

# Do No Harm: How to Intervene Without Making it Worse

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For this edition of *Rosalind's Classroom Conversations*, I asked ADL education staff across the country what issues they were hearing about from teachers and students to address in my next essay. Not surprisingly, I received many thought provoking questions. The subject I chose for this article is a topic I have struggled with myself: When you see a young person mistreated by their peers, how do you intervene without making things worse for the target?

What's great about this question is it shows how the educator realizes that the way they interact with the group impacts the target's ability to advocate (or not) for themselves.

Here's what I believe we always need to keep in mind. No matter what we teach, our credibility and effectiveness as educators is based on authentic, meaningful, respectful engagement with each and every student. It's easy to say but in practice, it can be difficult to accomplish.

Let's admit that some of our students can be personally very challenging. For example, have you had a student that got on your last nerve because they were really good at being mean and negative to other students but refused to take ownership for their actions? Have you ever been frustrated with a young person because they kept going back to the same kids who treated them like dirt or covered up for them?

We are going to have feelings about the cruel social dynamics that can occur between our students. And those feelings are a gift and a liability. A gift when they fuel our passion to uphold our students' dignity and motivate us to self-reflect about our own effectiveness. Or, a liability if our emotions blind us from seeing how we may make the problem worse. We have a responsibility to intervene appropriately and effectively. But, specifically, how do we do that?

We have to dig deep and get honest with ourselves. How did we grow up learning to speak truth to power? How did we learn to intervene in a conflict between people? Almost all of us learned to respond to aggression and anger in three ways: avoid, attack or acquiesce. These three responses have the potential to control our relationships in every aspect of our lives including family, friends, intimate partners and work colleagues.

None of these responses are responsible or effective ways to intervene when we see people ridicule or dehumanize each other. Let's call it our "conflict baggage" and examine how it can affect our interactions with young people (and keep in the

back of our mind how this same baggage also affects our ability to face conflicts with our school colleagues).

For example, do you describe yourself as someone who just doesn't like conflict? That would be the avoid strategy. But what this means is as educators, we would be more likely to convince ourselves to not intervene in situations where we should. In the eyes of our students, we easily look like we are too scared to face the problem or condone abusive behavior.

If our strategy is to acquiesce, we intervene without projecting authority or we are vulnerable to debating with socially aggressive or verbal students and losing.

If our strategy is to attack, we can come across as "rescuing" the target and going after the aggressors. Our intent may be to make the aggressors know what it feels like to be ridiculed or embarrassed so we say something that cuts them down. We may feel in that moment that we have dispensed justice but what we really have done is continue the cycle: using domination to attack the aggressors and taking away any power the target has to advocate on their own behalf.

### **So here's what we shouldn't do:**

1. We can't ask the target in front of others if the other kids are "bothering him or her" or any other question that asks the target how they feel about what the other kids are doing to them. If we do, we reinforce the power dynamic between students. We put the target in the position to say the other kids are playing with her/him and they don't care. This makes it much more difficult for the child to say anything different later—to you or their peers.
2. We can't say anything sarcastic, condescending or bullying to the aggressors like, "Wow, now do you feel good about yourself?" Even if the aggressors stop their behavior in the moment, they'll go right back to what they were doing the moment the adult turns away. Why? Because we used the same strategy (i.e. ridicule) to silence them as they used to silence the target.

3. We can't say, "That's enough" because that communicates that you're ok with some part of what's happening. As I have said in *Making It Meaningful: Interrupting Biased Comments in the Classroom*, it's a tacit acceptance of what is happening
4. We can't say, "How would you feel if that happened to you?" Of course, the purpose here is to teach empathy but that statement is constantly dismissed by people who are abusing their power. It goes right up there with "make healthy choices." These are sound bites young people ridicule as "adult speak."

### **Here's what we can do:**

1. We need to manage ourselves as we approach the group. That means being aware of any triggers we have and then putting them aside to talk about later with a professional mentor or friend.
2. We look at everyone in the group and succinctly identify the problem. Succinct means we don't repeat ourselves, we don't lecture and whatever we say shouldn't last more than a few sentences. We are not there to get into a debate with the students. Then, make a "values declaration" statement that communicates every student's dignity and why we think their behavior is in contradiction to that value.

Here's an example of an exchange:

*You: "Hey, just overheard you calling Jennifer a slut. We don't do that here."*

*Two girls in the group roll their eyes and one says, "Ok but we don't mean anything by it."*

*You: "I expect you all to hold yourselves to a higher standard than using tired words that put girls down. You all have to get to class now but if you want to talk to me later, I'm totally up for doing that. Does that make sense?"*

*Girls: "Yes, fine."*

*You: "Great. And remember I'm here if you want to continue having the conversation."*

### **Possible counters that can get you off course:**

If any of the aggressors say the target doesn't mind what they're doing or asks the target if it bothers them, say "If you want to tell me why you think what you're doing is acceptable, then schedule a time with me. Right now, what you need to understand is that calling anyone "gay" (or insert other derogatory comment/joke/behavior) is unacceptable. And I'm not going to have the target answer anything right now because I'm not going to put them in the possible situation of having to choose between admitting what they really feel and coming across as disloyal to you. I'm not saying that's happening but it's a possibility. So...just so we are clear, please tell me what you're hearing me say."

After the student responds, thank them and then direct them to where they need to go.

We can and should approach the target later for a check in. When their peers aren't around, say the following:

- "Maybe what they're doing to you is happening a lot but just because it seems normal doesn't make it right."
- "Even if it doesn't bother you now, you can always change your mind. Real friends accept your right to say they have gone over your personal line."
- "You can always talk to me. Obviously that's your choice but I'm here."

For any of this to work, the scripts I suggest here are just that: suggestions. To make this work for you, make these words your own. And that means you really should take some time and write down responses that are authentic to you. Don't wait until you're in the middle of a really stressful situation. If you do, you're that much more likely to let your emotions dominate your response.

You are going to see conflict, mean behavior and bullying and will need to address it. The quicker you learn that you have the ability to manage yourself, speak effectively and maintain everyone's dignity in the moment, the better off everyone's going to be.

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