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 to grow your classroom culture. In creating and reviewing each of the guidelines, students can be prompted to think of examples, and model them, to show they understand the concept.

Here are a few guidelines you may use or work toward in your discussion.

Everyone should be able to feel safe - no put downs

Some issues can be sensitive for some individuals. Students should be encouraged to think carefully about what they say and how they 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. Engagement is usually indicated by leaning forward and looking at the speaker; signs of disengagement can include sighing, excessive throat clearing, leaning back, crossed arms, looking at the floor or around the room, tapping or playing with objects. A bully may engage in this behaviour only when a particular individual is speaking, in order to signal that what the person has to say has no value.

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Promote active listening by encouraging listeners to look at the speaker. Give a general description of appropriate body language, and talk about enabling others to listen by remaining quiet and not making unnecessary 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 "Yeah, sure" or "Oh, right" which can be used by a 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. You may need to act as a moderator for the discussion.

Discussions are for the exploration of ideas and learning new things

The purpose of the discussion is to stimulate ideas and encourage new thinking. It's okay 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 nurture new concept formation.

Respect each other's opinions - agree to disagree respectfully

Sometimes in a discussion there is no "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. A 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.

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's stupid" is an opinion, but it may best be expressed in another format, perhaps by talking about the reasons for the opinion.

Instead of criticizing, students should be encouraged to offer an alternative viewpoint and justify it without making a direct comparison i.e. instead of "Chocolate ice cream is better than vanilla because vanilla is boring" 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.

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Consider confidentiality

Some discussions need to focus on confidentiality. In these cases, it may need to be made clear that what is talked about in the discussion is not to be talked about outside of it, except perhaps with parents or trusted adults. Emphasize that gossip is inappropriate, and information from the discussion should not be used elsewhere, such as follow-up activities or on the playground. With this ground rule established, discussion participants can be encouraged to recognize and stop bullying by intervening when gossip occurs, or when someone is abusing information gained 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 made clear.

Stay on topic

Some students may bring into discussions stories and examples 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 established that protect individual 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 someone agrees or disagrees with a point, and has a different reason for agreeing or disagreeing, then it may be appropriate to add that reason to the discussion. This guideline may help focus students on listening to what others are saying, and then analyzing, synthesizing, and responding to the information.

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