

PACER Center Co-Founder Paula Goldberg Talks Bullying Prevention

The mother of two reveals how her children influenced her work

by: [Laura Clark](#)

When Paula Goldberg was a young mother of two in Minneapolis, she was confronted with a life-defining choice—go to law school, where she had been accepted, or lead a nonprofit organization with a mission close to her heart.

The former teacher decided on the latter. That was 1977 and Goldberg is still the executive director of the [PACER Center](#), an organization dedicated to helping kids with disabilities and their parents. But her work didn't stop there.



Paula Goldberg (right) with radio personality Melinda Jacobs at a fundraising event at Nordstrom

Nine years ago, she created [National Bullying Prevention Month](#), which takes place every October. Goldberg notes that children with disabilities get bullied two to three times more than typical kids. But typical kids shouldn't have to deal with bullies, either.

People may know Goldberg as the mother of David Goldberg, the former CEO of SurveyMonkey and husband of Facebook chief operating officer Sheryl Sandberg, who [passed away unexpectedly](#) in May. Paula spoke with mom.me about how her sons David and Robert inspired her work for PACER, how she has used technology to tackle bullying, and how she juggled motherhood to get her organization off the ground.

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What inspired you to create PACER?

I'd been a teacher for three years and then was home with my children. When I taught, I had a number of children with special needs in my classroom. I became involved in the League of Women Voters, and the president of the board had a son who was deaf, and she asked if I would do a study on special education in the Minneapolis public schools. I did two studies in the '70s on special education.

I went to the Minneapolis School Board with recommendations that parents of children with disabilities needed to be more involved. And then I went to our state legislature. I met a woman there called Marge Goldberg (no relation), and she had a son with epilepsy and learning disabilities. She was a lobbyist with the Learning Disability Association.

We saw that schools were doing trainings for teachers and principals and educators, but no one was informing parents of their rights. Parents of kids with disabilities, no matter what they were, needed to know what their rights were and what their resources [were]. So we decided to form PACER, and we got a small grant of \$20,000 from our state department of education.

We just had no expectations. I thought in three years we'd close PACER. We would have served parents throughout the state and I'd go home. But parents came to us with needs, and we would develop programs and write grants. That's how PACER evolved.



Original five PACER employees below. Clockwise from top left - Paula Goldberg, Marci Bergdahl, Joan Schoepke, Evy Anderson, and Marge Goldberg.

You chose to lead PACER instead of going to law school. How did you make that decision?

My husband was a law professor, and my kids were young and so I thought I'd have more flexibility. I thought that I could go to school events if I was with PACER, so I decided to do that.

I think if we can save one life, that's what we're about in this world.

You started PACER while having two young boys at home. What did you have to juggle to make this work?

Luckily, I had a husband (Mel) who was very supportive of me. My husband read "The Feminine Mystique" by Betty Friedan before we got married. I'd never read it! He was very supportive of what I did, and I think that helped a lot. And I'll tell you this, and I think it's important. We always had breakfast together as a family. In fact, my husband would squeeze fresh oranges and make the coffee. He did that in the morning, and then we had dinner together and had discussions. And I think that is really something important for your family if that's possible—and it's not always possible as they get older they have activities and so on, but it was a priority in our home to have that as a family.



Paula Goldberg with her sons, Robert (middle) and David

What impact did your work have on your sons?

It was my birthday a few years ago, and we were all in Santa Monica celebrating with my grandkids, all five of them. They gave me presents and so on. The next morning David said to me, "Mom, I have another present for you," and I said, "Oh, David, I don't need anymore presents. I have enough." He opens his computer, and in it is the Sunday New York Times, and there's this story. [David] wrote how I started the organization with another woman, PACER Center. He said he was 8. He would come and collate newspapers for us and help PACER.

We have puppets and he learned to do the puppets and went into schools to help teach about kindness, and that people who are different are important. And then he went on to say, "I never knew you could be an entrepreneur in the nonprofit world ... but my mother is an entrepreneur and I owe my career to her." Something like that.

And I never thought of myself [like that]. It was so nice. I think I cried, and now it's even more impactful for me because he wouldn't have ever said that to my face. He just didn't do that. He wrote beautiful cards for our birthday and Mother's Day and so on, but he would never say it to you personally, but here he puts it in the New York Times for thousands and thousands of people.

What prompted PACER to address bullying?

In about 2005 or 2006, I got this letter from a father who worked in Minneapolis/St. Paul, and he wrote, "My son has cognitive disabilities and he's in 7th grade in a good suburban school, and every day six boys take his head and beat it against his locker over and over and over again. And my son is crying, he doesn't want to go to school. He says he really can't read and concentrate anymore, and the principal wouldn't do anything. And these six boys made my son wear diapers at school, gave him a laxative and pulled his diapers down."

It was the most horrific letter I have ever received. And I called five PACER staff people into an office, and I said, "We are going to change the culture in this society. We, PACER, are going to make everyone's child safe. How are we going to do that?"

We decided we'd start with elementary school and I went to a large law firm and their foundation and we asked for \$100,000 to (make a) website for elementary kids. It's called [KidsAgainstBullying.org](https://www.kidsagainstbullying.org), and it's animated, and it incorporated kids with disabilities into it.

In 2006, we launched the website for kids and we started a National Bullying Prevention Center. Then we started National Bullying Prevention week and it's now a month. And that's accepted all over the country, all over the world now.

Then people wrote to us—teachers and parents and social workers— and said, teenagers are the ones that do a lot of the bullying. Why don't we do a website? So a couple years later we developed the website for [TeensAgainstBullying.org](https://www.teensagainstbullying.org). A year or so ago, we got an email from a girl saying, "I was thinking of committing suicide tonight, but I went on your TeensAgainstBullying.org and decided not to. Thank you very much." I think if we can save one life, that's what we're about in this world.

We are going to change the culture in this society. We, PACER, are going to make everyone's child safe.

What did you teach your children about bullying prevention?

One of the things my husband and I taught both of our sons is about kindness and respect for others and helping others. And I didn't really know that my older son, David, had done that until we were at the Shiva and all these CEOs and other people came up to me and told me how much my son had helped them and what he had done—mentoring and advice. He just never told me that. They kept saying, "Can we make Silicon Valley nicer because of what David Goldberg did?" And my son Robert helps people all the time, so I think teaching them that kindness and respect and helping others and making a difference in this world is my value, and I think hopefully I inculcated that in my kids.

MORE: [I Was Bullied as a Teenager](#)

What would you like parents of kids who've been bullied to know as far as getting through this? Because sometimes they can feel powerless when it's at school or online.

A recommendation to parents that we make is that before your child is ever bullied—hopefully they never will be—but that parents sit down with their kids and talk about bullying and that they explain that the child needs to come to them if anyone's mean to them or doesn't respect them. It depends on the age of the child, but that (parents) teach them to come and communicate. Many kids don't want to tell their parents that they've been bullied. If they're teenagers, they're afraid their phones are going to be taken away, their cell phones or their iPads. If they're younger children, sometimes they're ashamed. They don't want to embarrass (anyone), they think it's their fault. So that discussion would be a recommendation for all parents to have and early on.

Those parents of children who have been bullied, they are welcome to call, email us. We recommend that they listen to their child. Sometimes parents don't want to acknowledge that their child has been bullied, but they have to listen and believe their child and then help that child and help that child be an advocate. And so go to the school principal and talk with the school principal, or if it doesn't stop, the superintendent. Put it all in writing. And [we have on our website documents](#) if your child has a disability. There's a letter you can send to the superintendent. There's a template if your child doesn't have a disability. You have to record it, and you have to do something about it. You can't just let it continue.