

# Standing up for the Underdog

## Teaching bullies a lesson in compassion

by Richard De Angelis, Director, Comics for Compassion

Bully: a person who hurts, frightens, or tyrannizes over those who are smaller or weaker.

**W**e have all had experiences with bullies at some point in our lives. Usually, our first encounter with a bully takes place when we are children, at school or on a neighborhood playground. Even if we are lucky enough never to have been targeted by a bully, we have probably seen others tormented by them, and felt the discomfort of imagining the pain and humiliation they had to endure. A few of us may have even played the role of the bully ourselves at some time or another, but hopefully learned the error of our ways as we grew older and wiser. Sadly, some bullies never see anything wrong with their actions, growing up to become common criminals, abusive spouses or parents, or even political leaders with entire countries to victimize.

Most people find the “might makes right” credo bullies use to justify their actions an offense against the principles of civilized behavior. And yet, when you take the definition of a bully at face value, it quickly becomes apparent this is exactly the role many of those same people have assumed when it comes to their treatment of animals. In fact, animals are often the very first victims childhood bullies single out as targets to hurt, frighten or tyrannize. Unfortunately, when adults fail to condemn this sort of cruelty, they teach children that force is an acceptable way to get what

they want, especially if what they want is to feel powerful. This is why anthropologist Margaret Mead warned “one of the most dangerous things that can happen to a child is to kill or torture an animal and get away with it.”

That is also why the Doris Day Animal Foundation created its Comics for Compassion program. Executive

Director Holly Hazard felt that comic books would be the perfect tools to make the concept of empathy accessible, and



even “cool” to kids—especially adolescent boys, who represent a significant percentage of both comic book readers and childhood perpetrators of cruelty toward animals.

Currently, we are distributing free copies of the DDAF’s second comic book, *X-Men Unlimited #44*, which was produced by Marvel Comics, the country’s most famous and successful comic book publisher. In this story, entitled “Can They Suffer?,” the popular mutant superheroes known as the X-Men—Professor Xavier, Logan (Wolverine), Jean Grey and Cyclops—

encounter three boys responsible for a string of disturbing acts of animal abuse and use their powers to demonstrate the common bonds of feeling and emotion humans share with other animals. They even teach a valuable lesson in compassion to one of their own teammates, Cain, a former bully himself, who doesn’t understand why the other X-Men are so concerned about a “buncha dumb animals.”

But their lesson has consequences for humans as well. In a letter that appears at the beginning of our special printing of *X-Men Unlimited #44*, Marvel Comics president Bill Jemas explains:

“Considering how our choices affect those outside ourselves is the first step towards realizing empathy.

It’s never too early to learn empathy when you’re a kid, and it’s all too easy a lesson for grown-ups to forget. Whether you’re responding to pets or neighborhood wildlife, or to your brothers or sisters, acting with empathy and compassion will never steer you wrong.”

The DDAF is one of many public service organizations that sees the value of this targeted communication. The child advocacy organization, Prevent Child Abuse America (PCAA), also joined forces with Marvel Comics, commissioning them to produce *The Amazing Spider-Man on Bullying Prevention*. Like *X-Men Unlimited #44*, this comic book uses an engrossing story line and high-action graphics, as well as the example set by a super-powered role model, to show young readers the heroism inherent in standing up for an ethic of empathy in the face of peer pressure to ignore, or even participate in, the cruel treatment of others. In this story, Spider-Man teaches readers they can be a powerful force

# Heroes are not made by the abilities they possess, but by what they choose to do with those abilities. This is true whether you have the power to climb walls, spin webs or simply speak out for those who cannot speak for themselves.

against bullying by speaking out if they experience or witness teasing or physical intimidation.

Hayden Vann Jensen, PCAA's Manager of Publications and New Media, who had oversight over this project, learned of DDAF's Comics for Compassion program from his contacts at Marvel. He immediately grasped the similarity between the two most frequent victims of bullying, observing, "if there's a characteristic common to animals and children, it is that they are both easy to hurt." Noting the parallels between perpetrators as well as victims, and referencing the abundance of research done on the subject, he added, "that there are inter-relationships between the abuse of children and animals is beyond doubt."

**B**ut what about the abuse of children and animals by children? Statistics make it clear that society pays a high price for ignoring or dismissing the violent behavior of young bullies. A 1999 study conducted by the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence found that 60% of students identified as bullies in middle school had been convicted of a crime by the time they were 24 years old. In a 1985 study of aggressive and nonaggressive criminals incarcerated in federal penitentiaries, 25% of aggressive criminals reported at least five incidents of childhood cruelty to animals, while less than six percent of nonaggressive criminals did so. In addition, the National School Safety Council, the U. S. Department of Education, the American Psychological Association, and the National Crime

Prevention Council all list childhood acts of both animal cruelty and severe bullying as important warning signs of increased future violence.

Because of these similarities, the advice offered in PCAA's Spider-Man



comic book on how to deal with bullies applies equally well whether the victim is a child or an animal. The story promotes empathy in young readers by pointing out that everyone is vulnerable to bullies, and encouraging victims of bullying not to take their anger out on others. Most importantly, it empowers them with the knowledge that they can seek help, for both themselves and others, and makes it clear there is nothing innocent about remaining a silent bystander to acts of cruelty.

Both PCAA and DDAF are committed to showing children that there is nothing more courageous than being true to their hearts, and no greater sign of strength than showing kindness to those who are weaker than them. Speaking on behalf of PCAA, Hayden Vann Jensen states, "Prevent Child Abuse America sup-

ports the Doris Day Animal Foundation's efforts to raise awareness of the cruelty connection, and to encourage children and families to empathize with animals. We look forward to closer ties between our organizations."

Marvel Comics President Bill Jemas expresses equal support for our goals. His letter in DDAF's copies of *X-Men Unlimited* #44 concludes with:

"Marvel is proud to be working with the Doris Day Animal Foundation for its Comics for Compassion campaign. The story you're about to read revolves around a simple truth that we stress again and again in all our comics:

"Heroes are not made by the abilities they possess, but by what they choose to do with those abilities. This is true whether you have the power to climb walls, spin webs or simply speak out for those who cannot speak for themselves." 🐾

Teachers, social workers, humane educators and others may order free copies of *X-Men Unlimited* #44 and an accompanying study guide by calling DDAF at 202-546-1761, or visiting our Web site at [www.ddaf.org/comicsforcompassion/xmen/index.shtml](http://www.ddaf.org/comicsforcompassion/xmen/index.shtml).

Anyone can purchase copies of PCAA's *The Amazing Spider-Man on Bullying Prevention* comic book by contacting its merchandise fulfillment department at 800-835-2671 or [pcaamerica.channing-bete.com](http://pcaamerica.channing-bete.com).

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