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## When the Aggressor and the Target are the Same Person

*Rosalind's Classroom Conversations, May 2019*



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Recently, after a teacher training at a local elementary school, the principal asked my colleague and I to meet with the administrative team to help them handle a conflict between a group of 6th grade boys. It immediately brought to my mind how complex a principal's job is when they make decisions around responding to a bullying incident. I'd like to share what happened and what we advised. It taught me an important lesson about how bullying situations can be very complex,

especially when the outcome demands both increased understanding and accountability.

## **The overview**

Unbeknownst to the adults in the school, for two weeks prior to the incident, a group of four boys had been taunting and harassing another boy. The administration found out about it only when a fight between the boys erupted during recess the day before we arrived.

As is common in today's schools, cameras recorded the fight on the playground. The footage showed one boy hitting and pushing four other boys, then running away, and coming back to push and hit them again. Based on the film alone, it looks like the boy was the aggressor and the group of four were the targets.

But of course, the situation was more complicated, as it always is. The camera doesn't show context leading up to the fight. The four boys had been harassing the other boy, "Daniel," in retaliation for what they perceived as Daniel's mean behavior towards one of the boys in the group. From their perspective they were not bullying Daniel; they were in the "right" because they were defending their friend during the build-up, and Daniel was the one who started the fight that was recorded by the camera.

This is a common dynamic in school; the "bullies" don't perceive their behavior as bullying if they believe their behavior is justified.

In addition, the fight took place during recess, which is a school's community square. That means it was a public event and most of the students, if not all, also did not know the context of the altercation. All they saw was one student continually going back to fight and naturally they're going to talk about it with their peers. So the students' perception of how the adults in leadership responded to the incident will affect the climate of the school.

## **How do we approach the incident?**

The principal's question was: How do I discipline the boys effectively? And how do I communicate with the rest of the school community so that our overall school climate is not negatively impacted?

Our response is grounded in the principles of restorative practices: to focus on accountability and make amends to the people harmed by the offense. It's best to begin the process by defining what a successful outcome is for everyone involved. Once we define what success means for the boys, those goals can be integrated into the school's formal disciplinary options.

### **For the single student "Daniel":**

- Build a relationship with a counselor, administrator or other trusted adult in the school so he is heard, supported and able to handle conflicts more effectively in the future.
- Going forward, identify a trusted adult so if the behavior continues or he feels overwhelmed emotionally for another reason, he will reach out for help before acting out.
- Examine the conflict with him from the beginning (when the conflict started), to his perception of being bullied, to the end (the fight on the playground) to identify where he can take ownership of his behavior that made the conflict smaller or bigger.
- Discuss with him if he would like to receive an apology and how he wants to respond or interact with the boys in the future
- Discuss if he thinks there is anything he needs to apologize for in his interactions with the boy(s).
- Have a "script" (which an adult can help construct) in place for him to respond when other students ask him what happened and how he is being disciplined so he is truthful and feels in control of the conversation.

- Create a strategy where he feels proud of how he handled the situation in the aftermath of the fight.

### **For the group of boys:**

- Through this process build a relationship with a counselor, administrator or other trusted adult in the school and teaches them how to handle conflicts more effectively.
- Help them understand that the manner in which they defended their friend made the problem bigger and came across as using their power to bully Daniel
- Define the difference between intention and impact. The boys' intention was to defend their friend. They didn't realize the impact of their behavior and how threatened Daniel felt. That fact doesn't excuse their actions, but it gives them a way to understand how they come across to others and where they made a mistake.
- Make amends by articulating individual apologies.
- Have a "script" (which an adult can help construct) in place for him to respond when other students ask him what happened and how he is being disciplined so he is truthful and feels in control of the conversation.
- Create a strategy where the boys feel proud of themselves for holding themselves accountable and contributing to repairing the school's culture.

### **For the student body:**

- When students' bullying and conflict become public, the school leadership's responsibility is to take the time to understand every person's role in the situation and then respond fairly and respecting students' privacy.
- While the school administrators can't talk about how they disciplined individual students, if a student has questions about something they heard related to the incident, they can ask the Assistant Principal, Principal, or counselor how the school generally handles students fighting in school.

- Remind the student that for better or worse “Stories stay, lessons leave.” Everyone learns from these experiences and the adults’ responsibility is to do their best to make the lessons positive for everyone.

### **Supporting the group of boys:**

In these situations, student meetings have two goals: teaching young people how to take responsibility for their actions and modeling the school’s values in action. In preparation for the meeting, send the boys home with the following questions in writing, or if you have the time they can answer the questions at school. Make sure to put them in separate spaces so they can self-reflect on their behavior, not engage in group-think about how “stupid” these questions are.

- When did the interaction and conflict begin with Daniel? Begin from the first time you can remember or any incident that increased the conflict.
- Before the fight, what was your goal when you all decided to confront him at the same time?
- Even if you think you didn’t do anything wrong, how do you think your actions could have looked to Daniel leading up to the fight?
- What can the adults at school do to help you feel more supported?
- We have a problem that we need to work together to fix. What actions can you take to make this situation better?

When they have their responses, have an adult facilitate a discussion with the group. Each student should take turns reading their answers aloud and then have the opportunity to respond to each others’ answers.

If they choose to apologize or have not already done so, give them five minutes to write an apology to whoever they think they should apologize to, and then have them read those apologies out loud to each other as well.

The last thing the group needs to do is come up with a plan if other students ask them what happened or if they got in trouble. This is a critical last piece of the

strategy because it can be so tempting for students to join in to the rumor spreading or coming across to the other students that they don't take the disciplinary process seriously.

### **Supporting Daniel:**

The art of the discipline is to hold people accountable for their actions, while understanding the context of their reactions. These kinds of fights don't just come out of nowhere. It's important to acknowledge that Daniel must have had an understandable reason to get this upset.

- What happened between you and the group of boys prior to the fight?
- Even if you think you didn't do anything wrong, is there anything you can reflect back on that contributed to the conflict?
- What can the adults at school do to help you feel more supported?
- What do you want your parents to know about this situation?
- If you received sincere apologies from the other boys, would you be interested in hearing or reading them?

For all the boys there should be guidelines about receiving apologies. If a person receives an apology they should say "Thank you" instead of "That's ok" or "Don't worry about it." Beyond that people don't have to accept apologies until they're ready. On the other hand, it is important for all the boys to know it's never too late to apologize. You can always go back the next day, a week or a month later and tell the person that you're sorry. Receiving forgiveness is important but more than that is doing your best to make amends.

At this writing, the school decided that meeting with the boys, doing role plays with the counselors and writing apologies was a better course of action rather than in-school suspension and detention. As is typical, some of the boys were better than others at making amends and forgiving each other. But expecting a clean, perfect ending where the boys get along instantly isn't the goal nor is it

realistic. Truly trusting each other doesn't happen overnight or with one apology and one meeting at school. But if the boys' future actions reflect their words, they will learn through this experience that the adults helped them to make a bad situation better, they will be clear about what is expected of them and they will have the foundation to repair their relationships.