



LESSON PLAN: THINK BEFORE YOU ACT

OVERVIEW: Students begin by articulating their values regarding conduct toward others and fashioning their statements into a class “code of ethics.” They next consider reasons why they sometimes stray from their values and participate in hurtful behavior, and generate alternative ways to express their feelings when tempted or pressured to bully. Students also consider the feelings of those who are targeted for bullying, and apply what they have learned through reflection on two bullying scenarios.

OBJECTIVES:

- Students will be able to articulate their values regarding conduct toward others and describe why they sometimes behave in ways that conflict with their values
- Students will be able to identify alternative ways to express their feelings when they are feeling tempted or pressured to bully others
- Students will be able to describe what it means to have empathy for those who are targeted for name-calling and bullying

AGE/EXPERIENCE LEVEL: Grades: 6-8

TIME: 75-90 minutes or two class periods

MATERIALS: Chart paper/markers; pens; Student handout: Think Before You Act

PROCEDURE:

Note: This activity can be done with the whole class, but may be most effective in a structured space with a small group of students. The lesson is especially useful for those who have regularly participated in name-calling or bullying, and student allies who will model positive behavior during the activity.

PART 1—INTRODUCING THE ACTIVITY (20 MINUTES)

Post the following quote on the board:

“This is the sum of duty: do naught to others which if done to thee would cause thee pain.”
— from The Mahabharata, an ancient religious and historical text from India



Tell students that these words are 7,000 years old, yet they apply today as much as ever. They represent a code of ethics, or specific values that guide our beliefs and behavior toward others. Point out that it is important for us to reflect on our own personal code of ethics and discuss those values that we agree to abide by when we are with others in school, at home, and in other settings. Ask students to write one statement that reflects their values regarding conduct toward others. Have volunteers share their statements aloud and, together, fashion them into a class “code of ethics” that can be posted in the classroom.

PART 2—ALTERNATIVES TO BULLYING BEHAVIOR (25 MINUTES)

Read the following questions aloud and ask students to mentally reflect on their answers.

Have you ever...

- Put down someone who did not fit in socially?
- Made fun of someone different than you?
- Told a joke based on race, religion, or sexual orientation?
- Verbalized a stereotype about a group of people?
- Spread a negative rumor or gossip?
- Told someone they were not included in an activity or social event?
- Threatened or verbally intimidated someone weaker than you?
- Followed up a cruel comment by physically touching or hurting another person?

Ask students to raise their hands if they answered ‘no’ to every question. (Presumably, few or none of your students will raise their hands). Tell students that all of us sometimes stray from our values and behave in ways that we know, deep down, are not right. Name-calling and bullying are examples of behaviors that we know are wrong, but that we sometimes participate in anyway.

Hang a sheet of chart paper at the front of the room and divide it into two columns with the following headings: “Reasons for bullying” and “Other ways to express your feelings.” Ask students to brainstorm some of the reasons why they sometimes participate in bullying behavior even though they know it is hurtful to others. Record their answers in the first column, making sure that the following reasons are included or addressed in some way:

- Expression of anger
- Retaliation or revenge
- Peer pressure and desire to be “popular”
- Need to appear or feel “cool” or better than others
- Prejudice or discomfort with differences

For each reason identified, ask students to generate alternatives to bullying and other ways to



express their feelings. For example, students who bully as an expression of anger might instead use “I-statements” to let others know how they feel, ask for support from a trusted friend or adult, or take a walk to clear their minds. Students who bully due to social pressures or the need to be popular might instead be confident and strong in telling others they will not participate, find interests or hobbies that make them feel good about themselves, or make friends who don’t care about appearances. Assign small groups one item each from column one and ask them to generate alternatives to bullying. Have them record their ideas in column two and share back to the whole class.

PART 3—STOP, THINK AND DECIDE (30-40 MINUTES)

In addition to reflecting on our motivations for bullying and alternative ways to express our feelings, emphasize the importance of considering the impact our actions will have on others before we act. Suggest that students use the “Stop, Think and Decide” method when they are feeling tempted or pressured to bully others.

- **STOP** means that when you feel the desire to bully others, you wait until you have thought about how they might feel.
- **THINK** means that you spend a minute or so imagining how the other person will feel.
- **DECIDE** means that you will decide whether or not to bully based on how you imagine the other person might feel.

Summarize the strategies you have discussed by telling students that when they feel tempted to bully or find themselves in a situation where others are encouraging them to bully, they can think about (a) their personal values; (b) their reasons for bullying; and (c) how it will make others feel before they act. Distribute the handout, *Think Before You Act*, which provides an overview of these ideas and asks students to apply them to two bullying situations by answering the following questions:

- How might this behavior conflict with personal values or school guidelines for personal conduct?
- How might the person who is bullied feel?
- What seems to be the reason behind the bullying? What do the people who are bullying get out of this and what would be a more appropriate way to for them to express their feelings?

Students can work on these questions individually or in small groups. Alternatively, you can substitute the scenarios on the handout with actual situations that your students have experienced or observed so that the application of concepts is more personal and realistic.



THINK BEFORE YOU ACT

When you feel tempted to bully or find yourself in a situation where peers are encouraging you to be mean to others, you have a choice. First, think about your personal values. What are your beliefs about the way others should be treated?

SAMPLE VALUE STATEMENTS

- Everyone should be treated with dignity and respect.
- Judge people by what’s inside them, not by how they look.
- Ask before teasing or joking and accept it when someone says no or stop.
- Respect the value of all people and do not ridicule others.

Second, think about your reasons for bullying and alternative ways to express your feelings.

REASONS FOR BULLYING...	OTHER WAYS TO EXPRESS YOUR FEELINGS...
Bad mood or temper; expression of anger or sadness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use “I Statements” to let others know how you feel and why • Get support from a trusted friend or adult • Take a walk and clear your mind
Desire to feel or appear “cool” or better than others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Find interests or hobbies that make you feel good about yourself • Make friends who don’t care about appearances
Prejudice or discomfort with differences in others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read books about the differences that make you uncomfortable • Talk to a teacher, counselor or parent about your attitudes
Desire to get back at or defend yourself from others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use “I Statements” to let others know how you feel and why • Get advice from a teacher, counselor or parent • Avoid or ignore the person or situation
Pressure from others to go along with negative behavior	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be confident and strong in telling others you will not participate • Make friends who are kind to others • Get advice from a teacher, counselor or parent



Third, think about how your actions might affect others. The Stop, Think, and Decide strategy can help you with this.

- STOP means that when you feel the desire to bully others, you wait until you have thought about how they might feel.
- THINK means that you spend a minute or so imagining how the other person will feel.
- DECIDE means that you will decide whether or not to bully based on how you imagine the other person might feel.

Think about the information above as you respond to the following scenarios so that you will be prepared to “think before you act” when real situations arise:

1. Megan, Sherry, and Talia have been inseparable since the third grade. Now in eighth grade, they are all cheerleaders and serve on the yearbook committee as well. Another thing they have in common is their dislike for Katia, the new girl in their homeroom. Katia recently moved from Russia and tried to make friends with Megan, who lives on her block. When Katia greeted Megan in homeroom one morning, Megan told her to learn English before talking to them. Since that day, all three girls have made daily insults to Katia about her accent, her language skills, and her clothes. Katia has tried to ignore these comments, but they keep coming anyway.

How might this behavior conflict with personal values or school guidelines for personal conduct?

How might the person who is bullied feel?

What seems to be the reason behind the bullying? What do the people who are bullying get out of this and what would be a more appropriate way to for them to express their feelings?



2. Jimmy is a rather slight sixth grader, who is not very coordinated and is usually picked last when his classmates are choosing teams in gym. At lunch one day, Jimmy slipped on a freshly mopped floor, which sent him and his lunch tray flying. One of his classmates patted him on the back and commented, “Nice going, spaz!,” which caused the other students to howl. As Jimmy collected the strewn items from the floor, he noticed another student looking his way. “What are you looking at, fatso?,” he yelled at the student. “Why don’t you just feed your fat face and mind your business?” Again, the other students laughed.

How might this behavior conflict with personal values or school guidelines for personal conduct?

How might the people who are bullied feel?

What seems to be the reason behind the bullying? What do the people who are bullying get out of this and what would be a more appropriate way to for them to express their feelings?

The “Sample Value Statements” and “Stop, Think and Decide” strategy are from *Teasing and Harassment: The Frames and Scripts Approach for Teachers and Parents* by John H. Hoover and Glenn W. Olsen, National Education Service (2001).