinking that no one has the right to leave you out of a group? You leave lots of people out of a group and there's nothing wrong with that.

I told you to choose your friend wisely. And do not hang out with certain kids. So look, everyone has the right to think whatever they want about you, say whatever they want about you, as long as it doesn't threaten your liberties, your freedoms, and do whatever they want without you, your expectations are very high, which means that you think it's a big deal when these things happen to you.

I'm asking you to lower your expectations, kiddo, and give permission for people to say, think, and do whatever they want about you or without you. And when you do that, your frustration tolerance rises, you're less emotional about it. And yeah, it's not that big a deal.

That's how you live. Let other people live the same way. That's brilliant.

**Spela [33:45 - 34:12]**

And what about neurodivergent kids? We know that the growing number of neurodivergent kids is on the rise all the time, those with ADHD, autism, and other conditions. Those kids are often targeted by bullies because they're different, simply.

How can we have these skills to stand up for themselves, especially if they struggle with maybe communication on this level?

**Dr. Gibbs [34:14 - 38:26]**

Yeah, again, the concept of asserting yourself and demanding that other people treat you a certain way is a losing battle. It is an absolute trap. Instead, you give everyone permission to do whatever they want, whenever they want, as long as it doesn't hurt your body or property or livelihood.

And the goal is to be so kind that people don't want to do those things, right? To treat others the way you want to be treated, to be kind. The problem with the neurodivergent population is one of the defining markers of autism is orderliness or perfectionism, or you need things just so.

There's hypersensitivity to your senses, and you don't like change. You're resistant to change. And because they are very particular with how things must be, they're the easiest targets on earth to trigger.

And that's why people are mean to them. I had a principal ask me the other day when I was traveling through Utah here in the United States. He says, I have two special needs kids.

One is constantly picked on. The other, which I think has a very similar diagnosis, is never picked on. And they're both in the same grade.

They have the same disability and challenges. What in the world is the difference? I knew right away what the answer was.

She couldn't see it, but I knew right away. I said, I can guarantee you the girl that is never picked on by other people is not someone who's easily triggered or upset. She has been able to accept the fact that people make fun of her and people might make a joke and people might not do things the way she likes them just to trigger.

And she's not easily triggered. And the other kid has not learned to just say yes to the mess, to not only accept that people don't accommodate you, but expect people not to accommodate you. And so the same is, I don't care whether they call themselves ADHD and that's their true diagnosis or whether they're on the spectrum, if they're functioning, they need to learn to let it go, to expect disorder and to make accommodations.

Maybe you wear headphones. If it's too noisy, you've asked people to not make noise, you're going to have to adapt to that. And if you like things clean and the person in your class does not always move your stuff, expect them to move the stuff and we have to practice.

I've worked with schools now. There's so many schools because one in 36 kids is on the spectrum, has some sort of diagnosis. Unfortunately, 40 years ago, it was one in 10,000, but now it's one in 36.

So we got something we need to investigate wrong, but be that as it may, there are a lot of schools that are special needs schools. They teach my videos. They teach my stuff.

They invite me to come and teach the kids. And that's what we have to do with these children because the judge is not going to care when they're brought before the court for assault and battering someone. The judge is not going to care that they're ADHD or that they're on the spectrum.

You did the crime, you will pay the time. The law is blind to these things. So the responsibility for the child to learn to expand his frustration tolerance is on the child and it will take more work and more practice and more role play.

But nevertheless, they have to expose themselves to the things that usually trigger them and learn to endure it. That's called exposure response prevention therapy. And it's the best approach for these special needs.

**Spela [38:26 - 38:43]**

And speaking of differences, what are the biggest differences you've noticed in teaching younger kids and teens, you know, and what should really parents keep in mind for each age group?

**Dr. Gibbs [38:46 - 41:26]**

I think that there's one lesson I like to give all age groups and it's to let them know why they feel what they feel. They are not upset because someone upset them. They are not angry because someone angered them and they are not hurt because someone hurt their feelings.

That's what they think, whether they're in first grade or twelfth grade. That's not true. They are upset because they upset themselves.

They came to school with rigid demands that you must, you ought, you should, you better be nice and because someone violated their rigid demands, they were they now have all these bad feelings. And so what needs to happen is for them to give up the grip of their rigid demands, be more flexible in their thinking and simply have lightly held desires. I would like you to be nice to me, but you might not.

I would like to be invited to that game, but you might not pick me. I understand. You know, it's a slight bummer, but it's not devastatingly horrible.

They're not awfulizing or catastrophizing. And so it's, it's rigidity in all age groups that is the source of all disturbances and so flexibility, lowering expectations, giving up the grip of demands, having lightly held desires or no desires at all, whatever, it's all good. Ain't no thing.

That's the goal of every child. And I start that as young as possible. Uh, and the younger ones, uh, have a harder time getting it.

We're talking kindergarten, first and second grade, but by the time you get mid year, second, or certainly by third grade, the average third grader starts to understand you're right. So-and-so's wasn't invited to the party and they're not crying. I wasn't invited to the party and I can't stop crying.

So it's not inviting or being rejected from the party that has created all this emotion. Something in my mind is creating all this emotion. So personal responsibility in our thoughts, that's what determines how we feel.

So, so I try to teach kids how to be flexible minded. Uh, I know that doesn't specifically answer your, your question, but, uh, to me, that's the battle and it may be harder for the youngsters, but, uh, but still that's the lesson, stop being so rigid, stop having such high expectations. Stop putting such demands on yourself, others, or life.

You need to be more flexible. And be more indifferent or, or you're going to perpetually be miserable.

**Spela [41:27 - 41:31]**

And probably also stay calm while those things are happening.

**Dr. Gibbs [41:31 - 42:54]**

But I imagine they only stay calm. They only stay calm. Uh, if they have a good rebound techniques, uh, which is when they have desire and the desires are not met, that's a letdown, but they need to see the upside to every letdown.

And so I train the littles all the way up to the older ones, rebound techniques. I call three coping questions and that helps them stay calm. Number one is, uh, how could this have been worse?

So you weren't invited to a party. You imagine if everyone was invited to the party, but you, that would be worse, right? It's just a few friends gathering for a party.

Other people are not invited. So thank God it's not that bad. The second thing is why won't this matter in your future?

It's really not that big a deal. There's going to be other parties that you go to. This really doesn't matter in your future.

So now you become more indifferent towards the bummer. And the third thing is how could this turn out for your good? It's actually, it could be a good thing because they might get in trouble at the party and you won't be there to get in trouble.

So, you know, count your lucky stars. Uh, so those three questions, how could this have been worse? Why won't this matter in my future?

How could this turn out for my good? Those are key questions in that order to ask any disappointment, any letdown, any bummer, any mean behavior.

**Spela [42:55 - 43:15]**

That's also true. Uh, what about the kids who are being, you know, singled out, um, and being, you know, bullied by a group? How can, um, kids, you know, safely

handle a situation like that and get out of it, you know, and avoid it happening again in the future?

Are those strategies different?

**Dr. Gibbs [43:17 - 45:55]**

Well, we, no, it's no different because whether it's one or many, uh, it's still unwanted behavior, right? And so the, the battles in the mind, I don't want that behavior. Well, how, how badly do I not want that?

If I don't want it a whole lot, I'm very rigid and demanding. You must not do that. You better not do that.

The whole group of you must stop talking about me. Or you could have a more flexible mind is I'd like you to stop, but clearly I can't control you. I wish you were nicer, but you're not.

So it's still rigidity. You know, a lot of people think cyber bullying or group bullying is worse than individual. And you know, it's not, you know, the president of the United States is always the most made fun of criticized human being on the planet, whoever he or she is at that moment.

They have billion dollar industries that make their living trying to assassinate their character, their character, slander their policies. If, if group bullying was more powerful than individual, then the, the president would never be able to function, but something happens in leaders that says whether it's one or whether it's a million, I still know who I am. I still know where I'm going.

I still have the, the, the few friends that love me for who I am and not asking me to change. You know, they challenge me, but you know, I, I don't, I don't need to change who I am to be around them. I have my small circle of confidants, my attachments, so to speak.

So I can take on the world, who that cares. And, and while it may seem visually that multiple people against one is worse, it really comes down to the psychology of the target. You know, do you think it's a big deal?

Then it will be a big deal, but if you don't think it's a big deal, it's not going to be a big deal. So I don't need to work on getting the group of kids to start being nice as a principal, counselor, or a teacher. All I have to focus on a hundred percent of the time is the individual who's claiming to be hurt.

Their feelings are hurt. Okay. Why, why, why are you hurting?

Well, because they're, this group is ganging up against me. Is there harm to your body or property? No, my feelings are hurt.

Okay. Well, what are they saying? Well, they're calling me names.

Why do you think they're doing that? To bother you? Joke with you?

They're probably joking with me. Okay. Well, let's learn to take and make a joke about yourself.

We'll watch roast videos, celebrity roast. You know, I'll, I'll get to the nitty gritty of it and work on an individual level.

### **Spela [45:56 - 46:35]**

Brilliant. And speaking of those hurt emotions, let's say that the kid, you know, manages to get the bully off their back. But that some kind, not always, means that they have also forgiven them.

You know, they might see, you know, the bully around and then still, you know, causes a lot of anger. From your experiences and perspective working with all of those kids, what have you seen that helped them let go of this heavy emotional load that they carry and find a healthier way to move on?

### **Dr. Gibbs [46:37 - 50:16]**

Um, it's important to view people as they are and accept them as they are and not try to make them into something that they're not. So if they're a jerk, they're a jerk. If they're rude, they're rude.

If they're extraordinarily selfish, that's what they are right now. It's not who they are holistically because they have other parts of them that are wonderful, but this is sort of a fly in the ointment, so to speak. It's a, it's a flaw in the gym.

It just is kind of an unfortunate reality. And so accepting and expecting that they're going to continue to act as they always have been, as they have proven to be, that protects you from being hurt by it. I go to school expecting them to be a jerk.

And when they are a jerk, I'm not surprised. In fact, I actually have a good feeling because I was right about them. I'm right.

I sized them up right. They're a jerk. Oh, they're being nice today.

Wow. What a surprise. I even have better feelings.

Either way, I can have positive feelings when I accept them as they are and not attempt to change them or expect them to be anything else. So it's our expectations. You know, love the friend you have, not the one you wish you had.

Love the school you go to, not the one you wish you went to. Love the brother or sister you have, not the one you wish you had. Unconditional self-acceptance, Dr. Albert Ellis said, is an unconditional other's acceptance, is the holy grail, the finish line of all therapy. If you can truly say it is what it is, then you don't have any disturbance. You've accepted it. There's no expectation or hope or desire for anything to be different.

And to me, that's mental health. Mental health is the ability to adjust well to a harsh reality. And if you have a harsh reality and you try to demand that reality changes and accommodates you, you go crazy.

You're not mentally healthy. You're more on the scale of mental ill. That's the inverse of health.

You're mentally struggling. You're sick. So how do we mentally healthy?

Accept reality as it is. If you can attempt to change reality through your kindness, through your apologies, then through your influence, certainly try to influence reality. But if you determine that reality is what it is, then adjust well to it.

Accept it unconditionally. You use the word forgiveness and that is a sort of a religious term, but there's some psychological value in it. And I always tell students, you know, forgiveness is not a one-time thing.

Let's define it first. It's releasing them from the responsibility to fix what they did to you. That's what forgiveness is definitionally.

Releasing them from the responsibility to fix what they did to you. And you may have the feelings of desire for them to fix what they did to you, but you have to re-forgive. So it's re-forgiveness.

It's 70 times seven. How many times shall I forgive someone? Seven times?

No, 70 times seven, not 449 times, but you lose count. It's redoing this process of, you know what? I have no expectations for you.

What you did, it hurt. It was a bummer, but we can't go back in time. You can't make it right.

You can't fix it. It is what it is. I'm not going to forget it.

You know, forgiveness is not forgetting. It's actually remembering. Remembering to do this over and over and over again because they wronged you.

**Spela [50:17 - 50:22]**

Okay, Dr. Gibbs, let's now move to the rapid fire questions, if you're up for it.

**Dr. Gibbs [50:22 - 50:22]**

Go for it.

**Spela [50:23 - 50:27]**

If you had to sum up your best parenting advice in a minute, what would that be?

**Dr. Gibbs [50:28 - 50:32]**

Want what you have and you will have what you want.

**Spela [50:35 - 50:53]**

What are some bullying behaviors that really don't look like bullying at first sight, but they really are humor, sarcasm, any form of passive aggression that's cloaked in kindness.

**Dr. Gibbs [50:54 - 51:12]**

It is likely aggression and you don't need to even be upset about that. You know, it'd be nicer if they were straight up with you, but that's usually the covert aggression that people struggle with.

**Spela [51:12 - 51:24]**

Yeah, we don't see. Is school exposure an effective tool against bullying or is that just a way to pass the problem along?

**Dr. Gibbs [51:25 - 52:14]**

I think it's like spanking for a parent. They choose spanking for any wrong behavior. It just lacks creativity.

The punishment often doesn't fit the crime. And so the child actually feels victimized by the system, by the parent, by the principal when they're expelled and they didn't do anything worthy of it. I think we should look at punishment in a broader term like discipline.

Discipline may include punitive punishment, but it should also be, well, the root word is disciple, which means student. Discipline means education. The child may just need to be educated.

They may need to watch some videos, Brooks Gibbs videos, they need to role play, they need to understand why. So I think it's all it does is it proves a lack of creativity.

**Spela [52:15 - 52:25]**

Great. What's the one anti-bullying policy school avoid to implement because it's too controversial?

**Dr. Gibbs [52:26 - 53:19]**

Surprisingly, I would say it's the First Amendment to the Constitution in America, which is free speech in the state of Florida. The anti-bullying and intimidation laws have eight items and the very eighth one says that no child shall be punished for any behavior that is protected by the First Amendment to the Constitution. So I think educators, principals, administrators, superintendents, they forget that the student is a citizen of a free country and the speech, as rude as it might have been, is actually protected speech.

And so, unfortunately, in our policy is the Constitution because it covers all policies and it certainly is in the laws of anti-bullying laws, but it cancels out the rest of the anti-bullying policies. So I think they forget that because they're afraid of an angry parent.

**Spela [53:21 - 53:29]**

And the last one, what's the best way for kids to reframe bullying so it seems less intimidating?

**Dr. Gibbs [53:29 - 54:04]**

I think the three coping questions of how could this have been worse? Why won't this matter in my future? How could this actually turn out for my good?

That trains them to process unwanted happenings in a way that's advantageous for them and once they learn that skill, they are unstoppable because life is full of hardship and they need the flexibility of mind to see the good and the bad. Or unless they just die in depression because this world is so hard.

**Spela [54:05 - 54:32]**

Right. And we'll definitely remember those questions to ask and everything else you really share, Dr. Gibbs. Thank you so much for being with us today and sharing your incredible insights.

I'm sure you shed a light on so many parents and they'll walk away with many insights on how to help their kids in those tough situations. We really appreciate you taking the time.

**Dr. Gibbs [54:32 - 55:00]**

Well, thank you for having me. And for the parents watching, I'm proud of you for watching, parent, because it means you care, you're trying to educate yourself and you're realizing you've maybe approached it a wrong way here. You're cultivating victimhood.

Don't be difficult. Don't be hard on yourself. When your child suffers, you suffer just as much.

But you are the one that can teach your child these things. The parent is the therapist as far as I'm concerned. So bravo for learning.

**Spela [55:01 - 55:03]**

Thanks for sharing that. Thanks for everything.