

# Bystanders: Turning Onlookers into Bully-Prevention Agents



Most students in a classroom or school do not bully others regularly and are not victimized by bullies. A common misconception about these student 'bystanders', though, is that they typically remain neutral or try to support the victim when they see bullying occurring. Unfortunately, the truth is that students who observe bullying are much more likely to encourage or assist the *bully* than to attempt to help the victim! With appropriate instruction and guidance, however, bystanders can be empowered to take an active role in preventing bullying from occurring and to report bullying to adults when it does take place.

To 'win over' bystanders as bully-prevention agents, the teacher should (1) make bystanders aware that their own behavior can encourage or discourage bullying, (2) teach skills that bystanders can use to intervene when they witness bullying, (2) hold bystanders accountable for their behavior in bullying situations, and (4) structure classroom and schoolwide activities to encourage bystanders to develop positive relationships with potential victims. Here are ideas for working with student bystanders:

**Train Student to Play an Active Role in Intervening in Bullying.** An effective way to reduce bullying is to teach bystanders that they can (and should) intervene to support the victim when they witness bullying. Consider using the 4-step lesson plan below to train students to be proactive 'bully-prevention' agents:

1. Introduce the term 'bullying'. Ask the group to come up with definitions and write these definitions on the board. Then summarize the student contributions to compile a single working definition for bullying. (An example of a simplified definition would be "*Bullying is when one person or group hurts another person on purpose by using mean words, physically harming the person, or damaging their property.*")
2. Tell students that bullying hurts the entire school and that everybody has a responsibility to help prevent it. Ask the group to brainstorm rules that the entire class can follow to prevent bullying. Write these rules on the board. Then work with the group to condense these ideas into a final set of rules of conduct.

NOTE: Limit the final set of rules to no more than 3-4 so that they are easy to remember. Also, if possible, state each rule as a 'do' statement (e.g., "Treat others with courtesy and respect") rather than as a 'don't' statement (e.g., "Don't yell at or insult others.").

A sample set of 'anti-bullying' rules may be:

- *Treat others with courtesy and respect.*
- *Make everyone feel welcome and included.*
- *Help others who are being bullied or picked on.*

3. Draw a distinction for the students between 'tattling' and 'telling'. *Tattling* is when a student tells an adult what another student did simply to get him or her into trouble. *Telling* is when a student tells an adult what another student did because that student's actions were unsafe or hurt another person. Say to students, "It is important that we tell adults whenever we see something that is unsafe or hurts other people."
4. [Optional but recommended] Invite individuals in your school who are 'trusted adults' (e.g., principal, school counselor, school psychologist, social worker, nurse) as visitors to your classroom. Tell students that these visitors are staff members to whom students can safely report incidents of bullying. Allow each visitor several minutes to introduce himself or herself and to tell students how to get in touch with them to report bullying or other issues of concern.
5. Tell students that, when they witness bullying, they should *never* encourage the bully or join in the bullying. (Remind them that bystanders who egg on or help the bully are considered to be as responsible for the bullying as the bullies themselves!) Instead, bystanders need to take action to stop the bullying:
  - In incidents of *direct* bullying, the bystander who feels *safe* confronting the bully should assertively remind the bully of the classroom rules for treating others and tell the bully to stop picking on the victim. If the bystander does *not* feel safe confronting the bully, the student should tell an adult about the bullying as soon as possible.
  - In incidents of *indirect* bullying by an individual or group (e.g., malicious gossip), the bystander should not participate in the bullying in any way. If possible, the bystander should also point out to the individual or group that they are engaging in bullying behavior. If the bullying persists, the student should tell an adult about the bullying as soon as possible.

Have the group think of other positive ways that a student could respond if they witness bullying and list those ideas on the board. (TIP: You may want to have students take the best of these suggestions and turn them into colorful posters to be displayed in the classroom.)

**Hold Bystanders Accountable for Their Actions.** Student onlookers need to understand that they are responsible for their actions when they witness a bullying incident. In particular, bystanders should know they will face negative consequences if they decide to join a bully in taunting or teasing a victim, cheer the bully on, laugh at the bullying incident, or otherwise take part in the bullying. (Help students to keep in mind that onlookers should side with the victim with a phrase such as '*Remember, bystanders should never become bullies.*')

Whenever you or another adult witness that a bystander is participating in bullying, schedule a private conference with that student. Talk about the bullying incident and explain how the onlooker's actions (e.g., joining the bully in calling the victim names) were hurtful. Share your disappointment that the student bystander had not attempted to assist the victim and point out ways that he or she could have done so. Impose a disciplinary consequence that fairly matches the bystander's misbehavior.

**Build ‘Bonds of Caring’ Between Bystanders and Potential Victims.** When bystanders already know, and have a positive attitude toward, a student being picked on by a bully, they are more likely to attempt to help the *victim* rather than to support the *bully*. Here are some ideas that teachers can use to build bonds of caring between bystanders and potential victims:

- When students transfer to a different classroom or school midyear, they may have few friends in the new setting and therefore be an easy mark for bullies. To help these transfer students to develop relationships more quickly, create a ‘welcome committee’ of children whose task is to orient the new child to the school and to provide him or her with social companionship for the first several days. For example, the welcome committee could take the child on a tour of the school, show the student where instructional materials and supplies are stored, preview the classroom schedule, demonstrate common classroom routines such as transitioning between activities, and include the new arrival in playground games. While this welcome-committee orientation would at most last only a few days, it should give the new student a head start in building peer friendships that can protect children against bullying attacks.
- Older children often select younger children as targets for bullying. One proactive strategy to ‘energize’ student bystanders to intervene whenever they witness younger children being bullied is to promote positive relationships between older and younger students. You might consider assigning students to younger classrooms to serve as teacher helpers or peer tutors. Or you might train older students to be ‘playground helpers’, organizing and refereeing games and other outdoor activities. Or your entire class may ‘adopt’ another classroom of younger children and participate with them in various activities. The larger lesson to remember is that any time that you can arrange a learning or social situation in which older students interact in a positive manner with younger children under adult supervision, you forge bonds between those age groups and give older students a reason to wish to protect their younger counterparts from bullying.
- A subtle form of bullying can occur when children in a group or classroom decide to socially ostracize a target child. To guard against group bullying, assign a student to serve as ‘group ambassador’ whenever you form student groups for a learning activity. The ‘group ambassador’ is responsible for greeting anyone who joins the group, ensures that all members understand how they can participate in the group activities, and gives additional support and guidance to any student who needs it. (‘Group ambassadors’ should be trained to recognize when a student might need assistance and in how to provide that assistance in supportive, non-intrusive ways.) In a variation of this idea, lunch aides can appoint a different student each day to serve as a rotating ‘table ambassador’ at each cafeteria table. Again, this student would have responsibility for welcoming other children coming to the table and for intervening if other children attempt to bully a student.

## References

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## Recommended Bully Prevention Programs

**No Bullying.** From not-for-profit Hazelden.

Visit the main Hazelden site at: <http://www.hazelden.org/>

Go to the Hazelden online bookstore to locate No Bullying teacher manuals, etc.:

<http://www.hazeldenbookplace.org/>

**Steps to Respect: A Bully Prevention Program.** For information, visit the Committee for Children website at: <http://www.cfchildren.org>