DEVELOPING A GROWTH MINDSET ABOUT BULLIES AND VICTIMS

“...We are not trapped or locked up in these bones. No, no. We are free to change. And love changes us. And if we can love one another, we can break open the sky.”

— Walter Mosley

OVERVIEW

Students apply a “growth mindset” lens to the personalities of bullies and their victims, recognizing that people can change.

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- Any time throughout the school year; however, using it at the beginning of the school year will help to build a trusting school climate and to cultivate more positive relationships among students.
- To prevent bullying and/or when issues around bullying arise

TIME REQUIRED

- 45 minutes

LEVEL

- Middle School

MATERIALS

- one web-based clip on Growth Mindset
- whiteboard & markers
- one worksheet for each pair of students
LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will:

- Demonstrate their understanding of how “mindsets” (beliefs) affect how they respond to social challenges, like bullying or exclusion, at school.

SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-Awareness
- Self-Management
- Social Awareness
- Relationship Skills
- Responsible Decision-Making

HOW TO DO IT

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

Think of a fixed mindset belief you have about yourself or another person that might affect how you interact socially. For example:

- “_______ (fill in name of person) never listens to me!”
- “We always disagree on everything!”
- “I will never get along with _______ (fill in name of person)”

Consider the research that shows that when we have a growth mindset about a person’s social skills or personality—whether our own or someone else’s—it can lessen the stress we feel about our social interactions.

Now turn your fixed mindset belief into a growth mindset one. For example:

- “It happens that sometimes this person doesn’t listen to me, but sometimes he does.”
- “Sometimes we disagree on something, but sometimes we agree.”
- “Though it seems like we’ll never get along, it is possible that we will eventually learn to be kind to each other.”

INSTRUCTIONS

SETTING UP THE PRACTICE

- Before students arrive, write the following statements on the whiteboard:
  - Bullies and victims are types of people who really can't be changed.
  - There are two kinds of people: Bullies and their victims.
Some people are just jerks, and not much can be done to change them.

PART 1 (10 MINUTES)

- When students walk into the classroom, ask them to rate their agreement with the phrases written on the whiteboard (1-5: 1 = Disagree strongly; 5 = Agree Strongly).
- Ask for a few volunteers to share their ratings, or post students’ ratings next to each statement on the whiteboard using sticky notes.
- Hold a short discussion with students using the questions below. (The purpose of this discussion is to challenge students’ potentially black-and-white views of bullies and victims and to begin prompting them to understand the following: “(a) if you are excluded or victimized, it is not due to a fixed, personal deficiency on your part; and (b) people who exclude or victimize you are not fixed, bad people but, instead, have complicated motivations that are subject to change.”)
  - Why do bullies bully?
  - Are victims always victims?
  - What traits do bullies and victims share?
  - Can bullies or victims change?
- Tell students:
  - Today we are going to learn about how our beliefs about people and ourselves affect the way we view social challenges at school like bullying or being excluded.
- Ask:
  - Why might be important to you?

PART 2 (15 MINUTES)

- Watch this “Growth Mindset Video” (2.5 minutes) with the whole class as it 1) introduces a model of someone who changed over time despite difficult circumstances growing up, 2) outlines the key components of the growth mindset, and 3) explains how a growth mindset can affect the brain.
- Ask:
  - How can you use the information from this video on growth mindset to think about bullies and victims? Can they grow and change?
  - What “fixed” negative beliefs do you think bullies and/or victims might have about themselves? What ways could they reframe these beliefs so they reflect a growth mindset? [Consider using the examples below as a guide.]

Fixed Mindset Beliefs

No one likes me.

Growth Mindset Beliefs

I can make new friends.
Fixed Mindset Beliefs

I don’t belong.

Growth Mindset Beliefs

I can do things to help myself feel more like I belong here.

Fixed Mindset Beliefs

He is a bad person.

Growth Mindset Beliefs

He did something that I don’t like, but it doesn’t mean he can’t change.

- Encourage students to remember the video and how it points out that we can retrain our brains by writing or repeating something to ourselves over and over. We can also retrain our brains by practicing a certain behavior, such as making an effort to say nice things about people, again and again.
- As a class, choose one item from the “growth mindset” belief column above and discuss ways a student could put this belief into action.

PART 3 (10-15 MINUTES)

- Create heterogeneous pairings of the students (based on gender, race, academic performance) and hand out one worksheet to each pair.
- Ask student pairs to fill in the growth mindset column for each fixed mindset belief.
- Ask several pairs to share their growth mindset column ideas with the whole class.

CLOSURE

- In their journals, ask students to write a short piece summarizing what they learned from this lesson and what they might say to convince other students that personalities aren’t “fixed.”

EXTENSIONS

- In pairs, have students create a mini-lesson for younger students that teaches them about how growth mindset can be used in our social interactions.

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

Do students use more “growth mindset“ language when talking about others or themselves in social situations?
THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

A study with a diverse group of teens discovered that adolescents who were taught the belief that people have the ability to change lessened their social stress, helping them to cope better, to keep their bodies calmer, and to do better in school—as much as seven months later.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

The way students view social challenges at school can dramatically affect the levels of stress they experience in their body, their thoughts, feelings, behaviors—and even their grades. If they believe that they (and their peers) have the capacity to change, then it’s more likely that they will see social struggles (like being bullied or excluded) as changeable and surmountable too.

It’s crucial for young adolescents to realize that they are not helpless; they can grow and adapt, and the peer who is challenging them can change, too. Things can get better. This perspective releases some of the pressure they might feel, and then they can think more clearly about a social problem as a challenge to solve rather than a threat to fear.