



## Stay-cool strategies to teach your students (and yourself!)

If you could create a wish list for the new school year, what would be at the top? For most teachers, more important than supplies and a spacious classroom is a happy learning environment in which each child feels welcome and safe. That's why it's so dismaying that according to one recent study, 43% of students worry about going to the restroom for fear of encountering a bully. The same study reported that a child is bullied every seven minutes.

If we want our students to feel safe, how do we answer to these numbers? Bullying expert Carol S. McMullen says we must look at it as a “bully-proofing puzzle,” in which each developmental piece—problem-solving, recognizing and using personal strengths, and building interpersonal skills—is a crucial part of strengthening community. McMullen adds that we can't confront bullying on our own: “Everyone in the school community needs to know the language, expectations about behavior, and consequences of bullying.”

More of McMullen's ideas can be found in her book *Creating a Bully-Free Classroom* (Scholastic, 2005). Here, she shares strategies for “bully-proofing” your classroom, including tips for teaching kids how to ask for help.

### Be Your Own Cheerleader

Bullies like to make people feel bad about themselves. Positive self-talk is a very effective, empowering strategy. While it may seem a little artificial, having children repeat their strengths over and over can increase their self-confidence. Demonstrate how to be your own cheerleader: Have a child tell you your shoes are ugly and then say to yourself (aloud so children can hear): “That's not true. I don't deserve to be talked to that way. I am kind; I would never treat anyone else that way. I like these shoes. That kid is just plain >>

# BUILD A BULLY-FREE CLASSROOM

# best practice

wrong!” Then encourage children to brainstorm and write their own personal cheers to use whenever they need them.

## Say “So?”

Sometimes, very simple responses can make very powerful strategies. In Bill Cosby’s *The Meanest Thing to Say* (Scholastic, 1997), Little Bill meets a boy named Michael who challenges him to play “The Twelve Meanest Things to Say to Somebody” game. Little Bill tells his dad, who gives him a simple, one-word strategy: “So?” It works! Every time Michael says something mean, Little Bill replies, “So?” and Michael soon tires of the game. Talk with students about why this response is effective. (It gets boring for a bully to keep taunting if he or she always gets the same, non-plussed response.) Remind kids that it’s not necessary to respond with any other word—“So?” does the job.

## Stand Tall

Point out to children that how they use their bodies and voices makes a difference in how others treat them. For example, if they hunch over, walk around looking at the ground, and use small, whispery voices, a bully may not take them seriously. Have children try looking right at a partner, using a loud voice, and saying in clear terms what he or she wants the bully to do. Encourage students to practice using the phrase, “Stop it. I don’t like that.”

## Be a Broken Record

This is closely related to “So?” except that the child chooses a statement to calmly repeat over and over. A good choice is: “Stop talking to me like that.” Model how this strategy works:

**BULLY:** Oh, look at your hair. Did someone cut it with a lawnmower?

**YOU:** Stop talking to me like that.

**BULLY:** Oh, I’m scared. What are you gonna do?

**YOU:** Stop talking to me like that.

**BULLY (mimicking):** “Stop talking to me like that.”

**YOU:** Stop talking to me like that.

Together, brainstorm a list of short, direct statements children can make.

## Breathe Deeply

When we feel scared, nervous, or angry, the body’s first response is to tense up. Ask your students to pretend that they are angry and then that they are scared. Point out what our bodies do when we feel these ways: muscles clench, fists ball up, and faces grimace. When our bodies are tense, it makes it harder for our brains to think clearly. Learning some basic relaxation skills can help us stay calm and make good decisions about what to do in stressful situations.

Teach children to take these steps to calm down: Breathe deeply. Think about what you are feeling and about what strategy you might try first. Breathe deeply again, and take action. Remind students that just breathing deeply will help them stay calm and decide the best course of action.



## 7 Books about Bullying

Read aloud one or more of these picture books to start off a class discussion about friendship and bullying.

■ **INCREDIBLE ME!** by Kathi Appelt (HarperCollins, 2003). Grades 1–3.

■ **BRAVEMOLE** by Lynne Jonell (Putnam, 2002). Grades 1–3.

■ **BULLY** by Judith Caseley (Greenwillow Books, 2001). Grades 1–3.

■ **NOBODY KNEW WHAT TO DO** by Becky Ray McCain (Albert Whitman, 2001). Grades 1–3.

■ **MEAN, MEAN MAUREEN GREEN** by Judy Cox (Holiday House, 1999). Grades 1–3.

■ **THE MEANEST THING TO SAY** by Bill Cosby (Scholastic, 1997). Grades 1–2.

■ **THE HUNDRED DRESSES** by Eleanor Estes (Harcourt Brace, 1972). Grades 2–3.

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### Use Humor

The aim of using humor is not to laugh at the bully, but to make a funny comment or joke that defuses the situation. If children are comfortable using humor, making a gentle joke about themselves can sometimes work. Give students a few positive and negative examples, such as the following: A bully is taunting you about your new haircut. It wouldn't be a good idea to reply, "Where'd you get *your* haircut, at Lawnmowers'R'Us?" Instead, you could say, "It does look like I put my finger in a light socket, doesn't it?"

### Eyes in the Back of Your Head

It's important for children to develop awareness of what's going on around them. If they see a bully approaching, they should avoid the situation by moving to an area with other students or adults. When children are aware that being by themselves may put them in a vulnerable situation, they often stay closer to others. If you supervise recess, help students practice this strategy by playing a version of "Stop, Look, and Listen." When you blow your whistle with an agreed-upon pattern, your class should freeze and look around them. Are they in a danger zone? Close to others? Once or twice a recess is enough to reinforce this simple strategy.

### Slip Slidin' Away

One simple option is to move away from a bullying situation. Encourage kids not to get "hooked" into talking to the bully, but to simply turn and go elsewhere. Tell them: If the bully steps in front of you, pivot and quickly walk away in another direction. If the bully follows, continue to walk away until the bully gives up or you get to a safer area. Remind kids that this strategy works best if you are dealing with just one person.

### Ask an Adult for Help

This strategy should go hand-in-hand with every other strategy you teach. Training children to seek safety and guidance from someone who can help is essential. As you explain when to ask for help, define the difference between telling and tattling. Bullying expert

Barbara Coloroso defines the difference aptly: Tattling only gets another person *into* trouble. Telling gets you or another child *out* of trouble. Younger children often "tell" on others, and you need to help them identify whether they are telling or tattling. You can cue them by responding, "Is this tattling or telling? Are you telling me this to get someone

else into trouble, or to get you or someone else out of trouble?" Ask your students to help you create a list of trustworthy people to whom they can go, such as you, their parents/caretakers, other teachers, school support staff, and other adults in the school. When you're done, hang the list in a prominent place in your classroom. □

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