

Every Conflict Isn't Bullying

Rosalind's Classroom Conversations, May 2014



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One of the things that can be scary about teaching is the possibility that our students won't engage or relate to what we're trying to teach. All educators face this reality, but those of us who do bullying prevention programs are particularly at risk. You know why? Because after fourth grade, many students are tired of listening to adults lecture them about bullying and believe adults aren't realistic about the problem or the solutions.

Bullying, when one person repeatedly abuses or threatens to abuse their power against another person, obviously occurs and has a profoundly negative impact on individual child's life and overall school culture. Beyond this definition, I also think of bullying as stripping someone of their dignity, of their inherent worth, by attacking and/or humiliating someone based on a perceived inherent trait like their sexual orientation, their conformance to gender expectations, their religion, their socio-economic level, their race or a disability.

But if we really want to reach young people about bullying we have to acknowledge that the way we often teach bullying prevention is counter-productive for the following two reasons:

We talk about bullying as if it's always one way; where there's "the bully", who is 100% guilty and "the target" who is 100% innocent. While of course those interactions occur and are critical to address, what children see more often is "drama" where peers are aggressive towards each other or the "target" is seen as doing something that has antagonized the "bully." In both situations, the aggressor and their peers often don't think they're bullying the target. Instead, they believe they're defending themselves or someone else by using the power and resources available to them. The consequences of drama can still be serious—a young person caught up in it can be really upset, isolated and distracted in school but to call it bullying is counterproductive if you want your students to be able to be self-reflective and shift their behavior.

We talk about bullying prevention as if it only happens between children. It is the very rare bullying program that acknowledges that bullying can occur between adults or adults to children. As in, it is entirely realistic to assume that the young people we work with observe or directly experience an adult at school bullying a child or another adult, a parent bullying a teacher or vice-versa, or any adult in the school abusing power over another. If we don't include this possibility, we perpetuate young people's belief that adults won't look at our own behavior and hold ourselves accountable in a way that we demand from them.

So what can do we do about it? Here are some ideas.

1. Teach the difference between bullying and conflict or drama, respect both as possibly upsetting to people, and tie both to developing social competency.
2. Teach children that it's not always possible to avoid conflict. Instead, conflict between people is inevitable and the goal is to handle that conflict competently while treating yourself and the other person with dignity.
3. Redefine how we advise "Talk to an adult" when a child has a problem and use it as a way to build social competency. When children identify that they are facing a problem too big for them to solve on their own, part of their self-care and strategy for solving the problem should be critically assessing which adult in their life will be the best advocate for them.
4. Closely tied to #3 is explicitly communicating to young people that asking for help is not a sign of weakness but a skill that people use who want more control over their lives and the problems they face.
5. Apologize when we make a mistake. Even the best teachers can tease a student the wrong way or discipline the wrong child only to realize later that they made a mistake. It is profoundly meaningful for an adult to apologize to a young person by saying, "I'm sorry. I was wrong." Yes, the child may respond with, "That's ok, don't worry about it." Don't be fooled. It can mean the difference between a disengaged student who would never ask a teacher for help again to an engaged learner who believes that there's at least one adult in the school community that truly has his or her back.
6. Admit that any strategy, from "I messages" and "feedback sandwiches" or anything like it, comes across as probably weird and cheesy. We need to introduce bullying prevention and social competency strategies realistically:

Children usually react to bullying prevention methods with eye rolls. We have to be constantly looking for ways to authentically connect with our students and admit it when we miss the mark. Here's what best works for me. I acknowledge that it can feel weird and cheesy to try the strategies I'm suggesting and then

recently I compare the SEAL strategy I teach to preparing for a battle in a video game.

SEAL stands for the following:

Stop and **Strategize** where and when you're going to speak to the person.

Explain what you don't like and what you want.

Affirm your right to be treated with dignity and your responsibility to do the same and **Acknowledge** anything that you did that contributed to the problem.

Lock: lock in the friendship, lock it out or take a vacation.

It's embarrassing to admit, but recently I had the miserable experience of failing in front of hundred and fifty middle school students in New Mexico. Thankfully they were nice children so they put up with sitting on bleachers in a gym for an hour listening to me talk to them about bullying and their friendship conflicts. But, I walked out with that sinking feeling that I had wasted their time.

For the next two weeks I thought about what I had missed. I also knew I had an upcoming opportunity to try again with another group of middle schoolers. As I said in the beginning, our work can be scary. I had failed a few weeks before so why was I putting myself in the line of fire again? Because, as I reminded myself, that's what teachers do. We try, we fail, we think about how we need to teach better, and we try again. But I had an idea on how to improve based on recent conversations I had had with young people about video games.

Two weeks later I was in Omaha, NE and with a hundred middle school boys in a gym sitting on bleachers. This time we had the added challenge of the cheerleaders practicing on the other side of the wall. For my introduction to SEAL, this is what I said:

Me: When you're preparing for a battle in a video game what do you do?

Hands shot up.

I get my best weapon!

I survey the land!

I put on my best armor!

I take my magical healing potions!

Me: *Do you think about what your opponents' possible counter strategies are?*

YES!!!!

Me: *Do you prepare thinking the battle is going to go exactly as you practiced?*

All the boys said, *No!*

Me: *No. You don't go into the battle assuming it's going to go perfectly and when it doesn't you should just give up. You prepare by thinking about the possible counterstrikes. You go in as brave, smart and strong as possible. That's how I'm asking you to think about preparing for a social conflict in real life. Except instead of the goal being to destroy the enemy, your goal is to speak your truth, face the situation courageously and don't let the other person control the situation so you end up feeling bad and stupid or even worse you end up apologizing for even trying to face the problem.*

The students didn't respond with, *Oh, I absolutely agree.* I got something better. The feeling in the room was unmistakable. The kids were thinking and considering what I was suggesting.

The solution to getting our students' "buy in" is in our hands but it's scary. It requires a hard look at our own behavior. But we are only asking what we regularly ask our students to do. Take responsibility, hold yourself accountable and do the right thing when it's hard. We are fighting for what matters the most: Our collective right to be treated with dignity. If we do this, we will also convince the young people we work with and care for that we are competent and brave enough to stand by their side.

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