
Storytelling for Bully Prevention

by Sue Black

Take your storytelling into the schools for interactive storytelling assemblies and workshops that engage imaginations, hearts, and minds for lasting bully prevention.

BUT...

Know before you go. Research the characteristics of each of the 'players' in the bullying scenario (bully, bullied, bystander), the statistics, the consequences to each 'player', and effective solutions and responses.

- Bullying begins in the elementary school and there are some studies that show it is trickling down to the preschool level
- 7 out of 10 kids are bullied
- 9 out of 10 kids will not intervene
- 9 out of 10 teachers will not intervene
- Bully behavior occurs once every 7 minutes on the playground
- When bystanders step in, bully behavior is reduced by 50%
- Of those who consistently bully and are not stopped, 60% will be in prison by age 24
- Those who are consistently bullied, are 7% more likely to attempt suicide as an adult
- The 'old school' bully was trying to feel good about himself. not so today – many of the 'new school' bullies have lots of self-esteem and are quite popular

Generally the kids know what bully behavior is – or assume they do – the younger kids think it is the one who punches. Using story art, I start by defining the bully behavior I'm talking about – I call it the Big 3 – **physical** (pushing, punching, shoving, pinching, flicking, kicking, intimidation, etc), **verbal** (name calling, hurtful words, taunting, etc), **social** (exclusion from the lunch table/parties/teams/group/friendships, rumor mongering with the intended or unintended result of someone being left out, etc). By the time I talk to 5th graders and beyond I tell them I have to add the online and cellphone bullying – chat rooms or websites set up specifically to make fun of someone; forwarding emails, text messages, or photos that will cause embarrassment; initiating emails that are hurtful, taking embarrassing photos, posting any photos without permission. Because much of this type of bullying is anonymous or at least not face to face, there are those who become involved who might never do so in a different setting.

And, while we're on the subject, the Teaching Artist in you will want to know coping techniques. The most popular programs around here teach 3 steps, 3 vocabulary words:

No – Go – Tell

Stop – Walk – Talk

Both deal with the same concepts: Look the bully in the eye and say 'no' or 'stop'. Most of the schools combine the word 'stop' with the sign language gesture as well.

Once you've said 'stop' or 'knock it off' or 'I'm outta here' or 'I don't have to take that kind of stuff', or maybe you weren't able to say anything but simply gave the stop signal, then it's time to turn and

go/walk. Get out of there. Don't hang around and take any more of it. Don't hang around thinking it will stop or get better. Remove yourself from the situation; it is another signal that you don't plan to take it.

Tell someone. Talk it out. Find a teacher or friend or parent or someone you can trust who will listen. And that is your first job as the caring adult – to listen. And that is followed by your second job – to believe. It is not our job to say 'he didn't really mean it' or 'she was only kidding' or 'everyone has to go through that' or 'you'll be fine' or 'just ignore him'. There are books that go into a stepped process of what adults should say and do – I'll let you go to them and not get (any more) long-winded here. And you'll want to be aware that the conflict resolution strategies you learned, while bits and pieces might be useful to one or more of the 'players', are really strategies friends employ and are not recommended for resolving bully/bullied issues.

The Stories

Then you'll look for stories that highlight the behaviors of each 'player' and you'll find the stories that celebrate differences or unique problem solving. So my story introductions or segues might be just a tad longer than normal so that I can creatively present some information just to make sure we're all talking about the same thing. But we are also artists, and we can rewrite some of those stories to artistically incorporate the Stop-Walk-Talk, or the use of humor to build community, or counting to 10 (by both bully and bullied) before acting/reacting, or taking a deep breath. Rewriting those typical bully stories from another point of view is helpful to get kids to develop empathy:

That wolf in the forest was just picking up the candy wrappers Little Red was leaving behind as she walked to Granny's and then she's the one who started calling him names and acting all snooty and by the time they got to Granny's she was making all those false accusations and no self-respecting wolf would ever eat a girl but the crazy kid started screaming and the lumber jack came in and by the time it was over it was wolf with the bad reputation and Little Red lived happily ever after but he sure didn't. – The Maligned Wolf, found in Don't Laugh at Me)

I have rewritten The Three Pigs so that each scene depicts a different bully behavior on the part of the wolf. And each of the first two scenes depicts ineffective bullied and bystander responses so of course the house is blown down. But by the time we get to scene #3, the brick school, the strong brick behavior, the pigs and others who know how to Stop-Walk-Talk, and the teacher who steps in to make sure the pigs are doing o.k. while he/she begins to work with wolf – that's when we start to believe we just might be able to live happily.

A sampling of other stories:

- **Anansi and the Moss Covered Walk** – Little Spotted Deer is a beautiful example of the shy/afraid-to-speak-up bystander who becomes brave enough to say 'stop'. And then she helps the other animals get their fruit back.
- **Tiddalick Who Drank All the Water in the World** – I've done a rewrite here, because in the original story the way they make frog laugh is by ridiculing the way platypus looks. But the story works to model bystanders working together to confront the bully frog.
- **Frog and Locust** – working together to solve a problem
- **Butterfly Brothers** – flowers won't shelter the butterflies who are a different color.
- **Two Bully Goats on a Bridge** – pushing and shoving don't work; cooperation prevails
- **Chicken Little** – the cry of 'the sky is falling' correlates to the consequences of gossip and how it spreads and hurts

For older grades:

- **Melinda Alice** – although I end it with her saying ‘I wish I’d never been born!’ so that she disappears. And then my next point becomes – Of course bullies don’t disappear just because we want them to.
- **Damon and Pythias**
- **The Answer is in Your Hands**
- **Pumpkin Sparrow**
- **Any of the brave underdog stories**
- There are a whole lot of historical stories that speak to standing up against injustice (bully behavior comes in all shapes and sizes.).
- The older grades do respond well to real-life stories. Required reading for middle school and above should be Jodee Blanco’s two books, Please Stop Laughing at Me and Please Stop Laughing at Us. If you can get her to speak to your middle and high school students, snatch her right up and get out of the way – no one does it better.

As you can see, my story choices have less to do with the bully and have a whole lot more to do with overcoming fear or standing up for what’s right or being part of a crowd that steps in to stop injustice.

In grades K-5 I’m very careful to refer to it as bully behavior and not say ‘the bully’. I don’t want anyone leaving the assembly having identified someone as a bully and feeling free to label him/her. Kids move in and out of these roles constantly. One day they might be a bully; the next day they might be a bystander, and the very next day they might be bullied.

I do like to use the old folktales at this age because it removes them from the bully behavior just enough to look at it from a safe distance. And in follow-up workshops we can then refer to the stories that were told and ask, for example, ‘When have you ever felt like Little Spotted Deer?’ or ‘Have you ever acted like a wolf?’

It’s just easier for the kids, in my experience.

One More Thing

It is worthwhile to have a discussion about:

1) Tattling versus Telling

When you tattle, you’re trying to get someone (your little brother or sister, your classmate who brought candy for a snack instead of raisins) *in* trouble. When you tell, you’re trying to get someone (the bullied) *out* of trouble.

2) Teasing versus Bullying –

Friends tease, and when one of them says it has gone too far then the other one stops. It’s like a teeter totter – friends try to keep it balanced. Bully behavior is hurting someone on purpose, an imbalance of power, feeling entitled to hurt because someone is different (that difference based on any arbitrary standard the bully chooses – too smart, too tall, too rich, too poor, etc).

Follow-Up (from *The Bully Free Classroom* by Allan L. Beane, Ph.D.)

Sometimes at the end of an assembly or in a follow-up workshop I do an interactive quiz. I have three signs that read:

No/Disagree

Yes/Agree

Not Sure

I have three teachers hold a sign in a different corner of the room. I read statements and then the kids move to the corner of the room with the sign that holds their answer to the question. It's a great reinforcement activity and also a way to set the record straight if there are any small groups of kids who have wandered toward the wrong answer (and again, there are lots of creative ways to handle being wrong – we are all learning this stuff, after all).

Statements

When someone bullies you, you should:

- Cry (no; although be aware that often the kids who are bullied are chosen because they cry easily)
- Tell a friend (yes)
- Tell the bully's parents (no)
- Run away (not sure; this is situation-based because if you are in danger the answer is 'always run')
- Try to get even with the bully (no)
- Tell a teacher (yes)
- Stay home from school (no)
- Hit, push, kick bully (no)
- Stand up straight, look bully in the eye, and say in a firm, confident voice, "Stop" or "Leave me alone!" (yes)
- Hunch over, hang your head, and try to look so small the bully will stop noticing you (no)
- Laugh and act like you don't care (not sure – situation-based; keep in mind the bully wants to get a reaction out of you and any reaction will do just so he/she knows they 'got you')
- Tell your parents (yes)
- Threaten the bully (no)
- Stay calm/walk away (yes)
- Call the bully a bad name (no)
- Shout "cut it out" as loudly as you can (yes)
- Ignore the bully (no – handle it, take control)
- Tell a joke or say something silly (not sure – sometimes humor diffuses a situation and allows you to take control; doesn't always work)
- If other people are nearby, join them so you are not alone (yes)

The Bully, the Bullied, and the Bystander – they're all in our schools and they all need our support. Present an interactive storytelling assembly that gets the whole school talking. Don't stop there! Empower students, teachers, and parents with the skills they need to make a difference.

Suggested Bibliography

www.sue-black.com/bullybiblio.html

Peter Yarrow (of Peter, Paul and Mary) has a great CD and companion activity book for elementary and middle school kids – I highly recommend this.

Suggested activities post assembly

www.sue-black.com/pdfs/BP-FollowupActivities.pdf

Relating your bully prevention program to the state standards

www.sue-black.com/bullysecgoals.html

Stan Davis and Charisse Nixon have just released (March 2010) the results of a survey they did among youth grades 5-12 on what they reported made things better, made things worse, and made no difference.

www.youthvoiceproject.com/YVPMarch2010.pdf

Really interesting reading/results. Short version: Of all those techniques we teach to kids, telling an adult helped the most. 💎

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