

A LEADER'S GUIDE TO

The Courage to Be **YOURSELF**



True Stories by Teens About Cliques, Conflicts,
and Overcoming Peer Pressure

*Al Desetta, M.A., and
Sherrie Gammage, M.Ed.,
with Engaging Schools*

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Introduction:

Accepting Differences, Promoting Peace

“Teaching young people to manage their emotions, resolve conflict nonviolently, and respect differences is just as important as teaching reading and math.”

—Linda Lantieri

Founding Director, Resolving Conflict Creatively Program

Cliques, conflicts, and peer pressure form a pervasive backdrop to social interaction in middle and high schools. When differences among teens escalate to teasing, harrasment, exclusion, and bullying, everyone in the school community is affected. Learning is interrupted, students feel unsafe and insecure, and a heavy emotional burden is carried by targets, aggressors, and witnesses alike. Yet the complexities of teen relationships are usually invisible to adults.

The following statistics paint a stark picture of the far-reaching effects of teen peer conflict.

■ In 2001, the Kaiser Family Foundation conducted a survey of young people regarding “tough issues.” Of the teens interviewed:

- 86 percent said students at their school are teased and bullied.
- 68 percent said students at their school are treated badly because they are different.
- 60 percent said students at their school are threatened with violence by other students.
- 54 percent said they never talk with a guidance counselor or teacher about what’s going on in their lives.¹

■ Seven percent of all 8th-grade students in the United States stay home at least once each month from fear of being picked on. One estimate is that 160,000 kids stay home from school every day in the United States because of conflict with peers.²

■ The World Health Organization and Health Canada polled students in grades 6–10. The students were asked about their experiences in the current school term and the results showed:

- 14 percent were threatened at school.
- 20 percent reported being hit, slapped, or pushed.
- 35 percent were bullied
- 39 percent admitted to bullying classmates at least once.³

■ A survey showed that 31 percent of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students were either threatened with a weapon or injured with a weapon in the previous 12 months.⁴

■ A nationwide sample of students in 8th–11th grades found that 81 percent of students—79 percent of boys and 83 percent

of girls—experience sexual harassment often, occasionally, or rarely (even rarely is too often). Of students who were sexually harassed:

- 16 percent stayed home from school at least once.
- 20 percent found it hard to pay attention in class.
- 24 percent reported speaking less in class.⁵

■ A study commissioned by the U.S. Secret Service and the U.S. Department of Justice found that many of the attackers in school shootings had been harassed or bullied. While myriad complicated factors have contributed to school shootings, teasing and harassment were key factors in many of them, and “could have been a predictor of the attack” according to the study.⁶



Clearly, for modern teens, the social scene is thorny to say the least. In such a culture, teaching young people to respect differences and resolve conflicts peacefully is vital.

Most books that address teen conflict discuss ways to prevent or resolve it without looking closely at *why* young people have conflicts in the first place. *A Leader's Guide to the Courage to Be Yourself* takes a different approach. The methods in this book were developed by Educators for Social Responsibility (ESR), one of the largest and longest-running school-based organizations in the United States for conflict resolution, violence prevention, and inter-group relations. Specifically, the sessions in this guide are adapted from Carol Miller Lieber's *Conflict Resolution in the High School: 36 Lessons* (ESR, 1998), whose lessons form a foundation for ESR's conflict resolution program in secondary schools. Applying Lieber's work to the 26 true stories by teens in *The Courage to Be Yourself*,

this leader's guide focuses on the root causes of teen conflict so they can be discussed, analyzed, and addressed by you and the young people you work with.

When Diversity Leads to Conflict

Young people often feel confused or threatened by peers who dress differently, come from a different racial or ethnic background, live in a different neighborhood, engage in non-stereotypical activities, or are different from themselves in some other way. Lack of understanding and respect for difference often leads teens to label and categorize one another. Forming like-minded groups or cliques—with membership determined by race, style of clothing, athletic prowess, or other outward traits—gives teens a sense of security and meets a need for connection and belonging. But such benefits are often gained at the expense of those who are excluded or banished from the group. When young people define themselves and others primarily by the groups to which they belong, they set the stage for emotional, psychological, or physical conflict with their peers.

Most conflict among teens takes the form of peer pressure, teasing, exclusion, bullying, or harassment. Research shows that verbal ridicule and harassment can be as devastating as physical abuse, because of the way they deeply demean and stigmatize individuals.⁷ Teens are engaged in a kind of continuous psychological warfare, conducted out of sight and below the radar of most adults. Even if adults are aware of this psychological warfare, they see only a small fraction of it, and they often lack the skills and tools needed to address the problem in a developmentally appropriate manner.

The complex factors that fuel these tensions and conflicts are often related to aspects of teen culture known only to teens themselves. Teens see adults as out of touch and, as a result, most remain silent. And the conflict goes on.

You can break that silence. These sessions will help you teach teens specific techniques to address the attitudes and behaviors that lead to conflict. Preventing and resolving conflict involves teaching young people to value and respect difference and diversity. By helping teens build character and increase their social and emotional intelligence, the activities in this book teach and reinforce core social values of respect, tolerance, integrity, truth, and social responsibility.

Targets, Aggressors, and Witnesses

All teens in a school or other community play a role in peer conflict, consciously or not. These sessions will enable you to reach three main roles—targets, aggressors, and witnesses.

- Targets often feel helpless to prevent the abuse they suffer, and fear retaliation if they seek help. The sessions will help you to build their confidence and assertiveness, and teach them problem-solving skills.
- Aggressors may feel little or no empathy for their targets and may have learned their behavior from being bullied or abused. The sessions will help you work with teens who bully to build their social and emotional competence, so that they understand the impact of their behavior on themselves and others.

- The majority of teasing and harassment occurs in the presence of other youth. Witnesses have the power to change a bullying situation by becoming an ally to the target. Witnesses are often unaware of this power and don't realize the importance of their role. Teens tend to take their cues from how other witnesses react; their actions and attitudes can ameliorate or worsen a conflict. The sessions will help you to encourage positive intervention by witnesses, so they can be part of the solution.

Teaching teens conflict resolution skills can be a difficult and even daunting task. *A Leader's Guide to The Courage to Be Yourself* will help you build tolerance and respect among the young people you work with by opening discussion and examining attitudes about diversity. It will help you teach teens to not only resolve conflict, but prevent it.

1. "Talking with Kids About Tough Issues: A National Survey of Parents and Kids." Menlo Park, CA: Kaiser Family Foundation and Children Now, 2001.
2. Olweus, Dan. *Bullying at School: What We Know and What We Can Do*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1993.
3. "Health Behavior in School-Aged Children: A World Health Organization Cross-National Study for Health Canada." Conducted by the Social Program Evaluation Group at Queens University at Kingston, 1998.
4. "Bullying in Schools: Harassment Puts Gay Youth at Risk." Alexandria, VA: National Mental Health Association, 2002.
5. "Hostile Hallways: Bullying, Teasing, and Sexual Harassment in School." Washington, DC: American Association of University Women Educational Foundation, 2001.
6. Fein, Ph.D., Robert A., Bryan Vossekuil, William S. Pollack, Ph.D., Randy Borum, Psy.D., William Modzeleski, and Marisa Reddy, Ph.D. *Threat Assessment in Schools: A Guide to Managing Threatening Situations and to Creating Safe School Climates*. Washington, DC: U.S. Secret Service and U.S. Department of Education, 2002.
7. Brendtro, Ph.D., Larry K., "Worse than Sticks and Stones: Lessons from Research on Ridicule," *ESR Forum* 18:2 (2001), pp. 1, 5, 9. Hoover, John H., and Ronald Oliver, *The Bullying Prevention Handbook: A Guide for Principals, Teachers, and Counselors*. Bloomington, IN: National Educational Service, 1996.

Leading the Sessions

This leader's guide is designed to be used with the anthology, *The Courage to Be Yourself: True Stories by Teens About Cliques, Conflicts, and Overcoming Peer Pressure*. Each of the 26 sessions in the leader's guide is based on a true story from the anthology and the themes it addresses. The sessions can be used in a variety of settings—regular classrooms, elective classes, advisory or family groups, after-school groups, service learning and leadership programs, and community- or faith-based settings. They can be conducted by both novice and experienced leaders who work with teens, including teachers, youth group leaders, counselors, clinicians, diversity coordinators, prevention specialists, and social workers.

The goals of the sessions are to teach teens to resist labeling and stereotyping their peers, to value and respect difference and diversity, and to resolve conflict peacefully when it arises. The stories in the anthology engage young people by reflecting their own experiences and modeling varied forms of positive behavior—the writers overcome stereotypes and preconceptions, befriend peers who are “different,” resist peer pressure and conformity, and learn to better manage difficult emotions. The sessions explain how to use the stories to facilitate discussion and reflection on the larger themes. They use a combination of reading, writing, discussion, and experiential group activities to help teens deepen their understanding of the roots of conflict and how it might be prevented.

The sessions are designed to take approximately 50–55 minutes, but that time may vary depending on the size of your group, the setting in which you are leading the sessions, and the amount of time you wish to spend focusing on

a particular activity. In many of the sessions, we provide suggestions for additional activities to extend the session beyond that time period, or to continue it on a different day.

The activities take a highly interactive approach that challenges young people to define, explore, defend, and change their attitudes and beliefs. Using time-tested teaching strategies, these activities will help teens to:

- define stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination
- understand why labels and stereotypes are harmful
- uncover their own preconceptions and stereotypes
- understand their feelings and learn to express them in healthy ways
- respect and appreciate diversity and difference
- learn critical thinking and conflict-prevention skills
- identify strategies for resolving conflict
- contribute to improving the school or community culture

The sessions have three primary goals:

- 1. To define the problem.** By reading the stories and participating in activities related to them, teens will learn to recognize teasing, harassment, and other forms of conflict, understand why conflict happens, and become more aware of why it's a problem.
- 2. To prevent conflicts.** The sessions focus on activities that build understanding and empathy and help teens examine their attitudes toward diversity and

difference, find common ground, and work cooperatively.

3. To urge teens to intervene in conflicts.

The sessions feature activities that will:

- give targets specific, tangible skills they can use when they encounter peer pressure or harassment
- teach witnesses how to intervene effectively if they see an incident taking place
- teach group members specific techniques like anger management, peer mediation, and conflict resolution that can be used to settle disputes among their peers

HOW THE SESSIONS WORK

The sessions are designed to be easy to follow and easy to adapt. They offer specific guidelines for working with the stories in *The Courage to Be Yourself*, but because you have your own teaching style and strengths, you should feel free to lead group sessions in ways that suit you and meet the needs of the teens you're working with. You can modify sessions to make them shorter or longer, to focus on particular parts of the stories, or to connect them to other subjects you are covering.

Each session plan contains an Overview and a Session. In addition, many sessions have reproducible handouts that you may copy and distribute to your group.

Overview

The Overview is a reference for you and is not presented to the group. It provides an at-a-glance summary of the story and session. The Story Summary describes the assigned reading in two to three sentences and may be written on the board during the session. (You will also

ask volunteers to summarize the story in their own words, and the summary provided in the session plan can be used as a companion or comparison.)

The list of Materials highlights the reproducible handouts and anything else you'll need to complete the session's activities. Ideally, group members should bring their copies of *The Courage to Be Yourself* to each session. Under Prep Work you'll find a description of the preparation you'll need to do before your group meets for that session, such as writing the agenda on the board, making handouts, and setting up the room. The Objectives for each session focus on the skills or consciousness-raising themes group members will work toward. Themes for each session summarize subject matter that will be covered. Links to the Academic Curriculum will help you draw connections between session activities, classroom skills, and academic content.

The Session

The Session is what you present to the group and work through with them. Each session has four parts: a Preview, Gathering, Activity, and Closing.

Preview. The leader briefly goes over the agenda (which she or he has put on the board or flip chart before the meeting), highlighting the subject matter and objectives for the day.

Gathering. A brief activity brings the group's focus to the day's themes and helps prepare the group for the main activities that follow. This activity sets the stage for learning and is designed to hook the group members.

Activity. The main part of the session, the activity—or activities—is based on a story from *The Courage to Be Yourself* and is designed to help you achieve the session's goals. The activities ask teens to relate their personal experiences to the experiences of the story's writer.

Closing. End the session on a positive note. The closing is a brief activity related to the main themes or objectives of the session and can help you check the group's understanding of the main points covered in the session.

The Preview, Gathering, Activities, and Closing create a comprehensive session that will challenge the group—as well as the individual—to grow. Participating in all four parts will help teens personally engage with the content of the stories and is more likely to facilitate behavioral change compared to a more cognitive lesson. However, if you don't have 50–55 minutes to devote to a full session, or if you prefer to focus on the more academic main activities, you may skip the Preview, Gathering, and Closing.

SELECTING AND ORGANIZING THE SESSIONS

All 26 sessions in *A Leader's Guide to The Courage to Be Yourself* are self-contained and can stand alone. You may choose to conduct only a few sessions with your group of teens. Even a single session can help raise teens' acceptance and appreciation of diversity. However, the guide's positive lessons are much more powerful when they are reinforced through a program of several sessions.

You may choose to present the sessions to your group in the order they appear in this book, which matches the order of the stories in *The Courage to Be Yourself*, or you may choose to select sessions and present them in an order that suits your needs more specifically. To help you select and organize sessions, we offer two methods of grouping the sessions: by subjects and themes, and by the stages involved in conflict.

Subjects and Themes

Following is an index of major subjects and themes the sessions and stories cover. Using this index, you can choose and organize sessions to fit your goals as a leader and the needs of your group. For example, you may use this index of subjects and themes to find sessions that match up with other material you are teaching, or you may use it to create a themed unit that focuses on a single topic, such as anger or peer pressure. You may also choose sessions covering a variety of themes to teach a broader unit on conflict.

Anger

Session 16: Understanding Power—Who Has It? Who Doesn't? Beating the Bullies

Session 17: Exploring the Nature of Conflict, It Ain't Easy Being Hard

Session 20: All About Anger, My Group Home Scapegoat

Teasing, Bullying, and Harassment

Session 1: We All Belong to Groups (Part 1), In Defense of Misfits

Session 3: What Is Harassment? Afraid to Learn

Session 4: How Do We Experience Conflict? Sticking with Your "Own Kind"

Session 5: We All Belong to Groups (Part 2), Which Crowd Did You Pick?

Session 6: Acceptance in Your Life, Fashion Un-Conscious

Session 7: Interrupting Bullying and Harassment, Lighten Up on Heavy People

Session 8: Types of Peer Pressure, Losing My Friends to Weed

Session 9: Responding to Conflict—What Do We Do? (Part 1), Getting Guys off My Back

Session 11: Resisting Conformity, Princess Oreo Speaks Out

Session 13: Exploring the Nature of Violence, Gay on the Block

Session 14: The Power of Cliques, Nasty Girls

Session 15: Racial and Ethnic Identity, Sticks and Stones

Session 16: Understanding Power—Who Has It? Who Doesn't? Beating the Bullies

Session 17: Exploring the Nature of Conflict, It Ain't Easy Being Hard

Session 20: All About Anger, My Group Home Scapegoat

Session 21: From Being a Bystander to Taking a Stand, There Are 20 Sides to Every Story

Cliques

Session 1: We All Belong to Groups (Part 1), In Defense of Misfits

Session 4: How Do We Experience Conflict? Sticking with Your "Own Kind"

Session 5: We All Belong to Groups (Part 2), Which Crowd Did You Pick?

Session 14: The Power of Cliques, Nasty Girls

Finding Allies/Becoming an Ally

Session 20: All About Anger, My Group Home Scapegoat

Session 21: From Being a Bystander to Taking a Stand, There Are 20 Sides to Every Story

Session 23: Overcoming Preconceptions and Stereotypes (Part 2), A Different Kind of Friend

Session 24: Letting Go of Labels (Part 2), She's Cool, She's Funny, She's Gay

Interrupting Teasing, Bullying, and Harassment

Session 7: Interrupting Bullying and Harassment, Lighten Up on Heavy People

Session 12: Interrupting Prejudice and Stopping Verbal Abuse, I'm Both Arab and American

Session 13: Exploring the Nature of Violence, Gay on the Block

Session 21: From Being a Bystander to Taking a Stand, There Are 20 Sides to Every Story

Mediation

Session 21: From Being a Bystander to Taking a Stand, There Are 20 Sides to Every Story

Session 25: Introduction to Mediation, Back Off: Peer Mediation Can Help

Overcoming Preconceptions and Stereotypes

Session 10: Countering Stereotypes and Prejudice, My Boy Wanted a Boyfriend

Session 11: Resisting Conformity, Princess Oreo Speaks Out

Session 12: Interrupting Prejudice and Stopping Verbal Abuse, I'm Both Arab and American

Session 15: Racial and Ethnic Identity, Sticks and Stones

Session 18: Overcoming Preconceptions and Stereotypes (Part 1), At Home in the Projects

Session 23: Overcoming Preconceptions and Stereotypes (Part 2), A Different Kind of Friend

Session 24: Letting Go of Labels (Part 2), She's Cool, She's Funny, She's Gay

Peer Pressure

Session 6: Acceptance in Your Life, Fashion Un-Conscious

Session 8: Types of Peer Pressure, Losing My Friends to Weed

Session 11: Resisting Conformity, Princess Oreo Speaks Out