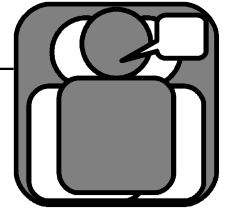


Guidelines For Classroom Discussion



When discussing issues in the classroom it is important to set out clear expectations for appropriate participation. When dealing with issues such as bullying, it is important that all of the participants feel safe about contributing to the discussion and that the discussion does not become a forum for further bullying to occur.

Perhaps the most effective way of ensuring students understand and own these expectations is to have them create guidelines together, in a guided discussion. This is an opportunity to model and practise appropriate interactions and grow your classroom culture. In creating and reviewing each of the guidelines, students could be prompted to come up with and model examples to show they understand the concept. Here are a few guideline you may use or work toward in your discussion:

✓ **Everyone should be able to feel safe / No put downs**

Some issues can be touchy for some individuals – think carefully about what you say and how you say it. Talk about racism, discrimination and sexism and how some comments may make someone feel unsafe. As students recognize these issues they are more likely to become positively involved. Build up instead of putting down! A bully will try a variety of techniques to put down their victim publicly. You may need to go over some examples of how to build someone up, even in cases where one speaker may disagree with another. If students learn to recognize a put down, they will often stop each other from making them. This is a positive step toward getting bystanders involved in stopping bullying .

✓ **Listen actively**

An easy way for a bully to show disrespect is to actively show they are not listening, particularly by not listening when their target or victim is speaking. A bully may do this by using body language to disengage from a discussion, shifting their body from an attentive position to one of inattention (i.e. from engagement: leaning forward and looking at the speaker to disengagement: sighing, excessive throat clearing, leaning back, arms crossed, looking at the floor or around the room, tapping objects or playing with anything from erasers to shoelaces.) A bully may engage in this behaviour only when a particular individual is speaking in order to send the message that what they have to say has no value. The active listening guideline includes having audience members looking at the speaker, a general description of appropriate body language, and a statement about enabling others to listen by remaining quiet and not making incidental noise.

✓ **Everyone has an opportunity to speak / No Interruptions**

Classroom routines for taking turns in a discussion such as raising hands or passing an object can help regulate and eliminate this disruption. A bully may regularly or persistently interrupt or comment on what their target says in an attempt to dominate the discussion or sabotage and devalue what they are saying. You also may need to directly address students that offer follow up comments such as “Ya sure” or “Oh right” which can be used by the bully to negate and devalue what another person is saying. To model this behaviour yourself, you may also let the students know that you will not interrupt unless the conversation is inappropriate, off topic, or to ensure everyone gets a turn.

✓ **Discussions are for the exploration of ideas and learning new things.**

The purpose it to stimulate ideas and encourage new thinking. It is O.K. for people to change their mind during this exploration process. Different people bring different information to the discussion and may form new ideas as a result of the process. Accept misinformation and use it to springboard new concept formation.



✓ **Respect each other's opinions / Agree to disagree respectfully**

Sometimes in a discussion there is not a “right” answer or a “better” answer. You may need to emphasize that there are no winners or losers; the discussion is not a battle of wills or a competition. The bully may find this a challenging concept to accept. Develop an understanding that different opinions on a topic may exist. Have students come up with some examples or model some situations where this may occur. Also, part of sharing an opinion is making sure that when your opinion is being expressed that it is not harmful to others (remember “safety first”) and respects a diversity of beliefs. “I think that is stupid” is an opinion, but it may best be expressed in another format. Instead of criticizing, students should be encouraged to offer their alternative viewpoint and justification without making a direct comparison i.e. instead of “Chocolate ice cream is better than vanilla because vanilla is yucky and smells like...” a more appropriate model may be “I like chocolate ice cream because....”. While making comparisons and contrast evaluations is a useful skill, you may need to reserve the evaluative component to a specific part of the discussion.

✓ **Consider confidentiality**

Some discussions need to focus on confidentiality. Things talked about in the discussion remain in the discussion and are not for general discussion outside of the circle (except with parents and trusted adults). This is to emphasize that that gossip is inappropriate and that information from the discussion should not be used to tease in loosely structured follow-up activities or on the playground. With this ground rule out in the open, bystanders can be encouraged to recognize and stop bullying by intervening when gossip occurs and when someone is misusing information from a discussion. Individuals should also not feel pressured to disclose personal information that they may not wish to share with the group. This option to “opt out” or “pass” should be clear and in the open.

✓ **Stay on topic**

Some students may bring in stories and examples to discussions that lead the group off topic or extend beyond the scope of the conversation. A bully may try to lead the conversation in a direction that may involve a story intended to embarrass one of their victims. Additional guidelines may need to be offered that protect individuals privacy, such as not using names when discussing some classroom issues.

✓ **Add to the discussion / Don't just repeat what has already been said.**

If you agree, but have a different reason for agreeing with a point, then it is appropriate to add that justification to the discussion. If you disagree, but have a different reason for disagreeing, than it may be appropriate to add this to the discussion. This guideline is intended to focus students on listening to what others are saying, thinking about what has already been said; analyzing, synthesizing, and responding to the information.