

# Teaching Kids How to Be Upstanders



*From our guest contributor, Dr. Michele Borba*

Studies show that active bystanders can do far more than just watch. In fact, student bystanders may be our last, best hope in reducing bullying.

Active student bystanders can:

- Reduce the audience that a bully craves
- Mobilize the compassion of witnesses to step in and stop the bullying
- Support the victim and reduce the trauma
- Be a positive influence in curbing a bullying episode
- Encourage other students to support a school climate of caring
- Report a bullying incident since 85 percent of time bullying occurs an adult is *not* present. Students are usually the witnesses

***When bystanders intervene correctly, studies find they can cut bullying more than half the time and within 10 seconds.*** [Pepler and Craig]

## **Borba's Six "Be a Bully B.U.S.T.E.R." Skills**

There are parameters to activate student bystanders, so get

educated! Here are a few facts to ensure success:

- To ensure success you must first mobilize students to be active bystanders.
- You must give students permission to step in.
- You must also teach specific strategies so they can step in.
- Each strategy must be rehearsed or role-played, until kids can use it alone. (I've had schools have students role-play these in assemblies, make them into chart-reminders that are posted around the school, and even have students create mini-videos of each strategy to share with peers).
- Not every strategy will work for every student, so you must provide a range of strategies.
- Ideally you must enlist your peer leaders – those students on the highest popularity tier who other students look up to – to mobilize other peers.
- Adults *must* be onboard with the approach and understand what bullying is and how to respond. Adults *must* listen to student reports on bullying and back students up. The biggest reason kids say they don't report: "The adult didn't listen or do anything to help." Step up adults!

The best news is that child advocates and parents can teach kids these same bystander skills. Doing so empowers children with tools to stop cruelty, help victims, feel safer and reduce bullying. Here are the three steps:

### **STEP ONE: Teach Students Tattling vs. Reporting**

Kids must realize that safety is *always* the primary goal, so stress to students:

*"If someone could get hurt, REPORT!"*

*"It's always better to be safe than sorry."*

Teach students the crucial difference between "Tattling" and

“Reporting” so they will know when they *should* step in because a child is bullied or when to step back and let two kids handle things for themselves because it’s just friendly teasing. Also identify specific trusted adults children can go to and report bullying incidents if they do identify bullying. Here is the crucial difference:

**Tattling** is when you trying to get kids **IN** trouble when they aren’t hurting themselves or other.

**Reporting** is when you’re trying to help keep kids **OUT** of trouble because they may get hurt (or they are). Report bullying to an adult you trust. If the adult doesn’t listen, keep reporting until you find an adult who does listen.

## **STEP TWO: Teach What Bullying Looks and Sounds Like**

The next step is to teach students what bullying behaviors look like so they will know when they should step in and not when the behavior is mere teasing.

### **1. Explain 3 parts of bullying:**

1. Bullying is a cruel or aggressive act that is done on purpose. The bully has more power (strength, status, or size) than the targeted child who cannot hold his own.
2. The hurtful bullying behavior is not an accident, but done on purpose.
3. The bully usually seems to enjoy seeing the victim in distress and rarely accepts responsibility and often says the target “deserved” the hurtful treatment.”

**2. Teach: “Five Bullying Types”:** Depending on the child’s age, bullying can take on difference forms including and children need to know what those forms. Bullying can be:

1. **Physical:** Punching, hitting, slamming, socking, spitting, slapping;

2. **Verbal:** Saying put downs, nasty statements, name calling, taunting, racial slurs, or hurtful comments, threatening;
3. **Emotional:** Shunning, excluding, spreading rumors or mean gossip, ruining your reputation;
4. **Electronic or cyber-bullying:** Using the Internet, cell phone, camera, text messaging, photos to say mean or embarrassing things;
5. **Sexual:** Saying or doing things that are lewd or disrespectful in a sexual way

**3. Mobilize Student Compassion** Students could make posters, power-point presentations, skits, or projects about bullying. The key is for students to understand the real definition of bullying. *And they must know that the staff is serious about supporting them and will back them up and respond.*

**4. Use Literature or Videos:** You might also use literature or video clips to help students understand the definition of bullying. Here are a few literature favorites: *Confessions of a Former Bully* by Trudy Ludwig; *Say Something* by Peggy Moss Gardiner; *Teammates* by Peter Golenbock; *The Bully Blockers Club*, by Teresa Bateman.

### **STEP THREE: Teach “Bully BUSTER Bystander” Skills**

I teach the acronym **BUSTER** as a mnemonic to help kids remember the skills more easily. Each letter in the word represents one of the six bystander skills.

*Not all strategies work for all kids.* The trick is to match the techniques with what works best with the child’s temperament and comfort level and the particular situation.

Don’t forget to ask students for their input and additional ideas. Their creativity never ceases to amaze me!

#### **1. B-Befriend the Victim**

Bystanders often don't intervene because they don't want to make things worse or assume the victim doesn't want help. But research shows that if witnesses know a victim feels upset or wants help they are more likely to step in. Also, if a bystander befriends a victim, the act is more likely to get others to join the cause and stand up to the bully. A few ways bystanders can befriend victims:

- **Show comfort:** Stand closer to the victim.
- **Wave other peers over:** "Come help!"
- **Ask if the victim wants support:** "Do you need help?"
- **Empathize:** "I bet he feels sad."
- **Clarify feelings:** "She looks upset."

You can also encourage students to befriend a bullied *after the episode*. "That must have felt so bad." "I'm with you. Sorry I didn't speak out." "That happened to me, too." "Do you want me to help you find a teacher to talk to?" Though after the episode won't reduce the bullying at the moment, it will help reduce the pain of both the targeted child and the witness. It may also help other children recognize there are safe ways to defend and support a targeted child.

## **2. U-Use a Distraction**

The right diversion can draw peers from the scene, make them focus elsewhere, give the target a chance to get away, and may get the bully to move on. Remember, a bully wants an audience, so bystanders can reduce it with a distraction.

One of the best distractions I've ever seen was a teen who saw bullying but did not feel safe stepping in to help (and most children as well as adults do not). So he got crafty. He unzipped his backpack and then walked nearby the scene and threw the backpack to the ground. Of course, he made it appear as though it was an accident, but it was a deliberate and brilliant act. "Oh no," he said. "All my stuff is on the ground and the bell is going to ring. My grade will get

dinged. Can anyone help?" And the teen drew the audience from the bully to help him pick up his papers. The target also had a chance to sneak to safety.

Ploys include:

- **Ask a question:** "What are you all doing here?"
- **Use diversion:** "There's a great volleyball game going on! Come on!"
- **Make up false excuse to disperse a crowd:** "A teacher is coming!"
- **Feigning interruption:** "I can't find my bus."

### 3. S-Speak Out and Stand Up!

Speaking out can get others to lend a hand and join you. You must stay cool, and *never* boo, clap, laugh, or insult, which could egg the bully on even more. Students also must learn how to assert themselves and say that speaking up to a bully is the hardest of the six Bully Buster Strategies. The students in the photo are learning my "CALM Approach" when speaking up to a bully. Best yet, older students are teaching the skill to younger students. Stress that directly confronting a bully is intimidating and it's a rare kid who can, but there are ways to still stand up to cruelty. Here are a few possibilities:

- **Show disapproval:** Give a cold, silent stare.
- **Name it:** "That's bullying!"
- **Label it:** "That's mean!"
- **State disapproval:** "This isn't cool!" "Don't do that!" "Cut it out!"
- **Ask for support:** "Are you with me?"

### 4. T-Tell or Text For Help

Bystanders often don't report bullying for fear of retaliation, so make sure they know which adults will support them, and ensure confidentiality. You *must* give students the option of anonymous reporting. An active bystander could:

- **Find an adult** you trust to tell. Keep going until you find someone who believes you
- **Call for help** from your cell.
- **Send a text** to someone who can get help. Many schools now have a text service.
- **Call 911** if someone could be injured.

## 5. E-Exit Alone or With Others

Stress that bullies love audiences. Bystanders can drain a bully's power by reducing the group size a few ways. Students bystanders could:

- **Encourage:** "You coming?"
- **Ask:** "What are you all doing here?"
- **Direct:** "Let's go!"
- **Suggest:** "Let's leave."
- **Exit:** If you can't get others to leave with you, then walk away. If you stay, you're part of the cruelty. Leaving means you refuse to be part. Just quietly leave the scene.

## 6. R-Give a Reason or Offer a Remedy

Research finds that bystanders are more likely to help when told *why* the action is wrong or *what* to do. Students could:

- **Review why it's wrong:** "This isn't right!" "This is mean!" "You'll get suspended." "You'll hurt him."
- **Offer a remedy:** "Go get help!" "Let's work this out with Coach."

## Final Thoughts

The right comments and behaviors can make peers stop, think, consider the consequences, and even move on. Those seconds are crucial and enough to stop the bullying or mobilize other students to step in and help.

Bystanders can make a difference. They can be mobilized to

step in and reduce bullying-that is *if* they are taught how.

*But it's up to adults to show students safe ways to do so, help them practice those strategies so they are comfortable using them in the real world, and then support and believe them and acknowledge their courageous efforts.*

Hundreds of students today skipped school because of peer intimidation and bullying. It's time to rethink our strategies and teach bystanders how to step in safely and speak out against peer cruelty.

For specific ways educators can create a caring, inclusive schools refer to my book, **End Peer Cruelty, Build Empathy: The Proven 6Rs of Bullying Prevention That Create Inclusive, Safe and Caring Schools** (from Free Spirit Press, on sale in February 2018).

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