

the bystander's role in violence prevention

Concerns about bias crime, school shootings, and safety draw attention to the role bystanders can play in preventing violence in public. Bystander interventions are equally important in personal relationships and can help decrease abuse.

Recent research into the role of the bystander suggests that bystanders can significantly reduce the occurrence and severity of violence in different circumstances, from violence in relationships, to verbal harassment, to physical attacks, to threats and use of weapons. We feel that this is an important area to explore with LGBTQ youth, who often experience and witness a range of abuse. Community intervention can de-escalate situations, demonstrate solidarity, and build community strength.

When considering the role of the bystander, it is important to remember that there will be some situations where you feel you cannot become involved safely. This is not unusual, and your priority has to be to keep yourself safe.

DISCUSSION

Why do we want to talk to youth about taking an active role when they are bystanders to violent or potentially violent situations? What positive outcomes could come of their intervention?

- It reminds all of us that an intervention can help prevent a situation from escalating or can help prevent someone from getting hurt.
- To remind young people of their own power and importance, and let them know they don't have to just watch or let things happen. They can take a stand, and something positive can come from their courageous action.
- To get the community involved in preventing violence before it happens. Intervention can occur at various points before verbal attacks escalate to physical violence.
- We can help make individuals more aware and less tolerant of behaviors that may lead to violence.
- By involving friends, roommates and youth workers, the blame is no longer focused on the person who was hurt—the community takes responsibility, and is empowered to act.
- By involving the community, social norms can change.

Following are some more specific discussion topics about the role of the bystander that you can go over with youth.

To begin the discussion, you can ask your group, “What are some of the reasons to take action as a bystander?” Some possible responses are:

- To allow time/opportunity for the defender to escape or get to a safe place
- To get the attention of others
- To support the person being hurt
- To educate about bias

Some more personal responses are:

- Caring about the person/people involved
- Feeling that someone has to do something
- Knowing how important it is to know someone is on your side
- Taking a personal stand against violence

INDIRECT AND DIRECT INTERVENTION

Before going into concrete ways to take action, discuss the spectrum of actions: from *direct intervention*, in which you step in and ask/say/do something, and *indirect intervention*, in which you call someone’s friends to get them to break up the situation; threaten to call law enforcement* if that is appropriate to the situation; or provide some sort of education or information that helps to change the abuser’s attitude or behavior. All kinds of intervention can be powerful. It is up to the individual to decide which is safer and more useful in any given situation in which they witness violence. Use our Bystander Continuum of Courage to help demonstrate the range of possibilities.

Concrete Ways to Take Action

- 1) Ask the defender if they need help, if you decide it is safe to intervene. (“Are you okay?” or “You look uncomfortable; is everything okay here?” etc.)
- 2) Tell the person who is speaking abusively that you don’t like the way they are speaking. This is an example of naming the behavior rather than verbally attacking the individual.
- 3) Voice disapproval, by speaking up for “right” behavior.
- 4) Express disapproval by not joining in, even if you are in a group with others who may be joining in. Often fights are not broken up, and instead they become a spectacle.
- 5) Get the attention of others. Try to enlist the aid of other bystanders who are nearby and look like they could or would help. Give them *specific* directions about what to do (“You in the red sweatshirt, go get ice from that store. You by the car, with a phone in your hand, call 911—I think we’re going to need an ambulance,” etc.) Other bystanders may be able to help, or to act as witnesses to what is happening.
- 6) Speak privately to the person who has been hurt *after* the situation has been

diffused (“I am sorry that happened to you” or, “No one deserves to be treated that way,” etc.)

**Note that we say “threaten to call” rather than “call” the police, a common strategy in some dangerous situations. CAE acknowledges the institutional violence inherent in the criminal justice system, and knows that too often LGBTQ communities are further persecuted by the police and the law.*