

# Empowering Bystanders

*from expert Rosalind Wiseman – Creating Cultures of Dignity*

## **Being a bystander:**

It's not like any of us look forward to the opportunity of confronting a bully. Ironically, it can often be harder to confront a bully we're close to than someone we don't know or don't like. And no matter how you feel about the bully or the target, it can be easy to stay silent because you don't want the abuse directed at you.

But here are three inescapable facts:

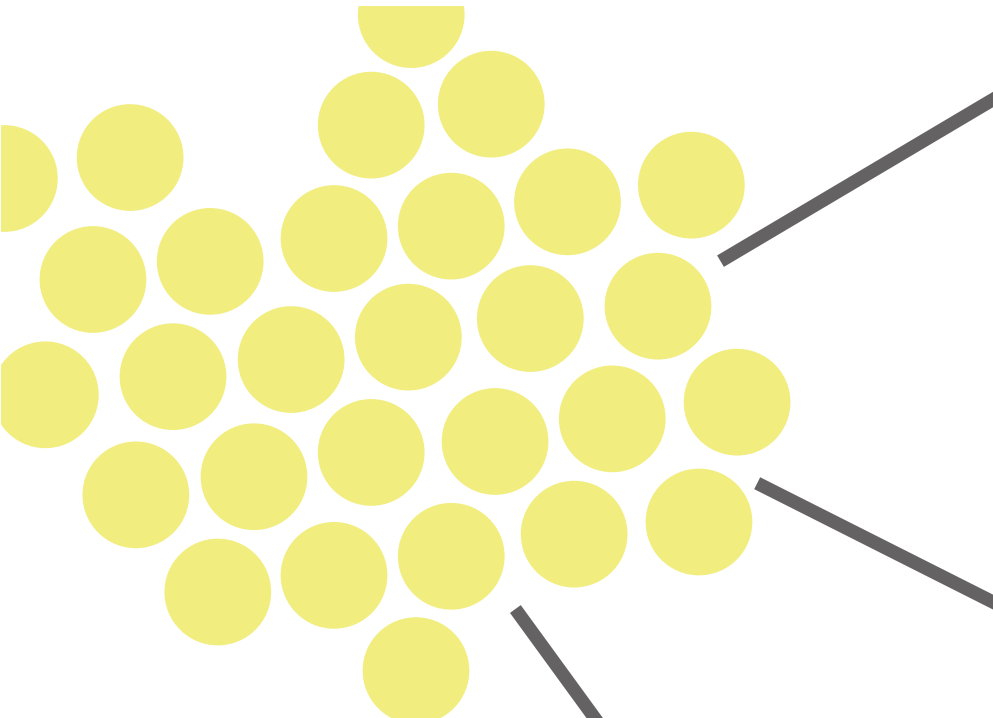
- Almost all of us will be in a situation at some point of our lives where we see someone bully someone else.
- Bystanders often decide to get involved based on their feelings toward the bully and/or the target. If you like the bully then you are more likely to excuse the behavior. If you think the target is annoying, then you'll more easily believe the target was asking for it. But a bystander's decision to get involved should be based on the merits of the problem, not on their relationship to the people.
- In that moment, we will have three choices. 1. Reinforce the abuse of power by supporting the bully; 2. Stay neutral—which looks like you're either intimidated by the bully yourself or you support their actions; 3. Act in some way that confronts the bully's abuse of power.

## **In the face of seeing someone bullied, here are some common reactions:**

- Deny it's going on.
- Distract yourself so it looks like you don't know what's going on. And if you don't know then you have no obligation to do stop it.
  - Remove yourself from the situation.
  - Laugh to try to convince yourself that what's going on isn't serious.
  - Join in the bullying, because it's safer to be on the side of the person with the most power.
  - Ignore it in the hope that it will go away.

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### **What do you do if you are a bystander?**

Even if you aren't proud of how you handled the bullying when it occurred, it's important to recognize how hard it is to know what to do in the moment. But that fact doesn't mean it's too late now to speak out. Especially if you are friends with the bully, reaching out to him is actually the ultimate sign of your friendship.

### **Supporting someone who's been bullied.**

Say, "I'm sorry that happened to you, do you want to tell me about it?" Don't tell them what they should have done or what you would have done. Listen and help them think through how to address the problem effectively. And if they ask you to back them up the next time it happens, ask them what that looks like to them. If it means upholding their right to be treated with dignity and not getting revenge on the bully, then do it.

### **Supporting someone who is being the bully**

In your own words say something like, "This is uncomfortable to talk about but yesterday when you sent that picture of Dave you know that really embarrassed him. And I know I laughed and I know he can be annoying but it's still wrong. If you do it again I'm not going to back you up." Yes, the bully is going to push back, make you uncomfortable, try to get you on her side but remember what happened and why you feel like the bully's actions were wrong.

### **Why are bystanders so reluctant to come forward?**

Let's move away from the bystanders and focus on the adults. The prevailing explanation of why kids won't come forward is because there's a code of silence that forbids them. No one wants to be a snitch. While there's some truth in that—I think just as powerful a reason for kids' silence is because the adults haven't created an environment where kids think reporting will make the problem better instead of worse. Yet, the most common advice we give to bystanders is to tell an adult. Like it or not, the truth is it's not good enough to tell kids to tell an adult.

Telling an adult won't magically solve the problem. What far too many kids know and experience on a daily basis but we deny is that far too many adults are ill-equipped to respond effectively and often only cause the child to give up on adults entirely. Furthermore, the very way a lot of adults treat young people— in a condescending or dominant (i.e. "bullying") manner — makes it impossible for children to have any confidence in our ability to be effective advocates.