Teaching empathy and respect can encourage students to intervene when they are witnesses to bullying behavior.

By Elizabeth Halsey-Sproul

Many students are likely to tell you that they’ve been bullied or have seen it happen to someone else. As a result, a focus on students who bully, bullying behavior, anti-bullying, and bullying prevention programs has become increasingly more visible in recent years across the nation.

Statistically, however, more students are witnesses and bystanders to bullying behavior than are victims. According to Bullying in American Schools: A Social-Ecological Perspective on Prevention and Intervention, Dorothy Espelage and Susan Swearer found witnessing bullying behavior occurs more often than being bullied and, as such, can have lasting detrimental effects for the bystander as well. Within the realm of bystanders, however, there remains a virtually untapped cadre of students who can affect the prevention and intervention of bullying behavior.

From Bystander to Upstander
Theoretically, students know what to do when being bullied: Say stop, walk away, and report the incident to an adult. From a culture change and student perspective, harnessing the capacity of the bystander and teaching skills to the students who are present during a bullying interaction can have an enduring positive effect on individuals and the school community.

Programs that explicitly teach students prosocial behaviors, such as speaking up, taking action, and teaching empathy can change the behavior of the bystander to that of an “upstander,” or one who speaks up and takes action out of empathy and with respect. Such explicit instruction is an investment, and teaching these important skills and values to students will pay off in a more positive school environment.
Research shows that schools with positive climates taught bystander intervention or upstander skills. Learning and consistently applying upstander skills requires a supportive school atmosphere—one that sends a consistent message about intervention while providing abundant support. Empathy, respect, and active responsibility provide the cornerstone for upstanding and reporting.

Teach Empathy
Empathy is a complex skill that is often considered to be the ability to put yourself in someone else’s shoes or to be able to feel and understand the feelings of others. Understanding the feelings of others can also be seen as the foundation of moral behavior. Although empathy is a complex idea, many of the skills that enhance an individual’s ability to be empathetic can be taught and learned. Empathy can be learned through role-play and practicing seeing another’s perspective, as well as regulating one’s own response to emotional situations.

Role-playing social skills activities, or social scripts as they are sometimes called, can include practicing making friends, working in groups, sharing materials and resources, making a presentation, receiving compliments, and offering sympathy. Social scripts give us a framework for understanding how to behave in various common situations and can include practicing speaking up respectfully, walking away, and reporting to an adult. These social skills need to be explicitly taught and practiced by students. Students need practice solving problems and being empowered to act.

Active listening or attentively listening to another’s point of view is another social skill that, when learned, can increase one’s ability to see situations from another’s perspective. Active listeners show speakers that they are paying attention through verbal and nonverbal feedback, such as body language and paraphrasing. Students learn and practice making eye contact, noticing the speaker’s facial expressions, turning toward the speaker, leaning in slightly while listening to another, and paraphrasing the most important points the speaker is making.

Active listening is a skill that helps students to become empathetic as they gain firsthand the thoughts and feelings of another. Active listening can be practiced in triads with one student being the speaker, another student as the active listener, and the third student as the
Students can consider this behavior as joking and hurtful comments, often unintentionally. The risk factor of speaking up in the classroom where the teacher is present is different from the risk factor in situations students encounter in more unstructured settings, such as recess or in the hallway or bathroom. The best way to avoid being stymied when the moment occurs is to prepare. As simple as these phrases may seem, students need to practice them aloud—even memorize them—so they have them at the ready when the moment occurs.

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Simple questions also are a good way to interrupt a negative interaction, and put the onus on the person who made the remark. Teaching students how to respond to these types of remarks empowers them by building awareness and empathy. Teaching students to identify typical situations where someone says something unkind, and then identify possible respectful, yet pointed responses. Students at all grade levels need language and context to help them become people who speak up. Consider teaching the following phrases to students:

- That’s not funny;
- That’s not nice;
- That offends me;
- That insults me;
- I don’t like that;
- I’m surprised to hear you say that; and
- Why would you say that?

The goal for students is to gather information and provide a fair and balanced report of what people believe, not explain what they themselves believe. Students can present the ideas with a Google slide, Prezi presentation, or poster.

Debate or persuasion—when learned and practiced—can also increase students’ ability to see another’s perspective. Assign older students a political or moral issue to research and analyze from opposing views on the subject. Students could interview adults and peers about the subject and summarize their point of view.

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