

**“Sticks and Stones”:  
Discussing Bullying in the School Community**

**Overview**

It's important for educators to address the issue of bullying with students, raise awareness about its prevalence, and help young people understand its detrimental effects for the classroom and school community. In this activity, students will discuss the various actions of bullies, the reasons for their actions, the effects of acts of bullying, and possible responses for taking a stand against bullying. By raising awareness of bullying, teachers can help decrease the behavior within their classes and school, offering much needed lifelines for victims of bullying.

**Grades**

K-8

**Activity Type**

Whole Class

**Materials**

- Chart paper and markers
- Cut out heart shapes (1 per student), template attached
- “Jess’s Day,” story attached for read aloud
- We Will Not Tolerate Bullying, handout attached

**Duration**

30-45 minutes (depending on how in-depth discussion gets)

**Procedure**

**What Does it Mean to “Bully?”**

1. Write the following sentence on the board and begin by asking a student to read it out loud: “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” Discuss:
  - How many of you have heard this phrase before?
  - When or why might you have been taught this phrase? What is the purpose of the phrase?
  - Do you agree or disagree with this statement and why? Do words ever hurt? Have you personally ever been hurt by something someone has said to you or about you? (Lead a discussion with the class regarding how words do hurt, sometimes even worse than physical violence.)
2. If students did not bring it up, note how this phrase has been used to ward off bullies with its core principal of “don’t let it get to you; shrug it off.” Tell students you want to spend some time talking about the concept of bullying. Write the word BULLY on a piece of chart paper and ask students to share what comes to mind when they see this word. Write down (or have a student volunteer write down) the words, behaviors, emotions, etc. that students share. Teachers should

ask clarifying questions that lead students to consider areas that are not evident in their comments. For example:

- What are the various actions a bully might take?
- In what ways do bullies try to hurt others beyond physical violence? (Encourage students to consider the emotional and psychological damages bullies try to inflict with actions such as teasing, spreading rumors, posting mean things on the Internet, instigating others to join them in their taunts, and intimidation.)
- How do you think a victim of bullying might feel?
  - Students will likely note answers such as: “victims may feel scared, sad, nervous, sick, unworthy, etc.”
  - Also discuss with students how it is important to recognize that we don’t always know what other people are dealing with. While something might just seem like a joke to us, the person to whom it is said might take it more serious; or that “one” joke you make to someone might actually be the “tenth” in a long list of insults that person has experienced that day, perhaps at home or otherwise.
- Do you ever hear statements such as: “I’m just kidding!” or “Come on, I’m just messing with you”? How can we tell the difference between “joking” and “bullying?”

3. Decide upon a class definition of bullying, such as:

- Bullying is intentionally causing harm to others, whether through verbal harassment, physical assault, or other more subtle or dishonest methods (such as manipulation, gossip, or instigating).

Write this definition at the top of the bully brainstorm students compiled and keep this posted in the room.

### **Jess’s Day**

4. Tell students you are going to read them a story and give each student a cut out shape of a heart (example attached). Explain to students it represents the heart of a boy named Jess and that they are to listen for points when they think Jess is hurt, disrespected, or bullied throughout the story you read to them. Tell students to tear a piece of their paper heart off at every one of those moments.
5. Remind students of the expectations of respectful, active listeners then read the story to them. Once it is over, many students will have a pile of pieces of their former heart shape in front of them. Discuss:
  - What was Jess’s day like? What made Jess’s day so bad? (Ensure discussion of the fact that while we might say or do only one hurtful thing to a classmate, we never know what other things have been said to a person in addition.)
  - At what points during the day were Jess’s feelings hurt by someone else?
    - As students relate these moments, ask them to share whether they would characterize the other students’ actions as bullying behavior and why. (If need be, refer students back to the definition and brainstorm of bullying.) Example moments to discuss:
      - Boys in first period
      - Anna’s refusal to speak back to Jess in the hall
      - Someone throws paper in the hall
      - Boys in art

- Also discuss the response of the adults throughout Jess’s day (mom, teacher, and substitute).
- How can experiencing bullying and disrespect affect us? How did it affect Jess?
- Do you think Jess’s Day is realistic? Meaning, do you think a middle school student could experience a day like this? Explain.
  - It is important to point out how nothing “sensational” happened in the story – Jess wasn’t thrown to the ground and beaten by 5 classmates. Yet, the culmination of what he experienced throughout the day added up to be incredibly painful.
- What if every day is like this for Jess? What kind of toll might this take on him?
- Why do you think Jess wants to “vanish into thin air for forever”? Do you think students (or even teachers) at our school sometimes go home feeling this way? Explain.
- A lot of you felt bad or sorry for Jess. What do you call that emotion?
  - Discuss the concepts of sympathy and empathy with students:
    - Sympathy, which students are more likely to mention, is the ability to understand and appreciate another’s emotions; having a strong concern for the other person. Sympathy is “feeling sorry for someone.”
    - Empathy is very similar, but a bit deeper. It also means understanding another’s emotions and feelings, but also involves the ability to “put oneself into another’s shoes,” or in some way experience what the other person is feeling. So if sympathy is feeling sorry *for* someone, empathy is feeling sorry *with* someone, understanding what they feel.
  - Discuss with the class that one of the reasons some students bully is because they are insensitive; they lack empathy for other people. They aren’t considering (or lack the mature ability to consider) what they would feel like if they were in the other person’s shoes who they are attacking. “When a bully attacks a victim, the bully feels powerful and in control. He or she may blame the victim, justifying his or her aggression by saying the victim deserved bad treatment or asked for it.” (Source: Teaching Tolerance)

### **WHO are the Bullies and the Bullied?**

6. Give students a few minutes to self-reflect (in writing) regarding the following two questions. Encourage students to be honest, letting them know that they will not be forced to share their answers unless they want to:
  - Have you ever been bullied? Describe an instance from some point in your life when you believe that someone purposely hurt you with their words or actions. How did this make you feel? How did you respond? If you could go back in time and do something differently, what would you do and why?
  - Have you ever bullied someone? If so, why? What made you stop, or, what made you continue?

Allow students to share their thoughts and further discuss:

- Why do you think bullies do what they do? Why do they intentionally try to hurt others?
  - Make sure to discuss the multi-layered aspects of this question. For example, students might note things such as: “bullies do what they do because they think it’s funny, they want to be in control and have power, they want to be popular, they want others to laugh along, they want other students to admire them or fear them, etc.”

- However, beyond again noting the lack of empathy bullies often exhibit, it's also important to consider that students may also be bullying because they themselves have an emotional issue they are masking or compensating for. Perhaps they don't understand what it means to be a friend or how to make friends.
7. A common complaint teachers often hear when correcting, reprimanding, or disciplining middle school students is, "You are picking on me!" Discuss this with students up front in order to diffuse this from being an issue in the future:
- I think we agree that in the story, Jess's teacher or substitute didn't treat him with a lot of respect. Have any of you ever felt like you were being picked on by your teacher? Why did you feel that way?
    - After students have shared their thoughts, share outright with them that you pledge to not pick on them or purposely disrespect them, because they deserve respect and to be treated with humility as members of the classroom community, just as you do. Tell students that if they ever feel you are picking on them, it is important they come and speak to you about it so that you can work it out.
    - Further discuss the concept of taking responsibility for one's actions. Explain to students that it is often when they are caught doing something they aren't supposed to be doing that they feel "picked on." But, if they actually examine the situation, often times they'll find that they are simply frustrated by being corrected or disciplined and are angry with the teacher for being "caught."

### **Don't Be Mistaken – Bullying DOES Matter**

8. Remind students of the opening quote, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me." Discuss with the class how some people, adults and kids, are under the misconception that bullying doesn't really matter, that's it's just "part of growing up," "part of life," or that it's something you just need to "get over." Tell students that this attitude is wrong – that bullying does matter. Discuss:
- Students targeted by bullies sometimes avoid school or have trouble concentrating. They can also develop personality disorders like depression and anxiety. (Think about it. If someone is hearing how stupid, worthless, unattractive, etc. they are all day; or if someone goes through school being ignored and doesn't feel like a part of anything, it is ridiculous to think this doesn't matter and isn't going to harm them.)
  - 60% of bullies have at least one criminal conviction because the behavior carries over into adulthood.
  - Putting an end to bullying requires a commitment from everyone in a school, including every single one of you.
  - What kind of interventions can you, as young people, use to prevent or stop bullying?
    - Discuss with students how it is important to not give a bully power. Don't laugh when they tease someone. Don't ignore it when they torment a classmate – whether that classmate is your friend or not. Let's all commit today, together, that we will not tolerate bullying in our classroom or in our school. As human beings, we deserve more respect than allowing ourselves or others to be pushed around.
    - It's normal for other people to get on your nerves. It's normal, and even acceptable to not be friends with every single person. But what is required is being respectful of every

single person. Remember this before you lash out at someone because they “bug” you, or are different than you.

- DO NOT just ignore it if you are being bullied. Talk to someone. You should seek adult intervention (counselor, teacher, parent, etc.) and try to stay among friends. If the first adult you tell is like some of the adults we’ve discussed, and they say “suck it up,” “get over it,” or “ignore it,” tell someone else. Tell ME. There is help for you.
  - Discuss with students how there is a difference between “tattling” and asking for help. Request that everyone agree that it is an expectation to tell someone if you are bullied or if you witness someone being bullied.
  - Pass out and discuss the attached “We Will Not Tolerate Bullying Because it *DOES* Matter” handout. Have students write and sign their own pledge regarding bullying. Students should store this handout in their notebook as a reminder.
9. As an optional culmination to the discussion, draw students attention back to Jess and ask:
- If you could say anything to Jess what would you say? If you could place yourself in his story, what would you do?

Teachers may also want to provide students with art supplies, such as construction paper, glue/tape, and markers. As an illustration of the effects of bullying, instruct students to put Jess’s heart back together again, gluing it to a piece of construction paper. Students can then decorate the paper with anti-bullying messages, poetry, drawings, etc., writing on the heart pieces themselves, between the pieces, or around the border of the paper they glue the pieces to.

### **Additional Activities**

- Continue exploring bullying and related concepts with the Consortium’s “In Their Shoes, Understanding and Standing Up Against Bullying & Intolerance.”
- Lead a Teaching Tolerance activity, such as “A Contract on Bullying” or “Playing the Bully Card.”

### **Resources**

- [www.teachingtolerance.org](http://www.teachingtolerance.org): *Teaching Tolerance* is dedicated to reducing prejudice, improving intergroup relations and supporting equitable school experiences for our nation's children. They offer free education materials (from lesson plans and activities available online to free videos that can be ordered) on numerous topics. Write “bully” in the site’s search box for particular articles and activities on this topic.
- <http://www.tolerance.org/teens/>: *Mix It Up* is a program of Teaching Tolerance which provides ideas and tools to help you break the walls of division in your school and community.
- [www.nonamecallingweek.org](http://www.nonamecallingweek.org): *No Name-Calling Week* is an annual week of educational activities aimed at ending name-calling of all kinds and providing schools with the tools and inspiration to launch an on-going dialogue about ways to eliminate bullying in their communities. The full curriculum and video is available for purchase on the site, but free lessons and activities are also available for download.
- <http://stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov/kids/>: In addition to animated videos and games, the *Stop Bullying Now!* site offers resources designed specifically for family members, youth advisors, youth, educators, mental health, health and safety professionals.

## Jess's Day

"For the last time, get up Jess! You're laziness makes me sick. It's 7:30, and you are late for school!"

Jess woke up to the sound of his mom storming around his room. He looked at the clock and groaned. He hadn't meant to sleep late - he'd just forgotten to set the alarm.

His mother was still yelling at him. "I have to do everything for you. I don't know why you can't have the good sense to even get up on time."

Jess got up and searched through his drawer for something to wear. He wanted to find his favorite blue t-shirt since the weather outside looked nice. Searching through drawer after drawer, he couldn't find it. Downstairs, he heard a final warning from his mother. "Jess! NOW!" Not wanting to anger her further, he hastily grabbed an old sweatshirt before running out of his room.

By the time he got to the kitchen, his mom was picking up the keys and heading for the door. "Mom, can I just grab something quick to eat...I'm kind of hungry."

"Too bad," she replied. "You should have thought of that when you were sleeping." So, with his stomach rumbling, Jess left for school.

Jess bypassed the snack machines in the lobby and rushed straight to first period, realizing he was now 20 minutes late. When he walked in, everyone was working silently and Jess remembered they were having a quiz this morning. His teacher looked up from her desk. "Well, how nice of you to show up. You can sign the tardy sheet, and since you have now wasted 20 minutes of my class period, you'll need to stay after school today."

Jess sighed and did as told. As he took his seat, the teacher walked over. "Here's your quiz. You have about 10 minutes left to finish." "Good luck," she said sarcastically. "You understand that if you fail this, your average will sink even lower." She shook her head and walked away.

Michael, the boy sitting by Jess, snickered at the jab from the teacher. He leaned over and whispered, "Hey man, nice hair style. Must have forgotten to buy a brush when you got that ugly sweatshirt at the Salvation Army. It's only supposed to be like, 80 degrees today."

Several other boys heard and laughed at this. "Boys! Unless you want zero's, get to work!"

Jess tried to ignore them and started his quiz.

When the bell rang, Jess headed to his locker. All around him students were talking, laughing, hanging out in groups. He passed Anna and said hello in a shy voice. She did not return his greeting and continued gossiping with her friend. Jess went to open his locker and was gathering his books when something hit him on the back of the head. Turning around he couldn't tell who had thrown something, but he didn't want to wait around to figure it out. He stuffed what he thought he needed into his bag and hurried off to art.



Jess liked art, because sometimes his teacher would let him sit outside the classroom and draw in the hall. He didn't have to worry about people making fun of him out there. He could pretend he was invisible, another cinderblock in the wall, as he lost himself in his sketching. Today however, the art teacher wasn't there. Instead, there was a substitute, and in Jess's school, this meant "free for all" time. With his survival instinct kicking in, Jess went to the substitute.

"Excuse me, sir? I'm not feeling well. May I please go to the school nurse?"

"What's wrong with you?"

When Jess fumbled with his answer, the substitute told him to "suck it up" and take his seat. As soon as Jess reached his chair and went to sit down, it was kicked out from under him and he landed on the floor with a thud.

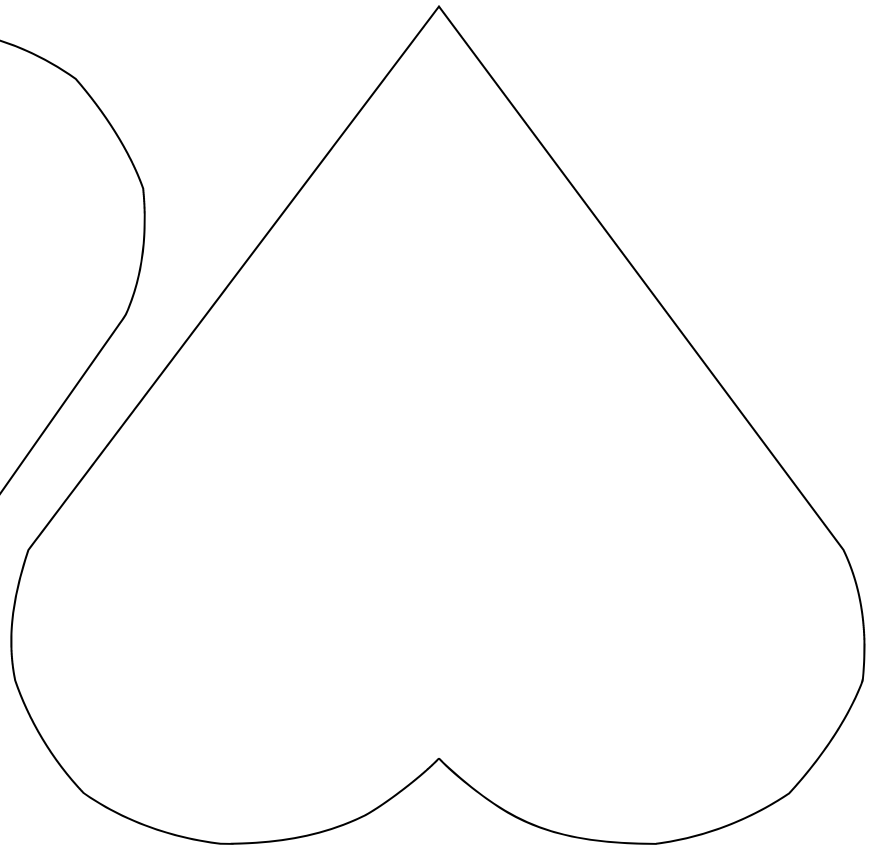
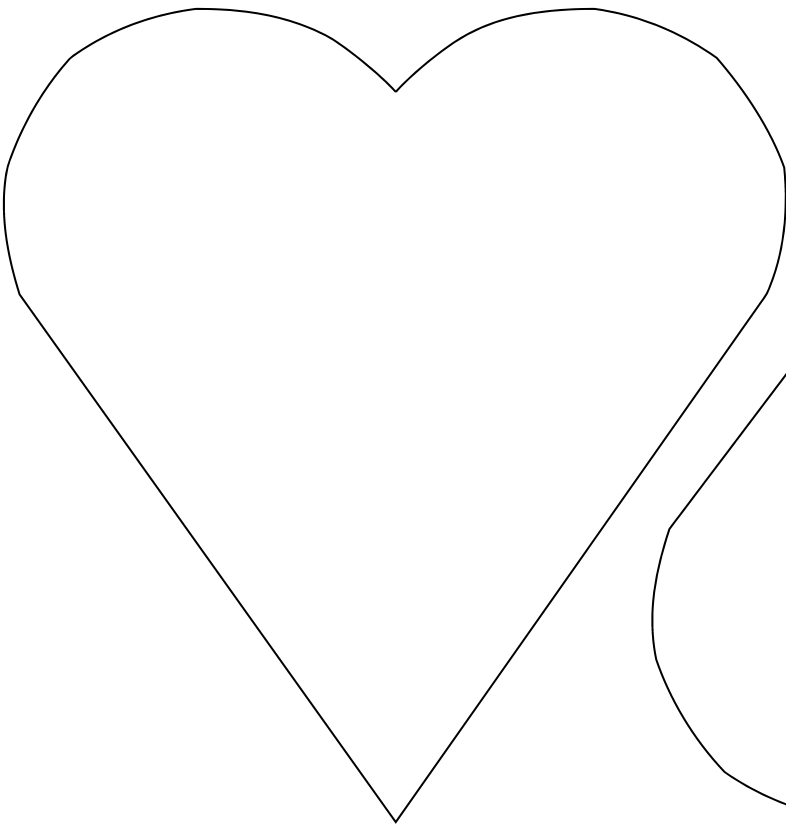
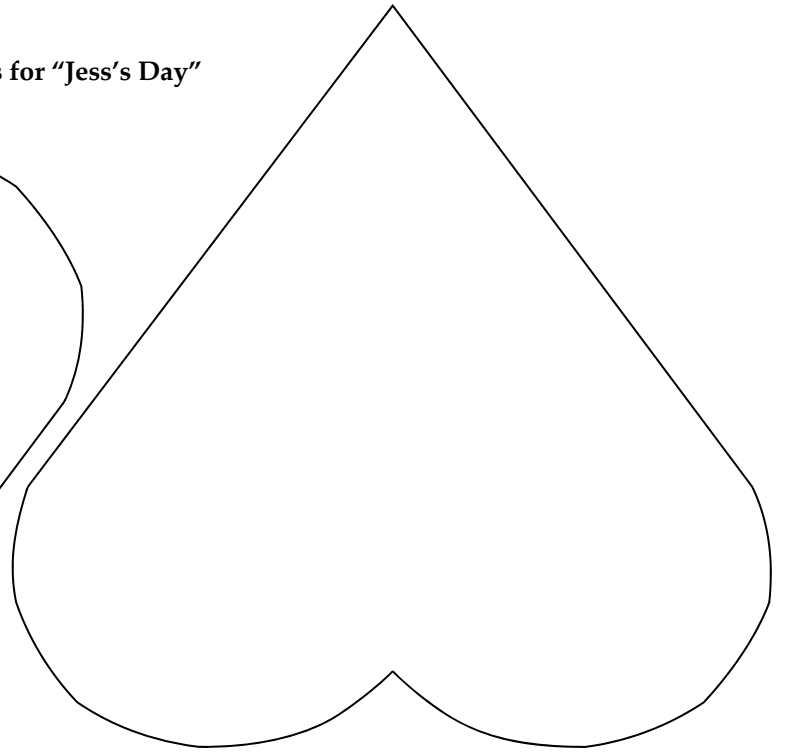
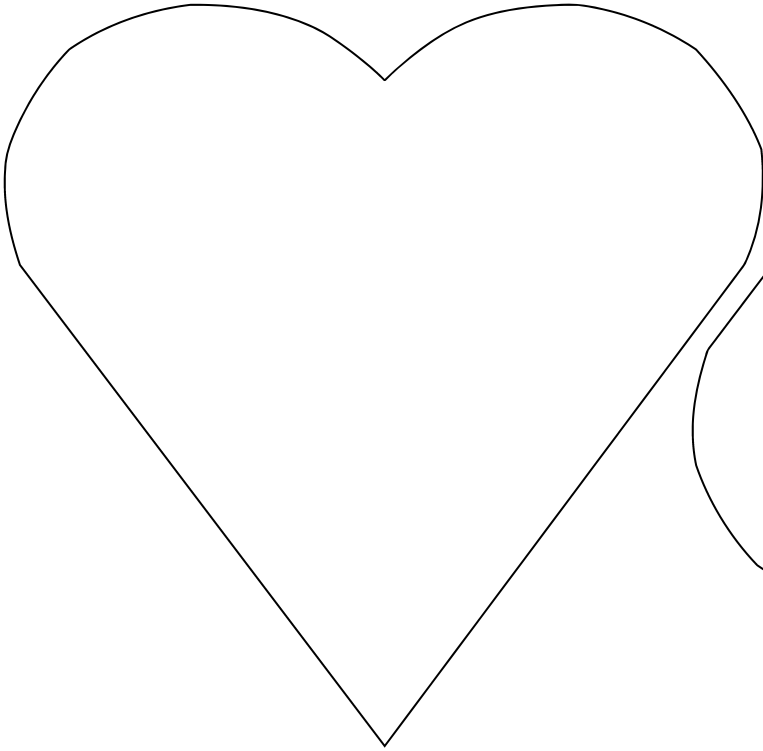
"What's the problem?" the substitute yelled? He walked over to Jess and stared down at him. "Why are you on the floor!?" Jess didn't know what to say. If he told the truth, he was sure things would be even worse for him later.

"I slipped and missed my chair," Jess said, rubbing his sore arm.

"Sure you did. I can already tell you are a trouble maker. Sit down and don't you say another word in this classroom, or I'll make sure your principal hears all about you. Do you understand?"

As the rest of the class snickered at his reprimand, Jess couldn't imagine feeling more miserable. He wished that he could vanish into thin air for forever.

**Heart Shapes for "Jess's Day"**





## We Will NOT Tolerate Bullying Because it *DOES* Matter!

*“Sticks and stones may break our bones, but words will break our hearts.”*

### **If you are being bullied...**

- Reach Out
- Tell an adult. Sometimes you may have to tell more than one trusted adult.
- Ask your friends to help you. There is safety in numbers.
- Practice what to say the next time you're bullied with your parents, teachers or friends.
- Be Cool in the Moment
- Stay calm and confident. Don't show the bully that you're sad or mad.
- Ignore the bully and walk away.
- Change the School Community
- Work with others to stop bully behavior; your whole school will benefit.
- Remember: A lot of kids have to cope with bullying. You are not alone. No one deserves to be bullied.

### **If you witness bullying...**

- Interrupt It
- Stand next to, or speak up for, the person being bullied.
- Ask the bully to stop.
- Comfort the person being bullied and offer friendship.
- Walk away and get help. Find an adult who can intervene.
- Remember, what you are witnessing is wrong. It is your responsibility, as a member of the school community, to not tolerate this type of behavior from anyone – whether they are your friend or not.

### **If you are the bully...**

- Make a Commitment to Change.
- Talk to an adult, like a teacher or parent, about how to get along with others.
- Ask a friend to help you stop your bully behavior.
- Apologize to the kids you have bullied.
- Focus on Empathy and Responsibility
- Think about what it feels like to be bullied -- would you want to be treated that way?
- Before you speak, think about whether your words will help or hurt another student.
- Change Your Behavior
- Resist peer pressure to bully.
- If you start to bully, walk away and find something else to do.
- Remember: You don't have to like everyone around you, but you have to treat everyone with respect.

Source: <http://www.tolerance.org/teach/activities/activity.jsp?ar=770>

### **My PLEDGE...**

Write a 1-2 sentence pledge below to **not bully**, to **assist if you witness bullying**, and to **ask for help if you are being bullied**.

*I* \_\_\_\_\_ *pledge...*

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Signature*

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Date*