

●● Bullying is something that haunts you through life ●●

Stewart Foster's latest book – and his own experiences – inspire his school visits, reports **David Hurst**

I have just done my 100th school talk in less than a year, which means that I have reached more than 5,000 children with the anti-bullying message in my latest novel *All The Things That Could Go Wrong*," says author Stewart Foster. The book was based on his own experiences.

"At the schools, I focus on how we can all know who the bullies are and we all know who is bullied – and yet we sit back and do nothing about it," he says. It's something that has concerned the 54-year-old for 40 years. During his school visits, Foster relates a memory from his school days when a boy was kicked and tripped relentlessly for a year.

"Even now, it plays on my mind because being one of the 'more popular' kids, I sat back and watched. Eventually the bullied child cracked and told a teacher. A teacher then approached me and a friend, and even though we hadn't participated, the teacher asked us to get it stopped," he explains.

"It was a brilliant use of peer pressure by the teacher because, sure enough, a week after he'd approached us, the bullying stopped. Maybe it was from then on that bullying always bugged me.

"Today, it really frustrates me how passive the approach to bullying can be in some schools," Foster says from his home near Bath, where he lives with his two daughters, aged 24 and 21. "I've been to schools where as soon as I mention the word 'bully', kids' eyes dart round the room and I can see who the bully is and who is being bullied.

"If I can see that, why can't the teachers? And I've lost count of the number of children who've told me while I'm at the schools that they're being bullied, or have been bullied."

Foster is on a tight deadline for his fourth book, which is about a boy's battle to come to terms with dyslexia, he says. "But because of children coming up to me, I'm still visiting schools every week to talk about bullying and I will continue to do so for as long as I can. Bullying isn't just something that affects you at the time – it follows and haunts you through life."

Apart from being spat at once at school, he has never been bullied. But it was his experience of seeing bullying that helped to persuade him to quit his 25-year career as a



pensions adviser, when he was 43, to start writing.

"Everyone says, 'Oh, you were so brave doing it,' because it was a good job – but you don't leave jobs if you love them, do you? And I really had a passion to get a mental-health message across through writing. So it wasn't hard to leave my job."

Even so, there was a risk. He did some part-time work – driving a taxi and as a market researcher – to make ends meet. Then, after six years, Foster got a book deal, and in 2014 his first book, *We Used To Be Kings*, was published. A story about madness and family trauma, it was described by bestselling author Matt Haig as "a very powerful book, something very special".

In 2016, his next book *The Bubble Boy*, about an 11-year-old trapped in a hospital room and dealing with isolation, won the Sainsbury's Children's Book Award.

His anti-bullying book *All The Things That Could Go Wrong* was published in June last year. That's when Foster vowed to get into schools to make bullying a talking point. "When I started writing *All The Things That Could Go Wrong*, I realised I was trying to rectify that mistake I made when I was 14, watching that kid get beaten up every day," he explains.

"I know adults who feel the same because they go through Facebook looking for the kid that they knew, hoping he's OK."

Foster has also met people who cannot face reading that book because it reminds them of how they were bullied at school.

Author Stewart Foster (above and below) LATYMER UPPER SCHOOL



Worrying behaviour

The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) charity's statistics on bullying reveal that **almost half of children and young people have been bullied at school** at some time. Almost half of the contacts made on bullying could be categorised as emotional bullying and nearly a quarter as physical abuse.

The charity also states that **38 per cent of young people have been affected by cyberbullying**.

According to Child Helpline International, a network of 181 child helplines in 147 countries, social media and mobile communication has created an environment in which bullying has become "inescapable and even more threatening than ever before".

The NSPCC helpline is available for anyone worried about a child. Contact its professional counsellors 24/7 for support on 0808 800 5000 or email help@nspcc.org.uk

ChildLine is the UK's free 24-hour helpline for children and people aged under 19. Call 0800 1111. Or for a one-to-one counsellor chat or email visit childline.org.uk/talk

Children really care about the issue of bullying – but we have to do more

He then recounts how in one class, a child who he had been told was in a bullying group put his hand up and asked: "What if the bully was scared of the consequences if he owned up?"

"It shows bullies do want help," says Foster. "They are not happy people and they are suffering themselves. I realise this book is a Trojan horse. I just want to get in to schools and talk about bullying. There aren't many kids' books addressing this issue, or mental health in general."

He says that out of his burgeoning book accolades and awards, those that mean the most to him are the ones voted for by children, such as when *All The Things That Could Go Wrong* was voted best book of the year by schools in the Hull region as well as in Essex. "It means to me that children really care about the issue. But we still have to do so much more. If you look at the latest figures from charities such as ChildLine, it's shocking."

Indeed, ChildLine received nearly 25,000 contacts from young people about bullying and cyberbullying in 2016-17.

"Many affected children are still too frightened to say anything. So we have to carry on – and be even more direct, as kids' lives are being made a misery. I do feel a responsibility, as a writer, to raise awareness.

"We have an anti-bullying week in schools, but time should be set aside for it every week. I don't care if it's my book or someone else's, but the message has to be put across."

'All The Things That Could Go Wrong' by Stewart Foster is published by Simon and Schuster (£6.99 paperback; £4.99 Kindle).