

Saving Our Schools

From Hate and Violence

• **LEADER'S GUIDE** •



Part 2: Building Caring And Safe School Communities

Distributed by:

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SAVING OUR SCHOOLS

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Series Overview

Saving Our Schools is a 2-part video series which will provide educators with an invaluable tool for preventing school crises and building critical lines of communication within our school communities. For classroom use in middle and high schools, this program is designed to spark honest and direct conversation about violence and school safety between students, teachers and counselors.

How To Use This Video

This video is designed for use in classrooms, community centers, youth organizations, camps, teen groups, libraries, or for children at home. Although teenagers are the target audience, parents, teachers, school administrators, school support staff, counselors, social workers, youth workers, peer counseling trainers, and anyone else who has regular contact with and a commitment to young people would benefit from this video as well. This leader's guide is aimed at the classroom teacher, but it can be used by any group leader who wants to get the most out of *Saving Our Schools*.





The S.O.S. programs are intended to be used as part of a learning experience that begins before viewing the programs and ends beyond the classroom walls. The discussion questions and activities are intended to focus and enhance this learning experience.

Before showing *Saving Our Schools* to your students, the following steps would be useful preparation:

- Screen the videos at least once, and note areas where you might want to stop the tape to probe an issue more fully.
- Read this guide to get a sense of how the videos might be used, what discussion questions would work best with your students, and what follow-up activities or projects would be most appropriate and beneficial.
- Ask the students questions to get them thinking about some of the key issues presented in these programs. You might want to distribute copies of the discussion questions in this guide. Be sure to go over these questions in advance to make sure they are understood and that they are appropriate to your students. They can be used to spark discussion after the screening.

The teaching technique underlying the series is peer education. Because we believe that teen viewers will





learn the skills and attitudinal changes proposed if they are taught by their peers, the programs are structured around discussions where real kids grapple with tough situations and model positive solutions and attitudes.

Objectives

- To understand why students join groups
- To examine the negative impact of gossip and insults
- To learn ways to ease social isolation
- To recognize the importance of individual responsibility in creating a more inclusive, caring school community

Synopsis

School can be a cruel place. We have almost come to accept teens making fun of one another as a rite of passage. However, the pain experienced by the victims of such behavior can lead to terrible consequences. According to Michael Pritchard, the root of all violence is disrespect for other people's pain. The recent shootings in our schools illustrate how cruelty and isolation can result in violence.

In-groups, out-groups, popularity, and cliques are as old as high school itself. We all need friends and being part of a close knit group is very supportive.





Michael begins by asking the students if they need to belong to a group in school. Jahmilla responds that if you don't, you may be labeled as a loner without any friends. When you belong to a group, you identify with that group and people identify you with that group. Another girl interjects that you want people at school to accept you the way your family does, but that doesn't happen.

Michael is surprised to discover that most of the students feel that their classmates don't care about them. A boy tries to explain, "You're dealing with an age where everyone is trying to figure out who they are. It's hard, when you don't know who you are, to care about anyone else...if it doesn't affect you." Dustin adds, "If someone comes at you about their problems or their feelings, that's not accepted nowadays." He explains that kids are more concerned with having fun than getting in touch with their feelings.

Michael asks if there are a lot of insults and put-downs in school. The group responds with a resounding "Yes!" They rattle off a list of things people make fun of, such as academic success and athletic ability, ethnicity, appearance and economic standing. A girl explains that kids can be mean. "In their insecurity, they make themselves feel better by putting others down or making them feel stupid."





The girls then discuss with Michael the way that teenage girls “torture” one another. One girl points out that a lot goes on behind people’s backs through gossip and rumors. “You end up being insecure because you never know what people are saying about you.” Another girl adds, “It hurts more than being punched in the face.”

“Tell me about someone who you’ve seen isolated and picked on in high school,” asks Michael. The students share stories of classmates who have been mistreated. One boy shares the story of another student who was teased for being poor. He then began to pick on other people to make himself feel better. Michael points out that such anger rolls downhill.

Michael poses a hypothetical situation to the group: A student is sitting alone in the lunchroom at a table next to your friends’ table. Would you go sit with him? Invite him to sit with you and your friends? Or just leave him alone and sit with your friends? Matt tells the story of trying to reach out to someone in that exact situation and the boy turned him down. He attributed that response to suspicion due to years of exclusion. “He probably thought we were going to make fun of him, like it was some kind of joke...He had lost his trust in people because people had made fun of him.” Michael notes that such experiences will cause you to push people away.





The students explore how peer pressure prevents them from reaching out to others in similar situations.

The group then discusses how to react toward someone who is reluctant to accept your friendship. Persistence and communication are key elements to success. A girl explains, "It just takes a willingness to do it again and it takes a lot of sensitivity. If you say 'Come hang out with us' to a kid who has been ostracized his whole life...even though he may be included, he still is not in a comfortable situation where he is accepted. It often takes one-on-one time."

Michael shares an African proverb, "If you do not know - it is bad, but if you choose not to know - it is worse." He then explains that every day we see kids who are isolated, picked on and treated badly. It is up to us to decide if we are going to sit back and let that continue, or if we want to stand up and do something about it.

He then takes the earlier hypothetical situation and adds that your friends are throwing food and humiliating the student. Azar would like to be able to say that he would stop his friends, but admits that he probably would sit there and be part of it. He agrees with Michael's comment that sometimes it seems funny. A girl argues that if it is a friend who has high





self-esteem, maybe it is funny. But if it is done to someone who is already ostracized, it isn't funny; it is detrimental. A boy argues that when you see your friends doing it, you don't want to become an outsider. "If you see people making fun of someone, you're not consciously thinking of it, but you're saying maybe that person is lower than me...By making fun of other people, you start to fill that empty void...and feel better about your own faults."

A girl notes that she thinks it is sad when people know in their hearts that it is wrong but just watch it, then feel okay because they weren't the ones actually doing it. Heather says, "Stop them! If they're your friends, they are going to listen to you. If they keep doing it...you shouldn't be hanging out with people like that." Michael asks what happens to us when we sit back and watch that cruelty. Matt suggests that it desensitizes us. The longer you let things happen, the more a situation can escalate.

Michael asks the students to consider what they can do to stop this type of behavior. Jahmilla answers that you can start by standing up for someone and letting people know that such cruelty isn't cool. "You don't have to be like 'Stop the Violence!' and run in like a superhero. You just have to be really cool about it...bring it back on them. How would they feel?"





By acting in such a way, you encourage other people to take action. Dustin asserts that sticking up for other people makes you a better person by strengthening your morals and values. Michael points out that character is what we do when nobody's watching.

"We know that cruelty happens everyday...probably since the dawn of time. What are we going to do right here and right now? What are we going to do in this school and what are we going to do in this world?" challenges one young girl. A boy answers that the first step is not to be a tormentor or an isolator. Michael agrees that personal responsibility is a crucial step. Azar quotes Martin Luther King, "It wasn't the thousands or hundreds of thousands of people who committed racist acts...it was the millions who stood idly by who didn't do anything." Azar insists that it isn't so much the people harassing, but the great many who aren't doing anything about it.

A girl emphasizes the importance of personal responsibility. "As an individual making the personal choice, if you are strong about those choices, and people see them, then eventually people migrate toward a leader. If enough people take personal leadership, then people will follow."





“If one person doesn’t do it, no one will. Everyone says you’re just one person, you can’t do it. But it is always that one person that gets everything started. It’s always that one small group that changes the world,” adds another girl.

Michael agrees and concludes the program by telling students to let a light shine out of their school. The key to this is to be a community: love, respect, show tolerance and be inclusive. Most importantly, don’t look to find the differences you have. Look to find the things that teach us that we can and must and should respect each other and live together in harmony.

Discussion Questions

1. Why do people consider teens' abuse of one another a rite of passage? Do you think it is true? What are the possible outcomes when you consider such behavior acceptable? Michael says, “Hurt people hurt people.” What do you think this means?
2. Do you think people need to belong to a group? Why or why not? How can groups divide people? How can we find a balance between being included in a group and maintaining our individual identity? One girl in the program says, “People migrate toward a leader.” What do you think she means by this? Do you agree? Who are some of the students in





your school who are leaders? Why do you think they are leaders?

3. The students talk about freshman being “canned.” Does this kind of hazing go on at your school? What happens? Does it ever become cruel or hurtful?

4. Do you think your classmates care about you? Why or why not? Do you agree that teens are not open to listening to one another’s feelings and problems? Why or why not? How can you become more supportive to your friends and classmates?

5. Are there a lot of insults in your school? What do people pick on each other about? Why do you think people hurt each other like that? Have you ever witnessed someone getting abused in this way? What happened? Did you get involved?

6. How does gossip hurt people? Is gossip ever productive? Can you think of a time that you were hurt or hurt someone with gossip? What is the best way to deal with rumors and gossip?

7. In the video, Michael poses a hypothetical situation where someone is sitting alone at a table next to your friends. Would you sit with that person, sit with your friends, or invite the person to sit with you and your friends? Why? What if your friends started to humiliate the person? Would you step in?





Why are we often afraid to stand up for other people?

8. “Character is what you do when nobody is watching.” What does Michael mean when he says this? How would you define character? Who do you know that has strong character? How do people respond to someone with strong character?

9. Sometimes, when we try to reach out to people who are isolated or depressed, we are rejected. Why do you think this happens? Often, it is because the person has been hurt so many times that they have lost their ability to trust others. How can you help people get beyond their past negative experiences? Have you ever encountered someone like this? Were you able to break down the barriers? How?

10. Integrity, individual responsibility and personal choice are mentioned several times in this video. What do you think they mean? How do they influence the way we treat one another? One girl says that people will eventually follow individuals who act as leaders by maintaining their personal integrity. Do you agree? Why or why not?

Recommended Activities

1. On index cards, create role-plays for four students. One person will be the tormentor or bully, one the





victim, and the other two will be bystanders who may or may not become part of the conflict. Have students act out the situation for the class. Then ask the class to offer input regarding how each individual influences the situation.

2. Coordinate an essay contest about people who stood up for other students who were harassed. Publish the winning essay in the school newspaper.

3. Make the class sit in a circle. Write a short story (one or two paragraphs) and have one person read the story to the individual to his or her right. Have that person tell the next person the story and so on until it gets around the room, with the last person repeating the story to the group. Then, reread the original story aloud to the group. Use this opportunity to illustrate the way gossip and rumors are created and then springboard into a discussion on how gossip can trigger conflicts.

4. As a group, create a mural illustrating respect. You may have an unveiling or dedication ceremony to bring attention to the issue of violence prevention in your school.

5. If you don't have a peer mediation program, start one. Peer mediation, the process by which disputes are resolved through mediation by trained peer counselors, has proven to be one of the





most successful violence prevention techniques in use today. Such a program offers students a forum to air their differences before they feel the need to become violent.

For more ideas and activities about how you can make your school safer and more caring, join us online at www.savingourschools.org.





A Few Words About Michael Pritchard

Michael is a humorist, actor, youth activist, former probation officer and PBS host known to audiences across the United States for his ability to help young people gain insight into themselves and the choices they make. Mr. Pritchard serves on the boards of directors for Special



Olympics, The California Association of Peer Programs and the Chinese-American Educational Institute. He also acts as a consultant to the California Consortium on Child Abuse and the Department of Pediatrics at San Francisco General Hospital.

SAVING OUR SCHOOLS From Hate and Violence:

Produced and Directed by Jim Watson
Leader's Guide Written by Jennifer Brady,
Edited by Sally Germain





Our Special Thanks

Saving Our Schools was filmed on location at:

San Rafael High School

Nando Llacuna, Principal

Ann Marie Sachetti, Project Coordinator

With Students From:

San Marin High School

Candace Curtis, Assistant Principal

And At:

Winship Jr. High

Kim Cobine, Principal

Patricia Merideth, Project Coordinator

Content Consultant:

Debra Whiting Alexander, Ph.D.

Trauma Specialist

Springfield (Oregon) School District

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