

“Barnyard Lessons in an Online World”

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He swaggers in, baseball cap hanging sloppily on head, ominously cracking his knuckles, ready to terrorize the unsuspecting students. This was the formidable figure introduced to us through our favorite 2000s-era high school movies, the schoolyard menace in our picture-books, the teenage tormentor our parents warned us about. We were taught that this kid was the bully.

By now as you look across the playground, the lunch-money shakedown artists are nowhere to be seen. Where have they gone? The answer: they have migrated to the internet. Today, children are attacked not in front of adults or even other children but from the screens they stare into, alone in their rooms. And the frightened kids driven to bullying remain unseen, unknown and unloved, hiding in cyberspace.

Speaking to students who have experienced “cyberbullying,” I felt their terror and helplessness. “I’m so scared all the time because no matter where I am, I’m always vulnerable. People can hurt me through my instagram and I have no idea who they are.” And it’s not just a few students. In 2018, [Pew Research Center](#) found that nearly half of teenagers have been victims of cyberbullying—in other words, most kids have experienced online bullying, your siblings, your friends, your classmates.

In Cynthia Brian’s beautiful children’s book about using love to combat bullying, we meet Cookie, a pampered piglet brought into a world miles away from a sheltered existence in the city. Cookie immediately starts being cruel to the other animals, refusing to accept their friendship. When we face the unknown, we scramble to defend ourselves, whether through causing mischief in the new barn, or taking to our phones to retaliate.

In the book, Monet, the rabbit does something inspiring, he *notices*. He not only notices how Tripod the goat is being treated, he also sees how anxious Cookie is and how that’s driving her to act out. I invite all of us to be like Monet, the rabbit who not only stood up for the other animals, but also taught Cookie how to lower her defenses and be loving.

As bullying becomes increasingly harder to see and more adolescents turn to bullying, it becomes more important to notice our friends, how their behavior might be a reflection of what they’re facing online or what they’re doing online. In this changing technological world, our empathy becomes key. When you notice your loved ones acting differently, reach out to them and be a listener. your empathy and remind them of your support. By listening and opening our hearts, we will be able to support our loved ones when they need us most, in real life and on the internet.

