

Using Voices Against Violence with Students

■ INTRODUCTION

Because the *Voices Against Violence* stories are dramatic and engaging, it is likely that students will be ready to talk, so you must be prepared to facilitate the process effectively, stimulate critical thinking, and support students in hearing one another's points of view. You will notice that the narrator often asks "why" or "why not" questions. This is because such open questions often produce the most stimulating discussions. Asking students to voice the reasoning behind an answer forces them to reflect on and analyze their own views. Assumptions and beliefs are revealed, which may result in a student modifying his or her initial position. This broadening of understanding and acceptance of others' points of view are important for identifying common barriers to bystander action and ways to overcome them. Students can also reinforce norms and behaviors that encourage positive bystander action.

WHAT IS BULLYING?

- *Repeated negative behavior, over an extended period of time, directed at a target who has less power than the bully.*
- *Persistent, offensive, abusive, intimidating, or insulting behavior that makes the recipient feel upset, threatened, humiliated or vulnerable; undermines the victim's self-confidence, and possibly causes the victim to suffer stress*
- *Longstanding violence – physical or psychological – conducted by an individual or group against an individual*

Most studies indicate that 15-20 percent of students will experience bullying at some point between kindergarten and high school graduation. Typically, bullying prevention programs help participants understand the power inherent in bullying and the ways bystanders support the behavior of bullies when they do nothing, directly or indirectly, to intervene. In addition, such programs train teachers to intervene effectively and provide guidelines for developing and implementing school policies and procedures that prevent bullying.

Voices Against Violence is part of Teenage Health Teaching Modules (THTM), a comprehensive health curriculum. THTM has a 12-lesson, middle-grades bullying prevention module titled Taking Action to Stop Bullying.

For additional information on bullying prevention, see the website Take a Stand, Lend a Hand. Stop Bullying Now! At [t www.stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov](http://www.stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov).

Remember that students must be taught not only how to organize their thoughts and present them coherently, but also to be respectful listeners when different opinions are voiced. Encourage them to hold other students' ideas up to critical analysis and be prepared to have their own opinions and experiences discussed. By engaging students in stimulating discussions that foster their critical-thinking skills, you will help them come to realize that there are often alternative ways of looking at the same situation.

TIPS FOR CLASSROOM DISCUSSIONS

- Establish ground rules for a “safe” discussion; these include not making fun of others’ opinions or experiences, and not putting down others’ points of view.
- Encourage students to express concerns about being bystanders to violence or impending violence, and to describe actions they take to keep themselves safe.
- Give students “equal time”; make sure to hear from all students – both boys and girls. Remember that girls’ and boys’ experiences with violence and as bystanders might be different.
- Emphasize that any student may be a bystander to violence.
- Hold students’ opinions up to respectful but critical analysis by the class.
- Leave time to summarize key points and talk about next steps.
- If the discussion uncovers a situation that needs immediate attention, be sure to follow up after class with the student(s) involved.

■ STUDENT DISCUSSION QUESTIONS BY STORY

NIKKI’S STORY

Nikki, the bystander, is troubled by threats that are being made against her older sister by another girl at their school because of a boy.

You can use this story to discuss the following issues:

- The types of disputes (e.g., over boy/girl friends) that lead to threats and fighting
- What bystanders can do to intervene before things get serious
- When students should talk with parents or adults at school
- What might make the situation better (or worse)

The Narrator’s Questions

At the end of this vignette, three questions are posed by the narrator. They provide a good way to start the discussion:

- **Is there something Nikki can do to stop a fight from happening?**
- **Is there anything the adults in the cafeteria could do?**
- **Is there anything Nikki might have done to keep this situation from happening?**

If there is time, it might be useful to show this story again and ask students to call out “Stop” at each point when they think Nikki could have made the decision to talk to an adult. This is a good time to make the point that students should seek help from an adult as early as possible when it appears that violence may take place.

Getting Help from Adults

In this story, teachers and other school staff are present in several scenes. For instance, the librarian notices that something is going on. The presence of adults provides the opportunity to ask students to discuss their views about getting help:

- 1. Do you think it would have been a good idea for Nikki to talk to the librarian, since the librarian saw the group of girls surrounding Nikki and Kelly? Why or why not? What could the librarian have done to help?*
- 2. Do you think Nikki was right when she said that if Kelly and Trina were called into the office, it would have gotten worse for Kelly? If that’s true, what could someone like the principal or assistant principal have done to make it less likely that Kelly would be the victim of retaliation?*
- 3. Why do you think Nikki didn’t talk to her mother? Is there anything her mother could have done? What would you want your parent to know? What would you want him or her to do?*

The final scene takes place in the cafeteria, where many students are present, but there are also cafeteria monitors. Therefore, you should ask the class about the ways students and adults might work better together. For example:

- 4. Do you think the monitors could have helped? What should they have done in this situation?*
- 5. What about the other students in the cafeteria? What did they see and do? Could they have done something differently?*
- 6. How did Trina’s friends influence what happened? What could they have done differently?*

Closing and Next Steps

There are many ways to end discussion of this story. Here are some examples:

- Encourage students to think about the school staff person or person(s) with whom they would feel comfortable sharing violence-related information.
- Conduct follow-up discussions to identify what students think each type of adult (e.g., parents, teachers, counselors, school resource officer) could do.
- Develop activities to address this topic, such as a poster contest, role plays, and brainstorming activities or homework assignments that include parents’ input about what should be done in a case like the one in Nikki’s Story.

ALEX’S STORY

Alex, the bystander, becomes concerned about rumors that Jake, a loner, is planning to retaliate against Monty, a popular student, and his friends, especially when Alex learns that a gun may be involved.

This story would be a good one to use with students in order to discuss bystanders’ roles in

relation to the following:

- Bullying
- Rumor spreading
- Threats of potentially serious school violence
- Weapon carrying and firearm violence

The Narrator's Questions

The three questions posed by the narrator provide a good place to start the discussion:

- *If you were Alex, what would you do, and why?*
- *What should adults do if Alex confides in them?*
- *Do students and adults in your community know what to do if they face this kind of situation?*

Rumor Spreading

To engage students in a discussion of rumor spreading and what they should do when they hear rumors about potential violence, consider asking one or more of the following questions:

- 1. Samantha told Alex that there were rumors spreading at school about Jake "getting" Monty and his friends. Why do you think Alex didn't tell an adult at school the rumors, even though Alex thought Jake might be serious?*
- 2. If rumors about one student "getting" another circulated among students at your school, would school administrators hear about the rumors as well? Why or why not?*
- 3. If staff at your school heard about a threat like the one in this story, what do you think they should do? Why? What do you think would happen?*

Weapons

Weapon carrying is a serious problem that becomes even more dangerous when a firearm is involved. Consider making the points in the next paragraph and asking students some or all of the questions that follow:

Although it wasn't clear whether or not the gun Jake had was real, it was important for Alex and Samantha to describe to an adult what happened. Even if the gun was not real, Jake could have been hurt if others thought it was real. There are many things that could have happened – none of them good. For example, what might have happened if Jake went to the dance and pulled out the gun? This is not a real story, but we know that there are times when students bring guns and other weapons to school, and the results have been deadly. Let's talk about this issue:

- 4. What do you think would happen at your school if some students knew that a student had brought a gun to school?*
- 5. Why might students not report that a student had a gun at school?*
- 6. Do you know what the procedure is for reporting a gun on school grounds? Do you think there are better ways to report? If so, what are they?*

It is also important to have students discuss the role that the crowd played in this story. To do so,

you might ask the following:

7. *Monty had his friends around when he was teasing Jake. Do you think they influenced Monty's behavior? If so, in what ways? Would you consider this behavior to be bullying?*
8. *Neither Alex nor Samantha laughed along with Monty's friends when he was making fun of Jake, but they also didn't do or say anything to discourage Monty. Why do you think that was the case? What are some of the things students can say or do that would make a difference when someone is being bullied?*

Closing and Next Steps

Sometimes students fear reporting that another student is carrying a weapon because they think they might be identified as the informer and experience retaliation. Sometimes they don't know whether a threat is serious and don't want to get a peer in trouble needlessly. However, when it comes to guns, students may be more likely to report what they know or have heard because of the potential lethality of the violence.

Because of the deadly nature of firearms, it is essential that schools have safeguards in place so that students are less afraid to report what they know to adults. Some schools have installed a special phone number that students can use to report the presence of a gun on school grounds. The call is free, even from a pay phone. The person making the call is guaranteed anonymity. Is this a procedure that might work at your school? If so, how would you verify the accuracy of a report and distinguish a legitimate call from a prank or an attempt to get an innocent student in trouble? This and other strategies for reporting weapons could be a follow-up topic of discussion.

Because rumors and gossip often spread widely in schools, a follow-up discussion on this topic is also suggested. Find creative ways to help students understand not only how rapidly rumors spread but also why it is important to share information with a trusted adult when the rumor is about potential violence.

ANNA'S STORY

Anna, the bystander, doesn't like seeing a new girl in school harassed by another girl and her friends, but is concerned about the consequences of getting involved.

You can use this story to engage students in discussions of the following issues:

- Bystanders and peer pressure
- Friendship obligations
- Barriers to intervention
- Teacher involvement

The Narrator's Questions

At the end of the story, the narrator poses three questions that provide a good way to start the discussion:

- **Why did Anna decide to help Maya?**
- **What should happen next?**
- **Is it time for adults to help out?**

The Role of Teachers

In the final scene, a teacher is in the background, walking down the hall. He stops briefly and seems to be looking at Sonia and her friends tossing Maya's papers in the air. However, he continues on his way. When the last question is posed by the narrator – Is it time for adults to help out? – try showing this scene again. It may be the first time that students notice the teacher. You could then follow up by asking:

- 1. Why do you think the teacher kept going? What do you think he should have done? What do you think would have happened as a result?*
- 2. How do teachers and other school staff handle similar situations at this school?*

There are many other questions that can be posed to students about this story, such as:

- 3. Do situations like this occur at this school?*
- 4. How do situations like this get resolved at this school? Do you think there are better ways to resolve them? If so, what are they?*
- 5. What would you have done if you were Anna and why?*

Closing and Next Steps

In this story, there are many bystanders in addition to Anna. There is Anna's friend Lindsey as well as Sonia's friends, who participate in the bullying. Although Sonia's friends never say anything, they are a powerful presence. Sometimes, friends are drawn into bullying by pressure from their peers. Some adolescents feel guilty about their role in bullying and in order to deal with the feelings, blame the victim and decide that he or she deserves the abuse. Others feel compelled to end a friendship or avoid being seen with a bullied student to keep from losing status or being targeted themselves. All of these issues are important ones to discuss with students and school staff as part of a discussion about what youth and adult bystanders can do to prevent bullying.

It may also be useful to explore the issue of girl bullies. In explaining this behavior, some researchers have contended that at an early age, girls are subjected to strong messages from the media and society in general that they must conform to certain ideals of femininity, beauty, and romance to be popular and successful, and they shouldn't trust other girls, with whom they are in competition. The result of this competition can be aggressive behavior. Does this seem like a possible explanation for bullying among girls in your school? Among the suggestions made for addressing bullying are finding ways to help girls feel more confident and powerful on their own, so they are less inclined to pick on other girls. Appendix B contains information about programs that have been developed especially for girls.