

Christians and Bullying Prevention

By Warren Throckmorton, PhD

Age range:

7-12 grades

Lesson Objectives:

- 1) To make students aware of the consequences of bullying
- 2) To make students aware that bullying is a spiritual and moral problem
- 3) To apply relevant Scriptures, featuring the Golden Rule.
- 4) To motivate students to respect the feelings of others in the same way they want their own feelings respected as a part of their respect and love of God.

Background

Studies demonstrate that most of the students in the group will have bullied someone, been bullied by someone or watched it happen (i.e., a bystander). Most of the time bullying takes place at school, although it can happen just about anywhere kids congregate, including youth group. Being a bully can seem empowering to a teen but is of course harmful to others and the bully too. It is also a spiritual issue and should be considered a violation of Christian teaching on meekness, kindness, civility, patience and love.

Being bullied can be devastating to the self-confidence of the victim and lead to many negative consequences, including suicide. Bystanders are also harmed. Those who watch and do not intervene can gradually lull themselves into an attitude that such behavior is acceptable, becoming less assertive.

Christians should lead the way in making schools safe. The teaching and example of Jesus should lead Christian youth to champion respect and fairness for all of their peers, even those who disagree with them on matters of religion and belief.

This lesson could be expanded or shortened depending on time allowed for youth programming. The times are based on an 80-90 minute session. This could also be the second half of a two part series. The first part would involve an extended discussion involving one of the Bullying Role Play exercises or The Freshman in the Lunchroom skit ([available for free download here](#)).

Prayer (5 min)

Group Time (10-15 min) Disrespect in action

Ask the group to consider whether they would come to someone's aid if they were being bullied. Discuss this for a few minutes. Then act out one of the Bullying Role Play exercises or The Freshman in the Lunchroom skit ([available for free download here](#)).

The role play and skit ask participants to identify the roles in a bullying drama. Then you are to ask them, which roles should be chosen by bystanders? Most students will endorse the Defender role. However, in practice, we know that most students do not defend victims of bullying. Why not? This leads to the next section.

Thinking Time (15 Minutes)

Possible introduction: The Bible has something to say about what goes on when someone is the victim of bullying. Sometimes we excuse bullying: it is a normal part of school, boys just do that or girls are mean like that sometimes, or the victim deserved it. Some of us possibly have actually bullied others, others have been the victim of bullying and most of us have witnessed someone being bullied. But we will see that God wants us to respect others no matter what the situation is and he wants us to stand up for those who need help.

Discussion questions:

1. What is bullying and what are examples of it?
2. What role should a Christian take in a situation where someone is getting bullied?
3. Why don't more of us defend those who are being bullied?
4. Should our helping depend on the reason someone is being bullied?

Bullying is when someone repeatedly and on purpose says or does mean or hurtful things to another person who has a hard time defending himself or herself.ⁱ

Most of us believe we should defend a victim and prevent bullying, but most students don't actually do so. Some research tells us that many students want to help but don't know how to do it. As we have discussed, there are many reasons why students don't do that. But these reasons do not change our calling to reach out and help others. Our great example, Jesus stood up for people who were being ridiculed and hurt and he taught us to do the same. Name calling (e.g., using the words gay, fag or homo, using racial slurs), teasing (e.g., making fun of someone's appearance or mannerisms), and/or social aggression (excluding people, gossiping, use of social media) are all forms of bullying which compromise our call to treat others the way we want to be treated.

Study Time (30 Minutes)

When Jesus was at the well in Samaria, he entered into a conversation with a Samaritan woman (Review the story if your group does not know it). There was racial tension between Jews and Samaritans and most of the time, and they did not interact. However, Jesus knew no bias. He reached out to her as one who was made in His image. She also was not morally pure and yet Jesus did not put her down or speak disrespectfully to her.

If you grew up in church, you probably sang the Zacchaeus song (Zacchaeus was a wee little man, etc). Zach was a tax collector and they were hated then because they were either dishonest or rumored to be. Jesus spoke directly and respectfully to him and had supper at his house. Jesus critics thought he was loose morally because he hung out with people no one else liked much. Time after time, Jesus demonstrated the attitudes He taught us to have. On one occasion, the Jewish leaders brought an adulterous woman to him. They were ready to kill her. Jesus stuck up for her and reminded everyone there and us now, that no one is above grace and mercy.

The teaching of Jesus reinforced his actions. Have someone read Mark 12:28-31:

28 One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"

29 "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. **30** Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' **31** The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these." Mark 12:28-31 (ESV)

These are powerful words and help orient us to our prime directives on the planet. Love for God and neighbor. How can we do this – love others as ourselves? He gave us a strategy via what we often call the Golden Rule:

"So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets." Matt. 7:12 (ESV)

Our job seems more obvious in light of these teachings. You don't want to be bullied? Then don't bully. You want someone to help you if you are being bullied? Then help someone else, don't be a disinterested bystander, be a defender. You want respect? Then give it. You don't want to be called names? Then don't call others names.

Finally, the book of James in chapter 3 gives us another basis for mutual respect

7For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, **8**but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil,

full of deadly poison. 9With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. 10From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. 11Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? 12Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water. James 3:7-12 (ESV)

Notice that this teaching is general. It is meant to be applied to all people, since all people are made in God's likeness. This teaching is very relevant since much bullying is verbal. Verse nine is a picture of how those outside the church see us when we engage in disrespect, bias and bullying for any reason. They see us blessing and praising God but hating on those with whom we disagree. When it comes to respect and compassion, we are called to give it to people of all religions, races and sexual orientations. One school administrator observed this about some church kids in school

“Some of the kids who are leaders in church groups are coming to school and exhibiting behavior that is atrocious.” – Tom Bell, Allied News, 9/1/10

Let those words sink in a little bit. What would the teachers and administrators at your school say about you? Would there be any evidence that you kept the Golden Rule? That you loved your neighbor? What would they say about how you related to kids of different races, religions or sexual orientations? The real test as Jesus taught, is not how you treat your friends and your youth group but how you treat everybody else.

Application Time (10 Minutes)

What can we do? Take some time to reflect on how these Bible lessons can change our behavior and what that would look like in our schools. Help students brainstorm what kind of differences they could make in their schools and other social groups.

Some groups break out into small groups for this kind of time. This is often effective and can form the basis for brief sharing of commitments before the closing.

A particularly pertinent application of this lesson would be to point out that slurs involving sexual orientation are not acceptable for Christians to use. Many people don't give this much thought and sometimes see gays and lesbians as acceptable targets for name calling and uncivil treatment. However, being different or disagreeing with someone does not mean that the Golden Rule no longer applies. Christ taught us in Luke 6:31 to treat others the way we want to be treated.

We don't like being stereotyped as Christians, so it seems likely that people in other groups don't like being negatively stereotyped. There are many biases which can form the basis for name calling and harassment in addition to sexual orientation, such as race, religion, appearance, etc. In all cases, using hostile names creates a threatening environment and is not consistent with our teaching. If you don't like stereotyping, then don't do it to others. If you don't want to attend school in a hostile climate, then work to make school a peaceful place for all.

Commitment Time (10 Minutes)

Ask students to commit to living out the Golden Rule. You could give each student a Golden Rule Pledge card as a reminder if you think this would be effective. In addition or as an alternative, you could make this a part of their accountability small groups if you have them. One time pledges have not been demonstrated to alter behavior appreciably over time so repeated "doses" of this message will be necessary.

You should offer to talk to any student who is a bully, a victim or a bystander privately in order to coach them through the process of getting help to change, to prevent bullying or intervening when needed.

Closing Meditation and/or Prayer

ⁱ Taken from the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program. www.olweus.org