

# Interrupting Prejudice

Some of our most challenging and teachable moments come not during a planned lesson, but when a student unexpectedly makes a prejudiced or insensitive comment. Here are some guidelines to help us to act calmly and consciously, and to help us to make the most of these moments.

- **Deal with it.** It is essential that we do. By not interrupting prejudice, we are condoning it. You might find excuses to not deal (too little time, there's too much going on, you're tired, you're overwhelmed), but please remember – there really are no good excuses.
- **Assess the situation.** We do need to deal, but not every incident is a code red situation. Intervention need not take an hour. A simple sweet comment and explanation might do the trick. Your response should match the seriousness of situation.
- **Come from a place of empathy, rather than judgment, compassion rather than shame.** We want to open our students up to learning, not shut them down. We want to “water the plants,” not drown them. Rather than tell our students, “That comment is not acceptable here!” help them to understand why the comment is not okay. Be supportive so students leave the conversation ready to learn more.
- **If the comment has pushed your buttons, breathe deeply and try to “put yourself in the student’s shoes”** and imagine what it might feel like to be the student in this particular situation. If your personal buttons were pushed to the point where you are not able to empathize, go ask for help.
- **Place your conversation in the context of Mosaic or other social emotional lessons you have taught.** Refer to games you have played or discussions you have had that relate to what has just happened. If you cannot think of anything, relate it to one of the Mosaic songs or one of the values in our MOSAIC acronym. Chances are it will easily relate to mutual respect or open mindedness. Feel free to sing!
- **Pay attention to what the intention behind the comment might be.** It may be that the students have no understanding or thought of the significance behind their comment. (“That movie was so gay!”) In that case, a gentle supportive explanation might be appropriate. It also might be that the student is making the comment in frustration or anger at another student. In that case, you may want to give an explanation for why the comment was not okay along with some tools to deal with the emotion. (“Why did you call him that name? Oh, because you were angry. What’s another way you can let him know you are upset? How about using an I Statement?”)
- **Often we hear students using words that describe people as insults or as synonyms for “stupid.”** (That’s so gay! You throw like a girl! That’s lame! That’s retarded!) You can explain how using these words in this way not only hurts the person they are targeting, it also hurts the whole group of people which the words describe. If we are going to live by the Mosaic values, including mutual respect, we must not use these words in this way.

- Be sure you address what has just happened with the perpetrators, bystanders, as well as with the students targeted by the comment.
- If the students to whom the comment was directed are having a hard time, be sure to give them space to talk about what happened. Discuss what they might do if it were to happen again. Remind them of their assertiveness skills, I Statements, and how to be an ally to others they see going through similar experiences.
- If you have an intense discussion, be sure to follow up with all the students involved.

*Modified from The Mosaic Project Staff Manual for instructors working with 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup>-grade students.*