

Empowering Middle School Students to Stop Bullying

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I'll never forget the time in the 5th grade when a friend of mine put another friend of mine down for being Jewish. I knew it was wrong, but my justification for not saying anything was that I wasn't there when it happened. I lost a friend, let another go down a bad path, and felt disconnected from my own heart. There were other times too, when I laughed as bullies called people names, or went along with exclusion. I feel sad recalling the times when I supported bullying. Statistics show that in bullying situations, students will side with the bully actively or passively at least 81% of the time, but intervene to support the target (victim) only 13% of the time. The top reasons kids give for not standing up to bullying haven't changed since I was young. Students say that they do not know how to help, that they are afraid of being hurt, becoming a target or being associated with them. They say they are afraid of losing friends, or they think that it is not their problem because they weren't actively involved.

By bringing my bullying prevention through story program to elementary and middle schools, I try to raise awareness about what bullying is, and to empower students to help stop it. Feeling empowered requires that students: feel safe and supported in the school culture, have honest awareness of their responsibility in the face of bullying, can empathize with the targets, have role models and ideas of how to help, and can connect to their own strengths.

My program includes folktales that I have adapted to further emphasize bullying behaviors, and to shed light on the many roles in bullying scenarios. One example is this African (Zulu) tale.

Once, down by the river, a group of teenage girls began gossiping about and putting down another girl their age named Nosa. The “leader” of this group decided to play a trick on her and pressured the rest to go along. They hid their necklaces in the sand. When Nosa came down to the river they told her that they had thrown their necklaces in the river as a gift to the River Goddess. The group leader invited Nosa to be a part of the group by throwing her necklace in too.

Longing to be included in the group Nosa threw her necklace into the river. The other girls pulled theirs out of the sand and ran away. Stunned, Nosa dove down into the river to find the necklace her grandmother had made for her. There on the sandy bottom she found an old woman tangled in fish netting and covered with open wounds from the rope. The old woman asked for Nosa's help, and she gladly cut the net away and put leaves on the wounds. The old woman, then transformed into the River Goddess who gave Nosa a necklace of far greater beauty than the original one.

Nosa returned to the village where the girls marveled at her new necklace. Without waiting to hear the whole story, the leader of the group and some of her supporters threw their necklaces into the river and dove in. They too meet the Goddess in the guise of the old wounded woman, but they refused to help her. The old woman pointed to a rock behind which they found necklaces; worn pebbles strung with rough string. Meanwhile, a few of the girls apologized to Nosa, telling her how they regretted not saying,

“no”, or warning her. After that fewer and fewer girls would support the bullying, and the new necklace helped Nosa to be recognized for her gifts.

Inviting the students to list the types of bullying in the story, (ganging up, embarrassment, trickery, gossip, peer pressure, exclusion, etc.) and in their experiences reinforces that these behaviors are bullying. To demonstrate the cast of characters found in most bullying incidents I invite volunteers onto the stage. Here I have adapted the work of bullying researcher Dan Olweus who introduced the idea of helping bystanders to move toward being helpers. For more on this work see *The Bully, the Bullied and the Bystander* by Barbara Coloraso, NY: HarperCollins (2003.) The volunteers hold signs for the different roles including; Target, Bully (instigates), Join-ins (actively help bully), Supporters (encourage the bully by laughing), Passive Observers (“It’s not my problem”), Passive Supporters of Target (want to help but don’t know how, or are afraid), Helpers(help by standing with or getting help for targets.) I tie these roles into the story and we role play ways the characters could have acted to help the target as the story unfolds.

Stories help us to empathize, and to feel less alone. Between stories, I have the audience play a “Stand up if you ever..” game. Have they ever; been bullied , bullied others, supported bullying actively or passively, witnessed bullying and not known how to help, felt afraid to help, and finally, have they ever been helpers. The students all have stories to tell, and benefit from scribbling down memories between questions. Remembering our stories of courage reconnects us with the positive feelings associated with them, and the parts of ourselves that know how to stand strong. Also, students are more honest about their bullying behaviors when they have identified with the other roles.

In the program the students hear personal and biographical stories of other young helpers. Here is the nutshell of a biographical story that happened in a Nova Scotia high school. I’ve adapted it from this article at <http://www.parentdish.com/2007/09/15/students-wear-pink-to-fight-bullies>, and on Norah Dooley’s website: www.norahdooley.com.

Brian, a new 6th grader went to his first day of middle school wearing his favorite pink shirt. He was quickly surrounded by a group of older students who pushed him, called him names and threatened to beat him up if he wore pink again. Two other 8th graders saw what happened and took action. Using social media, and word of mouth they asked everyone to wear pink a few days later. They bought 75 pink tee shirts for those who needed them. Over half of the students did show up in pink that day, sending a message that a few kids cannot make the rules, and that people will be supported for being themselves.

I leave the teachers with suggested follow-up activities in which the students create and role play stories of individual and group actions to stop bullying, and also share their personal stories of acts of courage and kindness.

I remember the day, quite a few years after middle school when I told some teenage boys to “shut up” when they were putting down two Asian men for speaking in their native language. It felt so good to finally have my voice connected to my heart. Storytelling can help young people to have this experience too.