

ALLYSHIP IN ACTION

Learning Objectives

By the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Define the difference between an ally and a bystander
- Identify specific moments where intervention is possible
- Practice concrete language for speaking up, supporting, and reporting
- Reflect on their own role in moments of casual bias or harm

Part One: What Is an Ally vs. a Bystander?

Opening (5 minutes)

Start with a question to the whole group, no hands raised yet, just thinking time:

"Have you ever seen something happen to a classmate that didn't feel right, but you didn't know what to do, so you didn't do anything?"

Give students 30 seconds of silent reflection. Then say: "You're not alone if that's happened. Today we're going to talk about what to do in that exact moment."

Define the Terms (10 minutes)

Write two words on the board: Bystander and Ally. Ask students to guess the difference before you define them.

Bystander: Someone who sees something harmful happen and doesn't act — whether out of fear, uncertainty, not wanting to make things worse, or simply not knowing what to do.

Ally: Someone who sees something harmful happen and uses their position, voice, or relationship to support the person affected — even in a small way.

Key teaching point: Being a bystander doesn't make someone a bad person. Most people freeze in the moment. The goal of this lesson isn't to make anyone feel guilty — it's to build the skill of noticing and acting, so the freeze gets shorter every time.

ALLYSHIP RESPONSES

The Four Types of Allyship Response (10 minutes)

Introduce these four response types. Write them on chart paper or the board as a visual the class can reference in Part Two:

1. **Speak Up in the Moment** — Saying something directly when it happens. ("Hey, that's not okay." / "That joke isn't landing the way you think it is.")
2. **Check In Afterward** — Reaching out privately to the person affected. ("That seemed like a lot back there — are you okay?")
3. **Redirect the Room** — Shifting the conversation or moment without confrontation. ("Anyway, what'd everyone get for number 4?")
4. **Get a Trusted Adult** — Recognizing when a moment is bigger than a peer can handle alone, and looping in a teacher or counselor.

Make clear: all four are valid forms of allyship. Not every moment calls for speaking up loudly in front of everyone. Sometimes the quietest response is still the strongest one.

Quick Discussion (5–10 minutes)

Ask: "Why might someone choose option 2 or 3 instead of option 1? Is that still allyship?"

Let students discuss in pairs for 2 minutes, then share out. Validate that context matters — safety, relationship, power dynamics, and the affected student's wishes all factor into which response fits.

Closing Part One

End with: "Next time we meet, we're going to practice these four responses using real scenarios. Start paying attention this week to moments — big or small — where you notice something that felt sour instead of sweet."

ALLYSHIP PART TWO

Part Two: Practice with Grade 6+ Scenario Cards

Recap (5 minutes): Quickly review the four response types from Part One (referencing the chart paper if displayed). Ask one or two students to share anything they noticed during the week without naming names.

Small Group Setup (5 minutes): Divide students into groups of 3–4. Distribute two or three of the Grade 6+ Scenario Cards per group covering race, hair, language, disability, immigration status, and more.

Give instructions: "In your group, read each scenario aloud. For each one, decide together: Which of the four allyship responses fits best here? What would you actually say or do? Write your response on a sticky note and be ready to share."

Small Group Work (12–15 minutes): Circulate as groups work. Prompt deeper thinking where needed:

- "What makes this scenario harder to respond to than the last one?"
- "What would change if this happened to a close friend versus someone you don't know well?"
- "Is there a version of this response that's too aggressive? Too passive?"
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Share Out & Discussion (10–15 minutes): Have each group share one scenario and their chosen response. After each share, open it briefly to the room: "Would anyone respond differently? Why?"

Watch for and reinforce these key teaching moments as they come up naturally:

- Intent versus impact — a comment can be harmful even when it wasn't meant to be
- The bystander effect — harm often continues because no one acts first
- Allyship isn't about being perfect — it's about trying, even imperfectly

Closing Reflection (5 minutes)

- Hand out index cards or sticky notes. Ask each student to write one private, unshared response to:
- "One specific thing I will do differently the next time I see something happen."
- Collect these or have students keep them in a folder/journal. Optionally, revisit them at the end of the semester to reflect on growth.

NOTES FOR EDUCATORS

- For Counselors: This lesson works well as a standalone small-group session and pairs naturally with a separate Identity Wheel activity as a follow-up. Once students have reflected on their own identity, they're often more attuned to recognizing harm directed at others.
- A note on scope: The scenario cards intentionally span multiple types of identity and difference — race, natural hair, immigration status and language, physical disability, and invisible illness — so that allyship is framed as a universal skill, not a single-issue conversation.
- Sensitivity reminder: Some students may have personally experienced one or more of the scenarios discussed. Frame all discussion in the third person (the student in the scenario) rather than asking anyone to disclose personal experience. If a student chooses to share something personal, thank them without singling them out further.

ROLE PLAY SCENARIO #1

"You're So Articulate"

A Black student gives a strong presentation in class. Afterward, a classmate says, "Wow, you're so well-spoken — I didn't expect that." The student isn't sure how to respond, and no one else in the room reacts.

ROLE PLAY SCENARIO #2

“You Don't Look Sick”

A student with an invisible chronic illness has a 504 plan that gives her extended time on tests and permission to leave class when needed. A classmate finds out and says, "Wait, you get extra time? That's so unfair — there's nothing even wrong with you." The student has never told most people about her condition, and now feels pressure to either explain herself or stay silent.

ROLE PLAY SCENARIO #3

"Where Are You Really From?"

A student who was born in the United States tells a new classmate she's from Ohio. The classmate responds, "No, but where are you really from? Like, what are you?" The student has answered this question a hundred times and is tired of it.

ROLE PLAY SCENARIO #4

“The Only One in the Room”

In a history class discussing a painful chapter in American racial history, the teacher turns to the only Black student and asks, "Can you share your perspective on how this must have felt?" The student feels put on the spot but doesn't want to seem difficult.

ROLE PLAY SCENARIO #5

"I Don't See Color"

During a school discussion about diversity and inclusion, a student says confidently, "I treat everyone exactly the same — I literally don't see color." A few students of color in the room exchange glances but don't say anything. The teacher moves on.

ROLE PLAY SCENARIO #6

“The Assumed Troublemaker”

A group of students — some Black, some not — are talking loudly in the hallway between classes. A staff member singles out one of the Black students and tells him to quiet down, ignoring the others who were equally loud. He's embarrassed and angry.

ROLE PLAY SCENARIO #7

"You're Not Like the Others"

A student is told by a peer she considers a friend, "You're different from most [insert racial/ethnic group] people I've met — like, you're actually really cool." The student doesn't know whether to say thank you or say something else entirely.

ROLE PLAY SCENARIO #8

“The Group Project Takeover”

During a group project, the one student of color in the group suggests an idea. No one responds. Two minutes later, a white student says almost the same thing — and the group loves it. The first student says nothing, but feels invisible.

ROLE PLAY SCENARIO #9

"That's So Ghetto"

A student uses the phrase "that's so ghetto" casually in conversation to describe something she thinks is low-quality or embarrassing. Several students laugh. One student is bothered by it but isn't sure if speaking up is worth the awkwardness.

ROLE PLAY SCENARIO #10

“The Costume Question”

A student comes to school the day after Halloween and overhears classmates laughing about costumes they wore that imitated or mocked another culture. One student pulls up photos. Others in the group go quiet, unsure whether what they're seeing crosses a line — or whether to say so.

ROLE PLAY SCENARIO #11

“The Elevator Moment”

A student who uses a wheelchair arrives at the elevator at the same time as a group of classmates headed to the same floor. One of them says cheerfully, "Oh, must be nice to never have to take the stairs!" and the others laugh. The student forces a smile but has heard some version of this comment every week since starting at the school.

ROLE PLAY SCENARIO #12

"Say It in English"

A student who recently immigrated is working through a math problem with a small group. She quietly asks a question in her home language to a bilingual classmate to make sure she understood correctly. Another student in the group rolls their eyes and says, "Can you please just speak English? We can't understand you." The teacher doesn't hear it. The rest of the group goes quiet.