

Empowering Bystanders

We often hear about bullying and how it can take place in many different forms. These include physical, psychological, social isolation, humiliation and cyber bullying. There is also a secondary form of bullying, which is through the bystander. Those who are bullied are not the only ones who suffer from the trauma of someone being bullied. The bystander also experiences trauma in a bullying situation, which can cause the bystander to not act to help the initial victim. This can result in multiple individuals being victimized by the bully. Victimized youth are more likely to suffer from depression, anxiety and other stress that will inhibit their academic and social performances. Some victimized youth have even died by suicide because they did not know where to turn for help.

So how does a bystander stop this cycle of abuse? A study done in Canada showed it only takes one person and ten seconds to stop a bully. When one student stood up to the bully and showed disapproval of what the bully was doing, the bully would stop the victimization within ten seconds. When bullies are surrounded by others and no one challenges what they are doing, it encourages the bully to continue their behavior. Even sitting by passively watching the incident encourages the bully to continue.

So, what can we do to help bystanders feel more comfortable speaking up and becoming upstanders? One activity that teachers and/or parents can use to empower their students is role playing. Role playing scenarios can not only help youth know how to react in these situations but can also start a dialogue about what students are seeing in the school. Some things to keep in mind for role playing is to try and stick to incidents that you are seeing or hearing about in the school. You can do this by having students anonymously write scenarios or situations they have seen in the school. Then walk through the best responses to these situations and discuss the power of a bystander.

Another action to take is to keep dialogue open with students. Ask students open-ended questions about bullying and talk through possible ways to address what they are seeing. Ask students their thoughts on what can be done to encourage kindness, create friendships and build community. It is also important in these discussions to define and identify some of the bully's actions that they have seen but may not be sure is bullying. Some students, like elementary students, may not be aware that what they are doing is bullying.

Some key actions students can take to help the victim of bullying when they see it happening are: Not laughing; not encouraging, ignoring or participating in the bully's behavior; not becoming an audience for the bully; supporting the victim, even if it is in private; inviting those being isolated to eat with you at lunch or involved in your friend group's activities; and lastly, and most importantly, telling an adult.

Being an upstander takes courage, action, assertiveness, compassion and leadership. Encourage students who are not comfortable taking action in front of everyone, or are worried about retaliation, to leave the situation and go tell an adult about what is happening. This way the adult can intervene and the student can stay anonymous. Encouraging anonymity for some students can be a powerful tool and help them feel more comfortable coming forward. There is strength in numbers and when one student stands up to bullying, others will follow. All it takes is one student and ten seconds to end a bullying situation. Let's create upstanders, not bystanders!

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