



THE BYSTANDER'S DILEMMA: WHAT DOES COURAGE LOOK LIKE?

"There are all kinds of courage. It takes a great deal of bravery to stand up to our enemies, but just as much to stand up to our friends."

—Albus Dumbledore (in "Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone")

OVERVIEW

Students examine their role as a bystander in a fictional bullying scenario that involves their friends. They identify their emotions, reflect on their values, and consider courageous action as they decide how they would respond in this situation.

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- To help students cultivate an awareness of their emotions, values, and priorities
- To help students think critically about their available choices in challenging social situations without clear answers
- To help students understand the impact of their choices
- To encourage courageous, values-based decision making

TIME REQUIRED

- ≤ 30 minutes

LEVEL

- Upper Elementary
- Middle School

MATERIALS

- Journal and writing instruments
- Access to an [emotion-sensation wheel \(optional\)](#)
- Access to the [values in action classification of character strengths](#)

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will:

- Analyze a dilemma where two of their values are pitted against each other, and make a values-based, courageous choice about how to respond
- Reflect on the reasons why they are making the choice while considering their emotions, values, and thinking processes
- Discuss the consequences of their choices in a judgment-free environment

ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)
- [Adapting Practices for Students with Special Needs](#)
- [Making a Practice Trauma-Informed](#)
- [Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered](#)

CHARACTER STRENGTHS

- Courage
- Bravery
- Honesty
- Social Intelligence
- Perspective-taking
- Fairness

SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-Awareness
- Social Awareness
- Responsible Decision Making

MINDFULNESS COMPONENTS

- Non-judgment
- Open Awareness

HOW TO DO IT

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- Think of a time when you were confronted with a social dilemma without a clear, “right” answer or response. Now, reflect on the following questions:
 - *What was the dilemma? Did you experience a sense of inner conflict or confusion about what to do in the situation? What did that feel like in your body? What emotions did you experience? Were your values threatened or compromised in one way or another?*
 - *In order to resolve the dilemma, how did you think through the tensions related to the available choices and their respective pros and cons? What did the attempt to resolve that tension feel like? Were you calm and collected, impatient, anxious, stressed, or something else? How did you draw on courage to make a values-driven choice?*
- Now think about the choice you finally made in that situation, and reflect on the following questions:
 - *Which values did you prioritize, and which values did you de-prioritize when you made the choice? Why?*
 - *What was the impact of your choice on yourself, on others and on the environment? Are you at peace with the impacts of your choice, or do you wish you'd done something differently? Why?*

INSTRUCTIONS

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

- Questions to ask yourself before doing this activity with students are: What is the emotional climate in the classroom right now? Are my students tired, agitated, anxious, energized or something else? What steps can I take to gently acknowledge their current emotional experience and also invite them to engage with a social dilemma in a patient, deeply introspective, non-judgmental and fun way?
- Consider setting classroom norms using [this](#) resource for participation in the session.
- Once students begin the activity, remember that there are no right or wrong responses; students' responses may differ based on their worldview, culture, mood, intensity of emotion, depth of awareness or engagement, and ability to sit with the discomfort inherent in a dilemma.
- As a teacher, consider how you may practice bringing an open awareness as you hear students' responses to the activity, while also being on the lookout for any potentially concerning responses that may make the classroom climate feel emotionally or psychologically unsafe for others. Consider how you might respond to a student whose words or actions trigger others.

THE ACTIVITY (25 MIN)

- Introduce the session by telling students: *From the moment we wake up to the moment we go to bed, we are continuously making choices, knowingly and unknowingly. What's more, the choice-making process begins early in humans and lasts a lifetime. Think of a three-year old displaying preferences in picking one toy over another, or a fifteen year old making career-related choices. Can you identify a few times today that you've already made a choice between two or more options? Let's take a minute to pair-share.*
- Now, share with students: *A dilemma is a difficult situation in which it may be hard for us to make a choice. Sometimes there may be no clear right choice or we might not feel fully comfortable in choosing between the*

available options. At these times, it is important to think of what courage means to us. Sometimes, picking one option might be considered brave by others, and at other times, it may not be – but we know that picking that option might require personal bravery for ourselves. Let's consider the following story where Andy faces a dilemma and has to choose between two options.

- Read the story "The New Girl" aloud to students (see attachment).
- Ask students to step into Andy's shoes, and reflect on the following questions:
 - *What is Andy's dilemma? What does he think his options are?*
 - *Now, imagine that you are Andy in this situation. What are the different emotions you might be feeling? Would feeling multiple emotions make you feel confused or conflicted? What are the sensations you might feel in your body?*
(Note: For middle school students, show them the [emotion-sensation wheel](#) as a scaffold. For younger students, consider selecting what you consider the top five relevant emotions and sensations in this situation beforehand (such as anxious-fidgety or guilty), and help students pick from these five. Have students pair-share, and then invite responses in the larger group.)
 - *As Andy, what might your values be? In this situation, are any of those values in conflict with each other?* (Note: For middle school students, show them the values in action classification of character strengths as a scaffold. For younger students, consider selecting the top five relevant values that may be at the heart of Andy's options in this dilemma beforehand (such as bravery, fairness, friendship, or loyalty), and helping students identify which of the five values might be in conflict with each other. Have students pair-share, and then invite responses in the larger group.)
 - *Now, as Andy, you must choose between the two options* (Note: If the space in your classroom allows, you could ask students to get up from their seats and quietly move to opposite sides of the room, where each side of the room represents one of the two options.):
 - *Do you run after Meena and your two friends to stop them from picking on Stella? Doing this might make them mad at you.*
 - or
 - *Do you stay where you are, and do nothing? Doing this might make you feel guilty for doing nothing to help Stella.*
- Read the story "The New Girl" aloud to students (see attachment).
- Once students have made their choices, allow them fifteen seconds to silently notice the split in the class – is the class evenly split between options A and B, or is there a skew?
- Ask students to return to their seats, and reflect on the following questions:
 - *Which values were most important to you (e.g., friendship, honesty, kindness), and which values were least important as you made your decision? Why?*
 - *How might your choice affect Stella, Meena, you, others in the group, and the kids in the neighborhood?*
 - *What might happen to all of you in the future? Why?*
 - *Are you comfortable with your choice, or do you wish you'd done something differently? Why?*
 - *Why is it sometimes harder to stand up to our friends than it is to stand up to others? Why might it be important to still do it anyway?*
 - *Which of the two options seems like a braver choice? When you think of bravery or courage, remember that courage includes a risk, an intention and a "noble" goal (or value) that benefits others. Think about the following:*
 - *What was the risk involved for Andy in each option?*
 - *What was the intention or plan?*
 - *What was the "noble" or helpful goal, or the benefit to others in each of the two options?*

- *Which of the two options seems more courageous?* (Note: Remember there are no right answers here. Allow students to discuss free of judgment.)
- *Could there be a third or fourth alternative that Andy didn't consider in the situation? What might other alternatives be? Which values do you get to prioritize if you choose one of those options? What would be the impact of choosing one of those options?*
- Allow students to pair-share, and then invite responses in the larger group.

THE DEBRIEF (5 MIN)

- Invite students to consider that in social dilemmas, it can be difficult to identify what to do and to feel comfortable with one's choice. Ask students to reflect on:
 - What was difficult about doing this exercise? What was easy? How did doing this exercise feel in your body?
 - What are you more sure of about yourself, now? What are you less sure of? What are you curious about?

CLOSURE

Invite students to participate in a two-minute guided meditation such as [this](#) one for younger students and [this](#) one for older students, to bring their bodies to a state of calm.

EXTENSION

Ask students to (anonymously or otherwise) bring in a social dilemma from their own lives to another session, and have the class reflect on the questions above that relate to that dilemma.

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- To what degree were students left with a sense of curiosity, enhanced awareness of their emotions, body sensations, and how they prioritize their values?
- What other steps could you take to facilitate a positive classroom climate while discussing dilemmas such as this one that are bound to bring up dissonance or discomfort in students?

THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

Moral dilemmas can help children practice [empathy](#), think purposefully, and gain an awareness of the potential impact of courageous actions. A [study](#) of five-year-old children from South Korea revealed that when children were able to look beyond their own perspective, they were able to empathize with victims and bystanders in a bullying situation. [Studies](#) also suggest that stories can spark U.S. elementary students' values-based conversations and perspective-taking skills.

Further, [researchers](#) in England found that young adolescents' (12-15 years) moral decision-making was influenced by their existing knowledge, personal experience, peers, and their ability to reflect on their decisions. More specifically, when responding to dilemmas, many students claimed that they drew on their values and

considered others' needs while weighing the consequences of their choices. These students' considerations can be linked to the core components of [courage](#): 1) a "risk" (and the necessity of weighing the benefits and/or consequences of one's actions), 2) an "intention" (a will to take action), and a "noble goal" (a larger value on behalf of the self, others, and/or the greater good).

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

[Research](#) has shown that children as young as three years old face moral dilemmas and internal conflicts. As they get older, children face social dilemmas and decision-making processes that grow in complexity.

Bullying is one of the key social challenges in schools that not only contributes to a poor school climate but also [impacts the health and wellbeing of students involved](#). And many students struggle with how to respond to bullying and social exclusion.

A child's ability to thoughtfully respond to bystander dilemmas may be foundational to future courageous action. [Courage](#), as an overarching virtue, can spark and guide students as they prioritize their values, consider the choices in front of them, and weigh the potential consequences of their actions.