

Introducing the Ostracism Case Study (Part 1)

Purpose: Define ostracism and consider what factors influence our choices and decision-making process in the face of ostracism and bullying.

ADVISOR NOTES:


1. Background for the Facing History Ostracism Case Study


The material in Activities 56–59 draws from “The Ostracism Case Study,” a report on an incident that took place in December 1996 and continued into 1998 at a middle school located in the suburb of a major US city. In this case study, we hear the voices of eighth-grade students as they reflect on a particularly poignant social conflict among a group of friends resulting in the ostracism of one of them. While the event itself occurred during seventh grade, the impact of this event could be felt in the eighth grade as well. The voices of these students bring us inside their world and provoke questions about issues of inclusion, exclusion, conformity, and belonging in adolescence and beyond.

APPROXIMATE TIME:

40 minutes

MATERIALS:

 **HANDOUT**
A Scene from a Middle School (Part 1 of 2)

 **HANDOUT**
A Scene from a Middle School (Part 2 of 2)

PROCEDURE:

1. Reflect on Ostracism in a Journal Response

- Start by writing “ostracize” on the board and ask advisees to help you define it. Then provide the dictionary definition if you feel that your group would benefit from seeing it: “exclude by general consent from common privileges or social acceptance. [Example:] The other girls *ostracized* her because of the way she dressed.”¹ As you discuss the definition together, note the difference between voluntarily leaving a group or being left out from time to time and ostracism, which is intentional, implies consent from the group, and is a form of bullying.

- Then ask advisees to respond to the following prompt in their journals. Let them know that they will not be sharing their responses unless they volunteer to do so.

Write about a time when you were ostracized from a group or a time when you heard about or witnessed someone else being ostracized.

- What happened and how did you feel?
- What choices were available to you and/or to others?
- What factors motivated your choices or the choices others made?

¹ “Ostracism,” Merriam-Webster.com, accessed June 2018.

- Ask for volunteers to share their responses to the second and third questions if they feel comfortable doing so.

2. Read and Discuss the Introduction to a Real-Life Middle School Scenario

- Explain to the group that today and in upcoming meetings, they will read and discuss a seventh-grade middle school case study about an ostracism incident that happened in December 1996 and continued through 1997 and into 1998, when the students were in eighth grade.
- Have advisees move into groups of four and pass out the handout **A Scene from a Middle School (Part 1 of 2)**. Invite advisees to read it out loud, with each advisee taking a role. After reading, they should discuss the questions and jot down notes to bring to a circle discussion.

3. Read the Outcome of the Middle School Scenario

- Then move into a circle and ask each group to share a highlight from their discussion. It might be a point of disagreement that they would like the whole group to weigh in on, a new understanding about ostracism, a connection to their own lives or school community, or an interesting point they would like to share.
- Pass out the handout **A Scene from a Middle School (Part 2 of 2)** and discuss the two questions as a group.
- Let everyone know that in the next meeting, they will be hearing from the three students directly involved and other members of the school community who shared their reflections on this real-life incident in interviews.



A Scene from a Middle School

(Part 1 of 2)

Directions: Choose roles and read aloud the following dialogue between three seventh-grade girls. The narrator can also read the setting section. Then discuss the questions on the second page together and record notes to share with your advisory group.

The Setting: The public school where this incident took place is located in a suburb bordering on a major city. Families living in the neighborhood surrounding the school range from working class to affluent, and a small percentage of students are bused to the school from the city as part of a longstanding desegregation program.

Narrator: In December 1996, Sue and Rhonda, seventh-graders in a public school, considered each other best friends. They belonged to a popular group of girls, which included another student named Jill. Most of these girls had known each other since elementary school.

Sue [*while writing a note*]: Hey Rhonda, what's up? Nothing much here. Did you hear about Jill? I can't believe it. She is breaking up with Travis. How could she break up with him? His mom just died. I think she's being really stupid. What do you think? Gotta go, Sue. P.S. Don't say anything to Jill about this. I haven't told her yet that I think she is stupid for breaking up with Travis.

Narrator: *Sue hands the note to Rhonda and walks away. Rhonda reads note. Then Jill walks by.*

Jill: Hey, Rhonda. What's up?

Rhonda: I was just reading a note from Sue.

Jill: What she'd say?

Rhonda: Well, she asked me not to tell you. I probably shouldn't say. But, you are my friend and you should know.

Jill: What is it?

Rhonda: Sue said you are stupid to break up with Travis.

Discussion Questions:

1. What feels familiar about this scene? What else would you like to know about the three students or the scenario?
2. Where do you see the students making choices in this scenario? What choices does each character—Sue, Jill, Rhonda—have? What factors do you think are motivating their decision-making processes?
3. Recall the range of responses to injustice that you have discussed this year: perpetrator, victim or target, bystander, upstander. What role(s) does each student adopt in this scene? Remember that the roles are choices and not parts of their identities, and that one person might choose different roles at different times within the same incident.
4. How might other students or members of the school community be impacted by this scenario?



A Scene from a Middle School

(Part 2 of 2)

Narrator: When Jill found out about Sue's note, she confronted Sue after school, and they argued in front of a crowd of students. School staff heard the argument and broke it up. After this argument between Jill and Sue, Rhonda sided with Jill, and they influenced other girls to do the same. For the rest of seventh grade and almost all of eighth grade, these girls excluded Sue from her former group of friends, teased and put her down, avoided and ignored her, spread rumors about her, wrote hurtful letters, and made prank telephone calls to her home. Other students, including some boys who were not originally involved, joined in. Most students, if they did not participate directly, kept Sue at a distance and did not stand up for her. Sue went from being a very strong student to getting poor grades and not wanting to go to school.

Discussion Questions:

1. Why do you think this event turned out this way? How can you explain the actions of the three girls involved in this incident, the other girls, and the other students who got involved in the incident later in the year?
2. What about this situation feels familiar to you? This incident happened in 1996 and continued into the 1997–1998 school year. What might it look like in a school today?