

# ▶ Voices: Sensitivity to Others

## FOCUS

To explore the reasons why people do not always intervene when confronted with bullying behavior.

---

## LESSON COMPONENTS

Discussion | Reading | Journaling

## MATERIALS

Student handouts

**Sensitivity to Others Continuum**  
**Voices: True Stories from Students**  
(3 pages)

## PROCESS

① Through an open class discussion ask students to be as honest as they can in listing the labels that are being placed on groups of students and individual students. As they do, list these terms on the board and group them by category when possible.

② Explain the background behind Martin Niemöller's poem, *First They Came For*. Then, read the poem to the class.

*First They Came For ...* is a famous statement and provocative poem attributed to pastor Martin Niemöller (1892–1984) about the cowardice of German intellectuals following the Nazis' rise to power and the subsequent purging of their chosen targets, group after group. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum quotes the text as one of the many poetic statements that captures the inhumanity of the times.

### **First They Came For...**

First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—  
Because I was not a Socialist.  
Then they came for the Trade Unionists,

and I did not speak out—  
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.  
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—  
Because I was not a Jew.  
Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn't speak out—  
Because I was a Protestant.  
Then they came for me—  
and there was no one left to speak for me.

③ Read the poem again, this time inserting the labels that the students have listed in place of the labels Martin Niemöller uses. Explain the two objectives of the lesson: To explore the reasons why people do not always intervene when confronted with bullying behavior and to learn how to take steps to confront bullying behavior.

④ Introduce the **Sensitivity to Others Continuum**. Share examples or elicit responses from students that demonstrate each stage of the continuum.

⑤ Use any of the strategies listed below to teach and reinforce the **Sensitivity to Others Continuum**.

- Have students read the handout, **Voices: True Stories from Students**. Through small group or class discussion or a writing assignment, ask students to identify stories that illustrate each of the stages on the continuum.
- Gather similar stories from students and staff. Lead with the statement,

“Describe a situation where you were the bully, the bullied or the bystander.”

- Have students keep a journal for one month documenting experiences and observations that illustrate the concepts on the continuum.

# Sensitivity to Others Continuum

***"Nothing in all the world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity."*** –Martin Luther King, Jr.

The Sensitivity to Others Continuum highlights the idea that as people we need to heighten our awareness of what is hurting people (our sincere ignorance), and we need to speak up when we know something is wrong (stop conscientious stupidity). It is a difficult challenge. Often it is easier to say nothing and do nothing rather than say, "Stop!" It is sometimes difficult to face the reality and admit we have been insensitive. No one is perfect. Situations may cause us to move up or down the continuum. A positive leader should always strive towards sensitivity.



<b>REACHING OUT</b>	<p>You go out of your comfort zone to help others, stop wrongs, get involved and do the right thing.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accepting and APPRECIATING differences.</li> <li>• Taking the time to really LISTEN.</li> <li>• Verbally ENCOURAGING others.</li> <li>• BECOMING "other-centered" rather than "me-centered."</li> <li>• Using your eyes and heart to SEE people in need.</li> <li>• Being APPROACHABLE because you are trustworthy and honorable.</li> </ul>
<b>COMMUNICATING DISAPPROVAL</b>	<p>You show disapproval by using words or physically removing yourself from a situation.</p> <p>"If you plan on teasing him in class today, I'm not going to sit by you."</p>
<b>SILENT DISAPPROVAL</b>	<p>You don't agree with what is happening, but you feel powerless to do anything, or lack the courage.</p> <p>"I didn't do anything, I just watched."</p>
<b>SURVIVAL</b>	<p>You are unable to do anything to help others because you are just trying to get through the day. You are not feeling emotionally or physically safe.</p>
<b>APATHY</b>	<p>You are aware, but unconcerned or indifferent. You don't care enough about the situation to give it any of your attention.</p>
<b>ACTIVE APPROVAL</b>	<p>You are the offender: bullying, tormenting, tearing down and encouraging others to be insensitive.</p>

***"The greatest sin of our time is not the few who have destroyed, but the vast majority who have sat idly by."*** –Martin Luther King, Jr.

## VOICES: True Stories from Students

**W**hen I was in middle school, I had a large group of really good friends. In this group, one of our favorite things to do was to make up secret nicknames for certain people that they didn't know about. I always played along enjoying the fact that I was involved. One day, all of my friends had a new person they were talking about, but I didn't recognize the name. Soon enough, I found out that person was me. I was so hurt by what they had said. I finally had enough courage to confront them. At first they denied it, but they ran out of excuses. With time, I got over it and decided to forgive. This experience was emotionally painful. It made me stronger as a person. More importantly, I now know how it feels to be made fun of. I choose to not always follow the crowd, which I hope other people get to learn the easy way.

**A** semi-autistic boy started school in our 6th grade classroom. We all welcomed him and made him feel happy to be at school. But, later in the year, after many days of sneaky teasing and constant, inappropriate treatment from a group of boys from our class, he no longer wanted to be at school. He would spend hours on the weekend crying and having hysterical fits because he did not want to go back to "that place." (This was his first year ever in a school setting!!!)

**W**hen I was in 6th grade, there was a boy everyone made fun of. He was the "nerd." Sadly, I was part of the group who taunted him day in, and day out, until one day, he switched schools. No one knew where he went until high school. He suddenly showed up in my freshman English class. No one remembered him because over the past three years he had completely changed. It wasn't until a class project that we remembered who he was and realized all the pain he had gone through in 6th grade. He wrote a story of a young boy who was cruelly taunted throughout the 6th grade and eventually felt hurt enough to switch schools. As he read his story, the tales he was telling were as clear as day. I remembered each word and action we had done to this boy. After class I walked up to him and apologized for everything my so-called "friends" and I had done. He didn't say anything, but I knew from the look in his eyes that it was a sense of closure for him. I finally understood the results of my actions.

**M**y sister was attending a new school and soon encountered other students that were both subtly and obviously cruel. One day, the teacher finally pulled a girl aside before recess and asked if she would please play with my sister. In front of my sister, she said "No," and walked away. The girl and her friends spent most recesses literally running away from my sister or another victim of choice! My sister probably missed at least seven weeks of school that year. She pretended to be sick so she wouldn't have to deal with those girls.

**T**here was a gift exchange at Christmas. One student brought a Barbie coloring book. Exchanging gifts was allowed and every student kept exchanging the Barbie coloring book. The person who brought the coloring book was in tears because nobody wanted her gift. Nobody thought about gracefully accepting the coloring book; instead it turned into a giant inside joke at the expense of one person.

**W**hen I was in middle school, I had problems with suicide and needed help. When I would try to talk to people, no one would listen. I was alone and scared. No one believed me. They said, "Go ahead, cut your wrists, we don't care. It doesn't matter to us." It broke me and I tried a number of times to take my life. Luckily, I never succeeded.

**F**riends are not always kind to each other. Sometimes they are downright mean. There was a girl that had a problem with body odor. Her "friend", instead of talking privately to her about it, gave her a bag with deodorant in it in front of everyone. She turned it into a big drama, almost a joke, instead of truly helping the girl.

## VOICES: True Stories from Students (continued)

**T**here is an autistic boy in my school who is made fun of a lot. I used to join in, until I remembered that my sister has Down syndrome and it hurts when people pick on her. I now speak up anytime I see someone picking on a special needs student. I also ask people to stop using the word "retarded."

**"C**heezy Louisey" is what we called her, and I was the President of the I-Hate-Louise-Club. We would trip her in the hall, spray ourselves with imaginary germ spray when she walked by, and would laugh at her when she sat alone in the lunch room. One afternoon I put a mean letter in her locker, not knowing that the principal was watching. He read the letter to my parents and to Louise's parents. I then had to apologize to Louise. I cried more than she did that day because I finally realized Louise was a person who had a heart with feeling too.

**W**hen I was in high school I saw a large circle of people forming around some kids. As I approached the circle, I saw some of the football and basketball players flicking pennies at some special education students and chanting "dance, retards, dance." I was horrified. Horrified that they would do such a thing, and horrified that nobody was stepping in to speak up for the kids getting picked on. I realized that if I didn't do something, nobody would. Even though I was scared, I jumped in the middle and started yelling at the boys to stop. They rolled their eyes at me, but at least they stopped tormenting the other students. I can't imagine what it must have felt like to be the target of that humiliation and the fear and confusion those students must have felt.

**I**was in middle school when everyone started teasing a girl. I was the ringleader. A lot of things were happening to me at home that made me a bully. It is not an excuse, but I know now why I was so mean teasing this girl. We called her every ugly term we could think of every day. In the middle of the year, my family moved. My parents told me, "You have a chance to reinvent yourself at this school. Nobody expects you to be the bully because they don't know you." I changed. I was lucky. I just stopped being mean and started to be nice. Years later when I was in college I was at a volleyball game with my girlfriend. I saw playing on the other team the girl we had so unmercifully tormented. She was beautiful. I really wanted to introduce myself and apologize for what I had done years earlier, but I just couldn't bring myself to do it. I was too ashamed of myself. I still am for that part of my life.

**W**e had a small school. I was known for my wicked humor. I used it as a shield and as a weapon. I had a best friend since kindergarten, and I used it on her at times as well, but we were really good friends. When we got into high school, there were so many more kids to become friends with. My best friend left me...and she should have. I was not a best friend to her. I've always regretted losing this friendship because it was important to me, but my careless humor in reality gave me what I deserved.

**I**'ve always been the girl with the funny name: Nantaporn. And yeah, I understand why people poke fun at it: Nanty Panty, Horny Porny, My Little Porny. I used to resent it. I'd insist on being called by my nickname, Nanty. I just laughed along so they all thought I was cool with it. They did, but I hated it. I wanted to only be Nanty, this Nantaporn girl wasn't me. It took me years to finally become Nantaporn. But now I am Nantaporn. I'm Nantaporn to the colleges I apply to, the doctors I use, and to the substitutes that can't pronounce my name. I'm proud now, but it's been a long time coming.

**O**ur school was a "bully free" space. Even the "weirdoes" like me were generally tolerated as long as we didn't get funny aspirations about climbing the social ladder. But, the autistics, the slow talkers, the stutterers...they got picked on. Did I ever defend them? Of course not. I was too

## VOICES: True Stories from Students (continued)

grateful to have escaped their ranks by being in a permissible level of eccentricity. I was scared.

**W**hen I was in third grade I didn't have any friends in my class. I was never invited to join in the games, make believe, tag, four square, or jump rope. When I asked to play, they would come up with a quick excuse of why I couldn't: "too many people" or "we already started." It was a never ending cycle that left me crying in the hallway. When a new girl joined our class, I was quick to pounce on even the opportunity of a friend. Her name was Wendy and soon we became friends. I finally had someone to play with. About six months later, another new girl joined our class. At recess, I noticed the new girl sitting by herself. Remembering how horrible it felt to be an outcast I said to Wendy: "Let's invite her to play with us." Wendy quickly shot me down. "No, just look at her, she's weird." I was shocked. I couldn't believe that my fellow outcast was outcasting another. I walked straight over to the girl sitting by herself and said, "I'm playing horses, wanna join?" I could not believe the huge smile that crossed the girl's face or Wendy's bright red face as she looked at me in horror at what I had just done. It felt good to stand up for the new girl and we're still good friends to this day.

**I**n fifth grade I bullied a girl for absolutely no reason at all. I suppose at the time I didn't even realize that I was bullying her, but I knew for a fact that I was treating her disrespectfully. The people that I hung out with didn't like her so I thought that the only way these people that I wanted to be friends with would like me was by being mean to this girl. I said things so mean that I made her cry. Thinking about it now breaks my heart. It was six years ago but it saddens me deeply to know that I had it in me to hurt somebody else so badly simply with words and thoughts that weren't even mine. It was truly horrible.

**B**allet class is a constant struggle for anyone. However, when the regular challenges are added to by cruel insults and teasing words, its simply unbearable. I understand now how Maggie must have felt, but back then I thought nothing of it. She was constantly teased for her looks and I stood on the side and did nothing to stop it. Maggie was a plump, quiet girl, older than the rest of us but she looked younger. One day, a girl in my ballet class began joking about her weight, in what seemed like a harmless manner. Quickly, the teasing escalated into full-on bullying. Poor Maggie didn't know what to do; she had no idea of how to handle the situation. When we came back from winter break, the teacher called roll but didn't call Maggie's name. She never came back. I wish I could go back and change what happened.

**I**carpooned to school with a few girls every morning during middle school. You know the feeling that someone is talking bad about you. Well that was the vibe I got every morning for the awful half hour ride to school. I could just tell that the other girls didn't like me. Whenever I said something, they would giggle and seemed to have some inside joke. I didn't and still don't know what I did wrong to make them hate me so much. They even created a secret language that they would speak in all the time so that I couldn't understand what they were saying about me. It was tortuous knowing that someone was gossiping about me in the same car I was in and I didn't know what they were saying.