

The Roots of Bullying Behavior

Purpose: Explore the desire to belong, the range of responses to injustice, and the relationship between identity and choices. Practice perspective-taking by retelling a moment in a story from the point of view of the antagonist.

ADVISOR NOTES: None

APPROXIMATE TIME:
40 minutes

MATERIALS:
 **READING**
Fear

PROCEDURE:

1. Read and Discuss Gary Soto's "Fear"

- Let your advisees know that in this meeting, they will be reading and discussing a short story by Gary Soto from a book called *Living up the Street*, a collection of stories about a young boy coming of age in Fresno, California.
- Pass out the reading **Fear** and read it aloud in small groups or as an advisory (visit facinghistory.org/advisory-media to learn about the Read Aloud teaching strategy). You might ask your advisees to underline words or phrases that help them understand the identities of the two main characters, the narrator and Frankie T.
- In small groups or as a whole advisory, discuss the first four connection questions.

2. See "Fear" from a Different Perspective

- Next, provide an opportunity for your advisees to practice perspective-taking by having them choose a moment in the story and retell it in the first person from Frankie's point of view. They might consider the following questions to help get them started:
 - What is Frankie thinking?
 - How is he processing what he is hearing, seeing, and feeling?
 - How does his perception of others and how he believes they perceive him impact his actions in that moment?
- Give your advisees some time to write the section of the story from Frankie's perspective. Then you can ask advisees to share some or all of what they wrote with a partner. If they don't feel comfortable doing so, they can discuss how it felt to write from Frankie's point of view instead.
- Finally, discuss the following questions:
 - How did it feel to write from Frankie's perspective?
 - What new insights, if any, did it give you about the scene you chose, a character, or the themes of identity, membership and belonging, or choices?



Fear

Sometimes, feelings of embarrassment and humiliation about parts of our identities can influence the way we think about and act toward others. In a reflection titled “Fear,” writer Gary Soto talks about how such feelings affected the way a boy he knew growing up treated others.

A cold day after school. Frankie T., who would drown his brother by accident that coming spring and would use a length of pipe to beat a woman in a burglary years later, had me pinned on the ground behind a backstop, his breath sour as meat left out in the sun. . . . I stared at his face, shaped like the sole of a shoe, and just went along with the insults, although now and then I tried to raise a shoulder in a halfhearted struggle because that was part of the game.

He let his drool yo-yo from his lips, missing my feet by only inches, after which he giggled and called me names. Finally he let me up. I slapped grass from my jacket and pants, and pulled my shirt tail from my pants to shake out the fistful of dirt he had stuffed in my collar. I stood by him, nervous and red-faced from struggling, and when he suggested that we climb the monkey bars together, I followed him quietly to the kid’s section of Jefferson Elementary. He climbed first, with small grunts, and for a second I thought of running but knew he would probably catch me—if not then, the next day. There was no way out of being a fifth grader—the daily event of running to teachers to show them your bloody nose. It was just a fact, like having lunch.

So I climbed the bars and tried to make conversation, first about the girls in our classroom and then about kickball. He looked at me smiling as if I had a camera in my hand, his teeth green like the underside of a rock, before he relaxed his grin into a simple gray line across his face. He told me to shut up. He gave me a hard stare and I looked away to a woman teacher walking to her car and wanted very badly to yell for help. She unlocked her door, got in, played with her face in the visor mirror while the engine warmed, and then drove off with the blue smoke trailing. Frankie was watching me all along and when I turned to him, he laughed, “*Chale!* She can’t help you, *ese.*” He moved closer to me on the bars and I thought he was going to hit me; instead he put his arm around my shoulder, squeezing firmly in friendship. “C’mon, chicken, let’s be cool.”

I opened my mouth and tried to feel happy as he told me what he was going to have for Thanksgiving. “My Mamma’s got a turkey and ham, lots of potatoes, yams, and stuff like that. I saw it in the refrigerator. And she says we gonna get some pies. Really, *ese.*”

Poor liar, I thought, smiling as we clunked our heads softly like good friends. He had seen the same afternoon program on TV as I had, one in which a woman in an apron demonstrated how to prepare a Thanksgiving dinner. I knew he would have tortillas and beans, a round steak, maybe, and oranges from his backyard. He went on describing his Thanksgiving, then changed over to Christmas—the new bicycle, the clothes, the G.I. Joes. I told him that it sounded swell, even though I knew he was making it all up. His mother would in fact stand in line at the Salvation Army to come away hugging armfuls of toys that had been tapped back into shape by reformed alcoholics with veined noses. I pretended to be excited and asked if I could come over to his place to play after Christmas. “Oh, yeah, anytime,” he said, squeezing my shoulder and clunking his head against mine.

When he asked what I was having for Thanksgiving, I told him that we would probably have a ham with pineapple on the top. My family was slightly better off than Frankie’s, though I sometimes walked around with cardboard in my shoes and socks with holes big enough to be ski masks, so holidays were extravagant happenings. I told him about the candied yams, the frozen green beans, and the pumpkin pie.

His eyes moved across my face as if he were deciding where to hit me—nose, temple, chin, talking mouth—and then he lifted his arm from my shoulder and jumped from the monkey bars, grunting as he landed. He wiped sand from his knees while looking up and warned me not to mess around with him any more. He stared with such a great meanness that I had to look away. He warned me again and then walked away. Incredibly relieved, I jumped from the bars and ran, looking over my shoulder until I turned onto my street.

Frankie scared most of the school out of its wits and even had girls scampering out of view when he showed himself on the playground. If he caught us without notice, we grew quiet and stared down at our shoes until he passed after a threat or two. If he pushed us down, we stayed on the ground with our eyes closed and pretended we were badly hurt. If he riffled through our lunch bags, we didn’t say anything. He took what he wanted, after which we sighed and watched him walk away after peeling an orange or chewing big chunks of an apple.

Still, that afternoon when he called Mr. Koligian, our teacher, a foul name—we grew scared for him. Mr. Koligian pulled and tugged at his body until it was in his arms and then out of his arms as he hurled Frankie against the building. Some of us looked away because it was unfair. We knew the house he lived in: The empty refrigerator, the father gone, the mother in a sad bathrobe, the beatings, the yearnings for something to love. When a teacher manhandled him, we all wanted to run away, but instead we stared and felt shamed. Robert, Adele, Yolanda shamed; Danny, Alfonso, Brenda shamed; Nash, Margie, Rocha shamed. We all watched him flop about as Mr. Koligian shook and grew red from anger. We knew

his house and, for some, it was the same one to walk home to: The broken mother, the indifferent walls, the refrigerator's glare which fed the people no one wanted.¹

Connection Questions

1. Make an identity chart for Frankie. Choose two phrases from the text that reveal something important about his identity. How might the identity chart you made for Frankie be different from the one he would make for himself?
2. What connection do you see between Frankie's identity and his choices?
3. What range of feelings does the narrator have for Frankie?
4. Why do you think Gary Soto called this story "Fear"? Who feels fear in the story, and what are they afraid of? How does fear affect their actions?
5. What is a bully? What motivations does this story suggest might be at the root of bullying behavior? What other factors might influence one to bully others?

¹ Gary Soto, "Fear," in *Living Up the Street* (New York: Laurel-Leaf, 1985), 59–62. Reproduced by permission from Gary Soto.