Actions: Skills for Bystanders to Stop Mistreatment

This part of the chapter describes five intervention strategies, or actions, that Ambassadors are trained to use in the Safe School Ambassadors Program to prevent, interrupt or stop mistreatment:

- Distracting
- Balancing
- Supporting
- Reasoning
- Getting help

These are not all the skills ambassadors learn in the training. Other skills are included that meet the developmental needs and abilities of elementary, middle and high school Ambassadors. It is important to modify actions and explanations to make them age appropriate.

Action 1: Distracting

Probably the simplest action an ambassador can take to interrupt an act of cruelty or mistreatment is to distract someone from the situation. Distracting is the act of changing the subject or focus of an interaction, often with humor or a simple request or comment. Distracting can often include the act of physically separating the people involved—not by force but by guile, request, suggestion, or invitation. Distracting can be used to stop exclusion, put-downs, intimidation, unwanted physical contact, and sometimes even acts against the school community.

Here are some ways distracting others has been used to respond to different types of mistreatment situations:

- *Put-down situation.* In class, a small group of girls was sitting behind a fellow student named Christina. They were talking about Christina behind her back and loud enough for Christina to hear them: "Did you see what Christina is wearing today? I can't believe she would wear that." Another girl said: "Yeah, looks like she buys her clothes at the Salvation Army." Then they all laughed. An ambassador interrupted and distracted the group by asking them, "Hey, guys, did you see *American Idol* last night? (Pause) You didn't? I can't believe you missed it. It kicked ass. It's on again tonight. You've got to check it out." Then the students began to talk about something else.

- *Intimidation situation.* A group of guys were cornering Jacob near his locker at school. Jacob looked nervous and afraid. An ambassador distracted in this situation by saying: "Hey, guys, did you all get what Ms. A told us to do for our assignment? Were we supposed to do all the questions at the end of the lessons, or just the even ones?" In other situations ambassadors have said things such as, "Hey, guys, look out, the principal's around the corner!" or "Hey, I heard they're giving away bags of chips in Ms. Garcia's room!"

Although distracting interrupts an act of cruelty, it does not resolve the underlying problem or issue between the target and the aggressor. After using a distraction, ambassadors might say or do other things that are likely to have more lasting effects; these interventions are described later in this chapter.

- *Unwanted physical contact.* Most young people don't want to get in a fight when they confront one another. If they really wanted to fight, they would immediately jump to physically hurting one another or throwing punches. This immediate move to physical contact rarely occurs, particularly with younger teens. More often, these students exchange words, use posturing, and then start pushing one another. When this happens, other students often see the developing situation and begin to gather around and encourage it by yelling: "Fight! Fight! Fight!" or "Go! Go! Go!" The students squaring off then find themselves in a difficult and pressure-filled situation. Backing down at that point would cause each of them to lose face and status. Word would quickly spread that they were too afraid to fight. Ambassadors have reported that they used distraction by changing the subject and moving one of the potential combatants out of the confrontation, an intervention that helps both students save face. The ambassador doing the distraction also shows the aggressor that the target is not friendless or alone and therefore is not a perfect target.

Action 2: Balancing

Many young people have been in the presence of friends and heard someone put down another person who is not around, spread a rumor, or "talk trash about someone," as it is often called. The tendency is for those nearby either to say nothing or to add other negative comments about the target. This ambassador action involves countering a negative comment with a positive comment in order to balance such a put-down. It does not involve telling someone that he or she is wrong or directly challenging the person who made the comments. It is the simple act of offering a comment, often from personal

experience or belief, that "puts-up" the put-down. In effect, it says, "My experience is different from yours." This helps prevent the negative comments from spreading and becoming regarded as correct. Students have used balancing to redirect a rumor, racist remark, negative gay comment, or other put-down about a person or a group.

In one situation a student said, "I can't believe Margie. She thinks she is so-o-o smart. She is such a stuck-up snob." An ambassador interjected: "You know what, Margie was in my summer program, and I saw her a lot. She was really easy to talk to and funny! I mean, she had some hilarious stories." Ambassadors can act quickly with a balancing comment before the negative talk can escalate or gain credibility.

The skill of balancing can serve adults as well. One evening one of us was in a store purchasing staplers the night before a scheduled training. When he placed all the staplers on the counter, a woman behind him asked, "So why are you buying so many staplers?" He replied: "I'm conducting a training session tomorrow of a large group of teens." She said: "Teens? Oh, boy, I sympathize. Teens can be such a pain, I have this nephew of mine, and he is such a nuisance. He thinks he knows it all, and he doesn't care about anything it seems." You can imagine she probably expected him to agree with her by saying, "Yeah, you're right," or to side with her by adding to the put-downs. Instead, he said: "Well, I've worked with thousands of teens around the country, and my experience is most young people really care a lot about what is going on. Most teens I've met want to make a difference. They just don't know how to do it, and they need our help. Most of the teens I have worked with are amazing, caring, and creative people." The woman paused and then replied, "Well, I know all teens aren't bad. I do have this niece who is really sweet."

This skill of balancing works best when the target of the put-down or rumor is not around to hear it. But sometimes the target of the put-down is nearby and the aggressor is deliberately trying to hurt his or her feelings. This is a situation in which ambassadors may have to say something directly to the target, using the next action: supporting.

Action 3: Supporting

Students who have been mistreated are put into an unhealthy and unstable emotional state. When left alone, the hurt they feel can become more painful and affect their self-concept and self-esteem. In most incidents of school violence,

students had been mistreated before they took revenge. Their pain had escalated to rage and a desire to retaliate. This pain-rage-revenge cycle demonstrates the need for and potential power of stepping in to relieve some of the pain by interrupting the cycle. In this action, a target's pain is defused by having an ambassador empathize with him or her.

Exhibiting empathy is a large part of the power of showing support, and the effect of support is much greater than it initially may appear. Many young people naturally understand how to offer support and show another person that they care. Supportive comments or gestures can make a big difference and have a significant effect on the person who needs to hear something supportive or validating.

Like balancing, supporting does not challenge the aggressor directly. Supporting also is not based on putting others down. For example, if someone is being excluded, the ambassador would not want to support by saying, "Don't worry about them. They're just a bunch of losers! You wouldn't want to waste your time with them anyway." A statement like that adds to an unhealthy climate and the cycle of mistreatment. It may also create a problem later and cause a situation to escalate if it gets back to someone that the ambassador called the aggressors "a bunch of losers." It is important to say things that will contribute to reducing the amount of pain and mistreatment, not add to it.

A more productive alternative is, "You know, I've been left out of things before too, and it stinks." This shows empathy and understanding, which can reduce some of the pain. Another example is, "Hey, they've left a lot of other people out of things before. They're just like that sometimes." This helps the target not take it personally and does so by offering objective data (they've left other people out) rather than by putting down the aggressors.

Supporting works in a number of situations:

- *After a put-down.* Supporting can often be used in combination with another action, such as distracting. After distracting an aggressor during a put-down, an ambassador turned to the target and said, "Hey, she says mean stuff like that sometimes. I hope you don't think that comment is true. I don't."

Vanessa, a high school junior in California, told us how she used distracting followed by supporting: "I intervened in a situation when my math teacher was putting down a male classmate and saying things like: 'You're too dumb' and 'You'll never graduate.' I used a distraction in this situation by asking the teacher for some help with understanding the homework assignment she just gave. The teacher answered my question and walked back to her desk. Then I supported the

student by saying: 'Hey, don't sweat her. I know you're a smart guy, and you're going to graduate with all of us.' Now that student does his work, and the teacher doesn't pick on him anymore."

Using distraction first to interrupt an act of cruelty often provides the ambassador with the opportunity afterward to offer authentic and appropriate support to the target without risking the ridicule or wrath of the aggressor.

- *After intimidation.* In intimidation situations, showing support can help the target bounce back more quickly. It can also help a target to understand that he or she is not alone, which helps prevent the further loss of self-esteem. Aggressors often target those who have little social capital. However, when aggressors see a target being supported by someone else, their perception of that target can change: they are less likely to see that student as vulnerable and therefore less likely to bully this person. The following comments are some things ambassadors have said to show support to a target of bullying:

  "I saw what she did, and that was really mean."

  "Do you know he's done that to other people too? I've seen him. Hang in there, okay?"

  "It's really annoying when people do that kind of thing. It's happened to me."

- *After unwanted physical contact.* Support can still be offered when a situation involves unwanted physical contact. When a student has tripped another student or touched someone inappropriately, ambassadors have offered support by saying:

  "Wow. People can be mean sometimes. I don't like what they did either."

  "That sucked, what they did. I hope you don't think that everyone is like that around here."

  "That was a cheap shot. Are you okay?"

Action 4: Reasoning

The human body's physiological response to an upsetting incident shifts the focus of brain activity from the thinking part of the brain to the feeling and reflexive parts—the classic fight-or-flight response. When people are angry, they can be considered "out of their minds" because they are not thinking clearly. By

using reasoning, ambassadors can help someone think and not just react, which could prevent this person from doing something he or she might later regret.

Most students and adults can probably recall a time when they were so upset or angry that they said or did something they later regretted. They were likely in a state where they were not thinking clearly. In hindsight, most students say they might have appreciated it if someone had said or done something that made them stop and think about what they were doing or about to do.

Even if a student is unlikely to regret an act of cruelty, ambassadors may be able to get someone to think about other options or consider the consequences of their actions. Bringing attention to an act of aggression can highlight its ugliness and may help an aggressor see that some actions are not within acceptable norms or not what they really want to be doing.

One eighth-grade girl wanted to get back at another person by spreading a rumor. The trained ambassador reasoned with her by asking, "Is that really true about her?" She continued by saying, "I've had rumors spread about me, and it upset me when I heard them. How would you feel if someone spread an untrue rumor about you?" In that moment, the girl may not have cared about how she would feel or how the person she wanted to hurt would feel; she may have even been intent on hurting the other person. But by speaking to the girl about her plans, the ambassador got her to pause and rethink her action.

Ambassadors help the aggressor know that other options are available. Ambassadors show that the consequences could really matter to the aggressor, such as being grounded, suspended, or not able to play with the rest of the team at the upcoming weekend. By reasoning with aggressors, ambassadors help them see that their actions might not be worth the consequences, thereby influencing aggressors to make a different choice.

Action 5: Getting Help

This is the only action ambassadors are taught in the training that requires adult involvement. Getting help involves taking action by communicating with an adult whom ambassadors trust to help them deal with situations that are beyond their own comfort zone. For example, if ambassadors find out about a weapon on campus, an impending fight, drug dealing or drug use, or another threat to the campus, even a potential suicide attempt, getting help becomes the best action to take.

Youth often believe that telling is snitching. The SSA program training demonstrates ways that getting help does not make a student a snitch. Snitching, or tattling, occurs when students go to an adult to get someone in trouble. Getting help occurs when students go to an adult to prevent or get someone out of trouble. The SSA program training supports students to see this distinction and gives them many examples in which other ambassadors have gotten help and have been glad they did. By empowering these leaders as ambassadors and offering them the action of getting help as one of the several tools available, they have a context for, and see the value of, involving adults.

The examples that follow show situations when ambassadors took the action of getting help and believed they made the right decision. As volunteers, ambassadors feel a strong responsibility to stop bullying and violence, and they have learned many ways to do this. So when they realize they need to tell adults, we have seen that ambassadors become comfortable with and feel natural in taking the action of getting help as one of the many actions they could take:

> At a football game, a group of students walked by and said they were going to jump my friends after the game, and instead of going after them, I talked to a school resource officer. I don't know what the officer did, but he did something because my friend didn't get jumped.—Marcus, age sixteen, Florida

> I tried to get these older boys to stop messing with this freshman at the bus stop. I tried reasoning with them, but they wouldn't let up. I talked to my coach about it, and it turns out he knew the older guys. He talked to them, and they stopped.—Phil, age seventeen, California

Examples of getting help include:

- Speaking to a trusted adult alone about what was seen or heard, who was or is involved, and where it was or is happening
- Leaving a note on the desk or in the mailbox of a teacher, counselor, or principal
- Making a phone call to a hot line or to the police

Students often hesitate to get help because they are worried that their peers would find out and retaliate. Therefore, when talking about the action of getting help, SSA trainers tell the ambassadors that every effort will be made to keep the ambassador's name confidential. The adults in the training agree to try to protect the student's identity.