Professional learning: Bystanders to student bullying

Encouraging safe and supportive bystander behaviour by students involves:

- teaching students how to use appropriate strategies
- developing staff knowledge and skills
- fostering a positive school climate.

These activities provide an opportunity for professional learning related to students’ bystander behaviour. Each activity focuses on one of the aspects above. Select one or all activities as suits the needs of staff.

Duration will depend on how many activities are undertaken and the depth of the discussion.

**Activity 1: Watch Our special superpower and discuss the strategies**

The short animated video for students (9 to 13 year olds) called *Our special superpower* (2½ minutes) explains who bystanders are and how their behaviour can either contribute to or help to stop bullying. It briefly outlines a range of strategies which can help in stopping bullying that include standing up to the bullying directly or supporting the student being bullied in other ways. It concludes with all students interacting in a positive and respectful way.

A classroom discussion starter is available for teachers to further unpack each of the strategies with students.

- Read the outline of *Our special superpower* (following page)
- Watch (and/or download) *Our special superpower animated video* (2:18 mins)
- Download the classroom discussion starter

Suggested questions for discussion

1. Do our students know the strategies for being safe and supportive bystanders?
2. Do we provide opportunities for students to practise these strategies?
3. How does our school communicate the message that staff understand that students may not feel safe standing up to bullying directly in some cases?
4. Is any training or support required for staff in our school to teach students these strategies?
5. Do students see adults in our school being safe and supportive bystanders? What actions do staff and other adults take as bystanders?
6. Do we avoid labelling students and instead describe their behaviour?
7. Are students (and parents) aware of our school’s policy? Are they aware of the school’s expectation that bystanders to bullying can help stop bullying behaviours, where they feel safe to do so?
### Outline of Our special superpower

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IMAGE</th>
<th>SCRIPT</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Did you know people who see bullying have a special superpower? They can help stop bullying.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Bullying is when someone uses ‘power’ they have over someone else to try to hurt or upset them again and again.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>The people who see bullying are called bystanders. Anyone can be a bystander — children, parents, teachers and other people who are around.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Some bystanders do things that make the bullying continue. They might join in or cheer someone on. Or they might do nothing and just watch.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Supportive bystanders use their power to try to stop the bullying. That could be defending or helping the person being bullied.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Most people don’t like to see bullying happening. But you might feel worried about what you can do. You can be worried that you might make it worse. Or maybe you think someone else should do something. Maybe you just don’t know what to do. Maybe you’re afraid about getting hurt yourself or being the next person to get bullied.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>You do need to stay safe. The best way to be safe is being part of a group. Together, the group can make it clear that the bullying is not okay. That’s really powerful!</td>
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<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Bystanders always have ways to use their power for good. If you feel safe to do so, you can stand up to the bullying. You can say ‘Just stop it’ in a cool and casual way.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IMAGE</td>
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<td>9.</td>
<td>You can say something to distract everyone, like ‘Hey, don’t we have to go practise for the game?’</td>
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<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>You can reduce the tension, saying something general like ‘Let’s try to keep things friendly, hey? No one likes that.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>You can challenge the bullying by saying something like ‘This isn’t fair, let’s all leave.’ (And make sure you take the person being bullied along with you.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>If you don’t feel safe to stand up to the bullying, you can still help. You can walk away, leave the space or chatroom. That way you don’t provide an audience for the person doing the bullying. Definitely don’t join in.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>You can tell an adult.</td>
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<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>You can report it to the site owner or the social media service.</td>
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<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>You can support the person being bullied at the time or talk to them later.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>When bystanders stand up to bullying together it is more likely to stop. So supportive bystanders really do have a special superpower. How will you use yours?</td>
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Activity 2: Read and discuss a journal article by Salmivalli

Professor Christina Salmivalli is a researcher from Finland who has worked in Australia at the Edith Cowan University in Western Australia. Her research interests include school bullying and evidence-based bullying prevention interventions. She has written extensively on this topic.

In this article, Salmivalli explores the various roles of those who are bystanders to bullying. She also discusses the risks and issues for bystanders in their decision to take a stand against bullying. The article highlights the important role of teachers in providing students with strategies for safe and supportive bystander behaviour, and in promoting an environment in which bullying is not rewarded or acceptable.

You can read or download the article here:


Suggested questions for discussion (with relevant text from the article)

1. How does our school respond to and manage incidents of bullying in terms of the various roles in bullying? ‘Bystander participant roles: reinforcer (of the bullying), assistant (of the bullying), outsider (silent approver), and defender (of the person being bullied).’ (page 287)

2. Does our school avoid using labels to talk about and to students? Throughout her article, Salmivalli labels students involved in the bullying interaction in order to present her research findings. However, using the labels of ‘bully’, ‘victim’, ‘bystander’ with students is not helpful. It can reinforce negative roles. Describing the behaviour of students supports a focus on a strength-based approach and encourages changing behaviour.

3. Research suggests that ‘bystanders reward bullying, even if anti-bullying attitudes are common amongst school aged children and youth’ (page 288). What does this mean for how our school directly teaches safe and supportive strategies for students to use if they see bullying? Also, what does it mean about how we communicate to students that staff understand their need to assess their own safety?

4. ‘Pluralistic ignorance’ means that if no one challenges the bullying, then students can come to (falsely) perceive each other as approving it (see page 287). Does ‘pluralistic ignorance’ play a role in our school? What does this mean for staff (and other adults’) responses as bystanders, particularly if adults do not intervene if they witness or are aware of bullying?

5. Do the actions of our teachers and other adults promote positive social norms amongst students regarding bullying? ‘Teachers’ efforts to intervene in bullying, or lack of such efforts, may affect classroom norms regarding bullying and related behaviours … When the reward structure of the classroom changes, supporting and defending [those children who are bullied] can actually become reinforced and rewarded.’ (page 288)

6. Does our school ensure a focus on both prevention and responding to bullying? For example, does our school respond to bullying more than it works to prevent bullying from happening in the first place? The article suggests: ‘Focusing on bystanders in bullying prevention/intervention work does not mean that individuals [who bully others] should not be targeted at all.’ (page 290)
Activity 3: Focus on fostering a positive school climate

Ensuring a shared approach by school staff to countering bullying is essential in fostering a positive school climate. Within a school community, adults’ efforts to intervene in bullying, or lack of such efforts, may affect the school norms regarding bullying and related behaviours. Promoting positive behaviour and demonstrating respect for all members of the school community are central to a positive school climate.

Suggested questions for discussion

1. Have we included the definition of bullying in our school’s policy (or other documents)? Do students, staff and parents all share this understanding of bullying and engage with the school’s policy? Does our policy specifically mention the role of bystanders?
2. How do we highlight and communicate our expectations about the behaviour of students (and others) who see bullying?
3. How does our school teach and support students to respond in a safe and supportive way if they see bullying? How do we model supportive bystander behaviour as staff?
4. Does our school avoid using the labels of ‘bully’, ‘victim’ and ‘bystander’ to talk about and to students? Do we describe their behaviour instead and encourage changing this behaviour?
5. Do staff feel well-equipped to teach safe and supportive bystander behaviours to students? Does our school provide professional learning for teachers on responding and preventing bullying, including how to promote safe and supportive bystander behaviour?
6. How does our school communicate to students that staff understand and will respect their need to assess how safe it is for them to stand up to bullying they see?
7. How do we implement practices to restore relationships between students after our immediate responses to bullying?
8. Do the school’s immediate and long-term responses to bullying take into account impacts on existing power imbalances, and on the ongoing relationships between students, including the bystanders?
9. Does the school seek out and act on students’ feedback on the helpfulness of actions taken by the school to address bullying?
10. How do we involve staff and other adults in our school community in promoting a positive school climate that encourages safe and supportive bystander behaviour?

Conclusion

Conclude the staff development discussion by considering the question:

- Have we identified the key issues for our school and the next steps for us in our bullying prevention approach?