

Exploring Being and Needing Allies

We are awkward, funny, fantastic, joy-filled, creative, loving, messy, well-fed, full of laughter, appreciated, intelligent, accepting, respectful and we listen to one another.

Those are the answers we, Robin Rainwalker and Chris DeRoller, got when we asked a group of 11 to 13 year-olds to describe themselves during a Powell House Youth retreat offered last January. The objectives of the retreat were to help participants feel empowered to be an ally and to know when they themselves might need one. We wanted to start off by having them identify what they were good at individually and as a group. Then we tapped into the wisdom and experience within their group to find openings for action.

This age group deals with harassment frequently and could readily name things people get harassed about. This is the list they generated:

- Their political views
- What they wear
- Gender
- Religion or lack of religion
- Sexuality or being a part of the LGBTQ community
- Their race
- How they live
- Their financial situation
- If they're social online or not
- Who they're friends with
- Height
- Body (how they look)
- Whether they wear a safety pin or not
- Ideas /opinions
- Their weight
- Immigration status
- Family situation
- Parenting

We had them look at the circles they travel in since those are the places they can most readily have an impact, positive or negative and asked them to share about things they wanted to confront but didn't know how to. This is their list:

- Transgender friends coming out and being afraid
- Age gap between 6th and 8th grade
- Harassing
- Bullying
- When other people are saying things you don't agree with
- Judging
- Slut shaming
- Labels
- Racial slurs
- Body insecurities
- Coming out to your friends
- Gun violence
- Peer pressure
- Pollution
- War
- Holding a lot of secrets for your friends
- Being honest about the situation
- Hunger

We asked them what keeps them from getting involved when someone is being harassed:

- The person doesn't want help
- Not sure what is needed
- Afraid of being taken advantage of
- Size - physically not able to help
- Fear of retaliation or violence
- Becoming a target myself
- Not being taken seriously
- Not being the one needed and the person who is wanted isn't helping
- Fear of making things worse
- Need more people to help
- Need to do something but not an opening to do it

Then we had them reflect on times when they themselves were harassed and what they wanted in that moment. They responded:

- Somebody to listen
- Somebody to hug me
- Somebody to notice
- Somebody to help me understand why
- Someone to intervene
- An adult to step in appropriately

As they looked at this last list many realized that they could actually do a number of the things mentioned, particularly the first three or four. When it came to intervening (responding directly to an aggressor) we explored the difference between aggressive (denying others' rights) and assertive (respecting others' rights without denying your own) ways of interacting and the subtle but important difference between standing up for someone and standing with them.

We handed them a list of personal rights to discuss so that they might recognize when their rights or others' were being violated. For many it felt good to be reminded that it was OK to make mistakes, to change one's mind, to take time to slow down and think, to ask for information and (gasp) to do less than humanly possible.

The deep conversations and focus on being aware of others spilled over into free times and improv moments, filling the weekend with laughter and drawing us together. We all, old and young, were reminded of the power we have to make a difference in our communities and also, that it is okay to reach out and ask for help when we need it.

Steps to becoming an ally:

1. Know what you are good at. What your own strengths are.
2. Look at the places you spend time in. That's where you can have an impact.
3. Know your and others' rights
4. Recognize aggressive (denying others' rights) and assertive (respecting others' rights without denying your own) ways of interacting.
5. Be sensitive to the difference between standing up for someone and standing with them.

Personal Rights Handout

You have –

1. The right to act in ways that promote your dignity and self-respect as long as others' rights are not violated in the process.
2. The right to be treated with respect
3. The right to say no and not feel guilty.
4. The right to experience and express your feelings.
5. The right to take time to slow down and think.
6. The right to change your mind.
7. The right to ask for what you want.
8. The right to do less than you are humanly capable of doing.
9. The right to ask for information.
10. The right to make mistakes.
11. The right to feel good about yourself.

From The Assertive Option: Your Rights and Responsibilities by P. Jakubowski and A. J. Lange