Changing the Role of the Bystander

by Barbara Coloroso

“There are no innocent bystanders. What were they doing there in the first place?”
—William Burroughs

The bully, the bullied, and the bystander are three characters in a tragic play performed daily in our schools. Though their roles are commonplace—children can act out any or all of them, depending on the moment—they are neither normal nor necessary, and certainly not healthy.

Bullying is a conscious, willful, and deliberately hostile activity—it can be verbal, physical, or relational—in which children get pleasure from another child’s pain. Bullying is not about anger, or even about conflict. It’s about contempt—a powerful feeling of dislike toward someone considered to be worthless or inferior, combined with a lack of empathy, compassion, or shame.

Bullies come in all shapes and sizes—big, small, bright, and not so bright. Some are popular and some are disliked. You cannot identify bullies by the way they look, but by the way they act. Likewise, the only thing bullied kids have in common is that they are singled out by bullies simply because they are different in some way. Bullies need targets, and when they feel a need to put someone down, it doesn’t take much to find an excuse.

Bystanders are the third, often overlooked, characters in this play. They are the supporting cast whose role is to aid and abet the bully through acts of commission or omission. They can stand idly by or look away, afraid to step in for fear of becoming a target themselves, or they can actively encourage or join in the bullying. Whatever the choice, there is a price to pay.

If they stand by or look away, bystanders’ self-confidence and self-respect are eroded as they wrestle with their fears and their guilt. All too often, these fears result in apathy, which can lead to contempt. By cheering on the bully, or actively participating in the bullying, bystanders cause even more distress to the child being bullied and increase the chance of other bystanders becoming desensitized to the cruelty, or even creating the image of the bully as a popular, strong, and daring role model, worthy of imitation.

Breaking the Bullying Cycle

Though they play the least active role, bystanders are a critical element in bullying. With peers looking on and providing at least tacit support, the bully is no longer acting alone. The bystanders have become allies to the point of magnifying the supposed negative attributes of the target: “He’s such a crybaby” or “She’s such a dork.” These reactions not only reinforce stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination; they hinder the development of empathy, compassion, and perspective (walking in another’s shoes)—three essentials for successful peer relationships. If we are going to break the bullying cycle, we must help change the role of the bystander.

We have to start with the four reasons kids give for not taking a stand against bullying:

- Fear of getting hurt;
- Fear of becoming a new target for the bully;
- Fear of making the situation worse; and
- Not knowing what to do.

Talked about openly, these four reasons for remaining on the sidelines can be starting points for convincing bystanders to accept responsibility for recognizing bullying, refusing to be part of it, responding effectively, and reporting it to proper authorities.

First, we can talk with them about overestimating the comfort and safety of siding with a
Since a bully targets peers, there is no guarantee that the bully won’t single them out next time. And if the school has an effective anti-bullying policy, bystanders who side with the bully could find themselves in as much trouble as the bully.

**What Can Be Done**

We can discuss actions that bystanders can take, ranging from those that involve the least amount of personal risk to those that require the greatest courage.

- Refuse to be a party to bullying. (For example, move away from a lunch table where kids are actively excluding others.)
- Support the target privately. (“That was a mean thing that he did to you.”)
- Talk to the bully publicly or privately. (“Leave her alone. She’s my friend.”)
- Intervene on behalf of the target. (This might be as small a gesture as telling an adult about the bullying, or something riskier, such as standing up to the bully.)

Research has shown that kids willing to stand up and speak out on behalf of a bullied child often have conflicting feelings before taking action—empathy, fear, sadness, or anger—and discomfort in going against the group. We must assure them that these feelings are normal and reaffirm the courage it takes for them to step in and help a peer who is being bullied. We need to encourage kids to intervene not merely by telling them what to do or not to do, but by explaining the whys of sharing, caring, helping, and serving, and giving them opportunities to practice them. They need to know that we care as much about their intent as we do about their actions.

Bullying is effectively challenged when the majority stands up against the cruel acts of the minority. Since much of the bullying occurs “under the radar” of adult supervision, kids can be a potent force against bullies.

That said, we have to understand that children can’t stop the bullying they witness all by themselves. They need adults—at home, in school, and in community programs—committed to breaking this cycle of violence. Establishing more stringent norms, enforcing playground rules, and increasing supervision are policy decisions that can help reduce bullying. So can a strong policy that has procedures for dealing effectively with bullies, supporting the bullied, and holding bystanders accountable for their actions or inactions.

Barbara Coloroso is author of *The Bully, The Bullied, and the Bystander*. Her e-mail address is [bcoloroso@aol.com](mailto:bcoloroso@aol.com).