



Alternatives to Bullying and Intolerance: Making Friends, Developing Compassion and Helping

The following program is designed to train teachers and school staff to present a therapeutic story telling and activity intervention designed to help students learn about helping behaviors and develop compassion as an antidote to bullying behavior. Students also learn about making friends. This intervention was developed for school-aged children from Kindergarten through 8th grades (encompassing age ranges from approximately 5 through 13). Lecture and activities vary by developmental level of the target group. The therapeutic narrative presented involves the story of a loving friendship between a wild dolphin and a human being. Elements of this narrative are emphasized in combination with activity-based didactic experiences. Research methods are employed to collect data regarding the impact of the program on students' social attitudes and problem-solving skills. Current results indicate that the program has a positive influence on children's attitudes toward providing and asking for help and their attitudes toward social differences.

Background

Schools and communities face enormous difficulties teaching children to tolerate differences, to help each other, to demonstrate compassion, and to avoid bullying. Most educational interventions that address these issues do so indirectly through administrative and disciplinary interventions.

Bullying and other forms of intolerance often occur when children feel a disruption or a general inhibition of their sense of personal agency or empowerment. Many children feel powerless to affect their environment, other important people, themselves, or their health. Maladies such as depression, attention-deficit problems, medical illness, substance abuse, relationship conflict, and dissatisfaction with school or work often involve a disruption in a person's sense of agency. That is, people with these difficulties often feel that they cannot change themselves or their situations.

Children bully in part in order to actively manipulate their environment and thereby obtain a sense of agency by expressing aggression that supports the bully's fragile self-esteem. The desire to effect change in one's environment is adaptive and healthy, but we regard aggression expressed in an effort to humiliate or dominate another child as unhealthy.

Intervention

Alternatives to Bullying attempts to prevent social intolerance and bullying by teaching behaviors and attitudes that offer alternatives to socially destructive attitudes and behavior. Through this intervention, children experience compassion for a wild dolphin named JoJo. JoJo has many of the same wonderful qualities as humans do, but also faces many of the same problems we do. We then help them use their compassion and the helping activity inspired by compassion as a way of altering their environment constructively and learning the component behaviors associated with compassion and helping. We anticipate that through this process children will feel an increased sense of personal agency, have enhanced self-esteem, as well as be more likely to help their peers and find alternatives to aggression in their relationships.

This intervention uses a video along with lecture, discussion, and an activity-based learning experience. Story telling, a form of human culture, involves the transfer of information crucial for the adaptation of human beings in their complex social and natural environments. Therapeutic story telling involves a process of active learning in which children are drawn by facilitators to certain aspects of a narrative for a therapeutic purpose.

The program is tailored to the developmental level of the children targeted by the intervention:

- Group 1 consists of children from approximately age 5 through 7
- Group 2 comprises children aged 8 through 13.

Group 2 participants will view a 35-minute video depicting the relationship between Dean Bernal and his wild dolphin friend JoJo. For the younger children (Group 1), the story will be told using a picture book that presents the narrative of Dean and JoJo. The pictures are drawings from a children's book about Dean and JoJo written and illustrated by Dean Bernal. This will be followed by a ten-minute video that encapsulates many of the issues discussed in the longer video.

For both groups, discussion of the story/video will be followed by an activity-based intervention which will also be discussed when it is completed. Data gathering is optional and should take place before and after the intervention. (Only observational data will be collected on the youngest group of children due to the difficulty they would have reading or understanding the questionnaire.)

About Dean and JoJo

Among the main themes and elements in the story, it is important to emphasize that Dean and JoJo are friends in the sense of collaboration and equality that the word *friend* connotes. Dean has never fed or deprived JoJo of a primary need to motivate him in any way. Although Dean has developed ways of communicating with JoJo and requesting that JoJo perform certain activities, Dean is not JoJo's trainer. JoJo is wild and untrained – all interactions between JoJo and Dean occur because of JoJo's interest and volition.

Procedure

- 1) If the facilitator wishes to participate in data collection, Group 2 children should first be given the **Helping and Acceptance Survey**. (This instrument is still under development and needs to be modified through user suggestion and empirical study and refinement.)
- 2) For Group 1 participants (ages 5-8), the Dean and JoJo story will be read told orally and illustrations of the story will be shown along with the narrative.
- 3) Participants will then screen the video appropriate to the age group. (The Group 1 video lasts 10 minutes, while the Group 2 video is approximately 35 minutes.)
- 4) Participants will then be led in a discussion by facilitators about their reactions to the video. Attention will be paid to helping participants note important aspects of the story with the list of topics and questions in [Appendix A](#). This discussion should take from 5-10 minutes.
- 5) Participants will be given paper and colored pencils and crayons and asked to create drawings.
 - **Group 1:** For the youngest group of participants (ages 5-8), a single picture will be drawn. The instruction will be: "Please draw a picture of you helping or person or an animal or a picture of a person or an animal helping you. This

picture can be from your imagination, something you make up, it can be from something that happened to you, or something from the Dean and JoJo story you liked.”

- **Group 2:** The older children will be asked to create a set of three drawings in which they depict either an actual or imaginary experience in which they help a human, animal, or the environment, or in which they are helped by another human, animal, or the environment. Students can also depict stories in which they both received and gave help. They will be asked to structure their drawings as follows:

- A. The first picture should introduce and depict the characters in their story and the problem they face.
- B. The second picture should depict how the help was given.
- C. The third picture should depict how things turned out after the help was given.

- 6) Facilitators will then ask students to take turns telling the stories depicted in their drawings. We have found it helpful for a facilitator to have each child stand up either at the front of the room or at her desk to show her pictures and tell her story. To help children who may feel anxious about presenting their story for the group, facilitators may benefit from holding the child’s drawings up for the class in sequence and asking the child helpful, prompting questions to elicit their story. Facilitators may then help focus the discussion of the story by asking a few select questions about the story. Some suggested questions are:

- A. How did the characters depicted in their story feel before they faced the problem?
- B. Was help asked for directly or was help given intuitively?
- C. How did the characters feel when they faced the problem?
- D. How did they feel when they were helping and being helped?
- E. How did the characters feel when the problem was resolved?
- F. What made the characters feel like helping each other?

NOTE: These questions need to be worded more simply for the youngest group of participants. This activity (drawing and story telling) takes about 30-35 minutes.

- 7) Participants will then be asked to generalize what they have learned in the presentation so far. We have found that asking questions from the following set of questions will facilitate discussion:

- A. When do you know when someone or something needs help?
- B. How does it feel to give help? Why?
- C. How does it feel to receive help? Why?
- D. What do we do if we see someone or something needs help, but someone might make fun of us for helping?

- E. What do we say to someone if they have helped us?
- F. What should we do if we feel angry at someone?
- G. If you feel like teasing someone or hurting someone, how do you think they will feel? Is there any similarity between how JoJo might have felt when he was hurt by boats and water skiers or bullies who didn't care about his feelings and how someone might feel if you hurt their feelings?
- H. If someone is getting teased or bullied, what do you think they might need to help them feel better or act in a way so that they don't get bullied?

NOTE: These questions need to be worded more simply for the youngest group of participants.

- 8) The group will close with a discussion of their overall reactions to the therapeutic story telling intervention and ways to improve the presentation in the future. Participants will also be asked to come up with ways in which they might be able to help JoJo, other animals and humans, and/or the environment.
- 9) Facilitators who are participating in data collection should give Group 2 students the **Helping and Acceptance Survey** for a second time.

APPENDIX A: Topics for Discussion

The following topics and questions help to highlight the issues raised by the story of Dean and JoJo. The conceptual level of the lecture and discussion material should be adjusted to suit the developmental level of the participants. We have found that very young children can understand and talk about the issues presented here as long as facilitators adjust their wording and the conceptual complexity of the material.

Mutual helping behaviors establish friendship

1. How did Dean make friends with JoJo at first?
2. How did JoJo feel when his family died?
3. How did Dean help JoJo with his sad feelings?
4. How did JoJo help Dean at the beginning of their friendship?

Trust in friendship and understanding leads to active helping

1. How did Dean feel for JoJo when JoJo got injured?
2. How did Dean's feelings about JoJo's injuries lead to him helping JoJo?
3. How did JoJo help Dean with the shark?
4. How did Dean help JoJo when JoJo was being bullied?

Understanding differences and differing needs

This leads to compromise rather than to unresolved conflict. Working to change difficult situations by helping leads to a sense of personal agency—the feeling that doing something to help brings a feeling of pride in one's own activity and confidence in one's ability to change what is undesirable.

1. How did Dean help humans understand what JoJo needs?
2. How did Dean feel when he helped the humans decide to protect JoJo?
3. How does feeling compassion make it likely that you will help someone?
4. How can children help JoJo, other animals, and people?

How do we deal with bullying?

1. How did it make you feel when the men tried to capture JoJo?
2. How do you think JoJo felt when the men tried to hurt him?
3. How do you think JoJo felt when he escaped from the men?
4. What made JoJo try to hurt the men?
5. How did JoJo feel when Dean tried to help calm him down and bring him away from the men?
6. What might JoJo have done if he had human language? Would he still have tried to hurt the men after they hurt him?
7. What does a bully feel like before he or she bullies someone?

8. Why does bullying make some people feel good?
9. What are some ways we can deal with a bully or bullies?