

Older Students Help a 6th Grader Overcome Bullying and Exclusion and Model the Importance of Caring and Respect for Others

This lesson can be presented over 1-2 sessions. Instructors should feel free to use whichever discussion questions and activities you think best for your class or group. We advise giving students the sheet with the definitions of the virtues before the discussion questions.

Lesson Goals

Help students...

- be aware of and identify bullying in our communities
- consider, even if we are not the bully or being bullied, how we can help create a community that respects others, affirms the dignity of others, and values every person by standing up for others.
- place themselves in others' shoes— practicing empathy for people who are going through hard times.
- consider their personal responsibility to intervene or to reach out when they witness bullying. Even if they are not the ones bullying, don't just sit on the sidelines—act!
- learn to lead by example by inspiring students to emulate the upperclassman in this story and to establish solidarity with others
- value family support, even if it may at times be embarrassing
- consider how they should react if they are a victim of teasing and/or bullying

Highlighted Virtues / Character Traits

Caring - to help others, a caring person lives with empathy in trying to understand another person's situation, compassion in desiring to help others, and then with generosity in acting to help

Compassion - feeling of sympathy for the distress of others, with the desire to help

Courage - the capacity to meet danger and difficult situations without giving way to fear; to have the courage of one's convictions; to be willing to put one's opinions into practice

Empathy - trying to understand another person's situation; entering into the feeling or spirit of others and imagining yourself in another person's situation

Generosity – giving freely of our own time, possessions and / or talent

Solidarity - unity from a shared common purpose and / or interest; active loyalty within a group; mutual support within a group; being present with others

Respect for Others - showing full appreciation of the worth and dignity of others; living by “the golden rule” of do unto others as you would want done unto you

Leader Introduction:

Who has seen bullying in schools? Whether you have seen it, been a victim of it, or even been a bully yourself, we all know that bullying is wrong. During today's lesson we are going to look at a case of bullying in Colorado and what some upperclassman, meaning older high school students, did to stop it right in its tracks. It all started when 6th grader Brody Ridder came home from school near the end of last year, and his mom discovered that most of Brody's classmates were trying to exclude him by refusing to sign his yearbook. A couple of teachers signed his yearbook, but besides that, he was left to sign his own yearbook. He wrote a note to himself that said, "Hope you make some more friends (next year)" -Brody. Fortunately, that sad note is not the end of this story. There were some heroes, and better days to come. Let's see how Brody's mom and a group of older students at his school felt called to action, and helped Brody finish off his year with a smile.

Lesson Video:

<https://www.msnbc.com/yasmin-vossoughian-reports/watch/high-school-students-step-up-to-support-6th-grader-bullied-during-yearbook-signing-141486661904>

Leader Summary:

After no one signed his yearbook, Brody was left feeling alone and sad, but because of the simple effort that his mom and then Joanna Cooper put forward, he now looks forward to his seventh grade year with excitement, and now has a crew of older students to support and guide him. Now let's dive into the discussion questions, talk more about the story and how it speaks to our own lives.

Discussion Question Options: *(discussion prompts / answers are in parentheses)*

Before beginning our discussion, let's read over the virtues and their definitions, found in the online lesson as a separate document.

1. We often think of bullying as a physical assault or saying mean things to a person, but in this case, Brody was hurt by fellow students not doing something. Let's talk about whether this is a form of bullying. School counselors sometimes describe bullying with the acronym—STOMP. It's behavior that happens **S**everal **T**imes, is **O**ne-sided, **M**ean, and **P**urposeful (helpful to write this out on the board). For additional background, Brody was new to this school, and his mom had already reached out to the school administration one time before because he was being bullied by his new classmates. How does the STOMP acronym apply to what was happening to Brody, and do you think he was being bullied? (They were doing it throughout the school year, Brody was not retaliating, and the students not signing Brody's yearbook knew it would hurt his feelings)

Can you think of other hypothetical situations in our school and general community of students where not doing something can be a form of bullying? (A good example to key up, if students don't do it on their own, is repeatedly ignoring a fellow student and simply not responding to their comments, which leads to them feeling isolated and rejected.)

2. It can be difficult to stick up for others and against bullying, even when we know it's the right thing to do. What virtues does it take to stand up for someone who is being excluded or abused?
(Write each virtue on the board and encourage a discussion of each virtue as it applies to standing up to bullying:
 - **empathy** in trying to place ourselves in another student's position and to understand how that person feels when they are being excluded or abused
 - **compassion** in wanting to help
 - **courage** in overcoming our fears in standing up for someone, even when we know others may then make fun of us or exclude us
 - **solidarity** by actually standing with someone who is being excluded or abused, and showing them they are not alone
 - **respect for others** in realizing that every person has value and dignity, and this can motivate us to act and to affirm the value of someone who is being bullied)

3. After the upper-class students came to sign Brody's yearbook, many of the students who originally refused to give him their signatures eventually signed his yearbook as well. Brody ended up with over 100 signatures! Why do you think they changed their minds? (Many students were likely ashamed and felt badly about their original decision to not sign Brody's yearbook when the older students shined a light on its impact on Brody, and especially when they modeled through their actions the power of caring for others and showing respect for others.)

The younger students maybe also realized how caring for others can make us feel good too. It's inspiring to see others help someone in need, and it's rewarding to join in and be part of it.)

What does this story tell us about the power of fellow students and friends leading by example? Why do you think fellow students and friends leading (instead of just adults) is important and needed?

4. Brody's mom, Cassandra, found out what happened with his yearbook and posted about it in the school's Facebook group to bring attention to what her son was experiencing. Many kids would be embarrassed if their parents did this. How was Brody's mom actually caring for him, even if he was a little upset by her action? Do you think she did the right thing?
5. Cassandra explained that when making the post about Brody's yearbook, she wanted to encourage parents to talk to their children about bullying. She also said, "I am aware that some parents prefer to keep such matters private, but I thought being forthright about it might help prevent my son and others from being targeted further." Do you agree that by talking about bullying we can help prevent it?
(Talking about it makes us better able to identify it when it happens, and hopefully by thinking about it ahead of time makes each of us more likely to step up and help stop bullying. Within discussions about bullying, we can also promote a culture of acceptance, inclusion, respect for others and love and these attitudes and actions will help to prevent bullying.)
6. Cooper (the upper-class student) was the first to organize her friends to go and sign Brody's yearbook. Instead of approaching the bullies directly, she addressed the problem by helping the student who was hurt. Cooper shows us how we can counter bad actions with goodness and by caring for others, rather than with force and additional negative actions. Do you think this is true for life as a whole? Let's share some examples of this that we have experienced directly, or stories of others we know (or even from the news) where we saw this play out.
7. Cooper said that it "hurt her heart that people would tell him no and deny him a signature." What virtue is reflected in this statement, and what experience did Cooper have that inspired her to help Brody?
(Empathy that she was able to put herself in his shoes and to imagine the pain that he was experiencing. Cooper was likely more able to do this because she had also experienced the pain of bullying at his age.)
8. Cooper also shared that her advice to anyone being teased or bullied is to "reach out when you need something." What did she mean by this advice? Why is it important that we do not stay silent if we are going through a hard time?
(Speaking with others about a problem we have allows others the opportunity to help us, and often someone else can help us in a meaningful way. Other people can often offer us another perspective or idea that we would not have thought about on our own. By speaking with others, we will likely feel more supported that someone else is with us in whatever challenge we are facing.)

9. Let's talk about whether our school community has a problem with bullying.

What can we do to better counter bullying through positive steps and possibly negative consequences? (If students don't do it on their own, encourage a discussion of how they as individuals can be more present and inclusive of students who may be excluded or bullied by others)

Journal Writing Options

1. Has there been a time that you felt excluded at school? Reflect on how you felt in that situation and how you got through it. Did anyone help you?
2. Write about a time you have reached out to another student who was being excluded/bullied. How did you express **solidarity** with that person?
3. Write yourself a positive note with your hopes and wishes for your new school year. Be **caring** to yourself!
4. What lessons can we learn from Cooper's approach to addressing bullying?
5. Older students have an important role and influence in their schools. Many younger students look up to older students to set examples. How can you be a positive example to the younger students at your school?

Extended Activity:

1. Organize students into small groups of 3-5 and have each team come up with a game plan for how to identify and address exclusion within their school. Think about exclusion that may not be as obvious as Brody's situation. Are there students who go to recess/break or lunch alone? Are there students who have been ignored on purpose by others? Have the student groups share their ideas with others and decide which plans are most practical to be lived out in their actual school communities.
2. Organize students into groups of 3 to 5 and have them role play various bullying situations. You may want to consider assigning each team a general theme such as physical bullying, social media, excluding others in common situations etc. Have each team come up with their own skit showing an incident of bullying where it isn't constructively addressed by others, and then the same situation where one or more people step up to help. After each skit, various team members should present to the class on the negative consequences of not doing anything and on the positive consequences of constructively engaging the situation.

Sources:

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2022/06/02/yearbook-bully-kindness-cassandra-ridder/>

<https://www.msnbc.com/yasmin-vossoughian-reports/watch/high-school-students-step-up-to-support-6th-grader-bullied-during-yearbook-signing-141486661904>

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