



MIDDLE SCHOOL FOLLOW-UP CURRICULUM

"Let's Talk Respect"

Be curious, not judgmental.

*Before you say something, before you do something —
stop and put yourself in the other person's shoes.*

Grades 6–8 · One core session + four optional extensions

Presented by Robert Hackenson Jr., MBA, CAOL · Dynamic Influence

dynamicinfluence.com

Before you start

What this is

Your students sat through an assembly called "**Let's Talk Respect.**"

It is not an anti-bullying lecture, and it isn't really about rules. Robert opens by asking a question that gets at what the hour is actually about:

Have you ever woken up and not wanted to come to school?

Most hands go up. Some of that is homework and some of it is being thirteen. But a good share of it is the room itself — how people in these hallways treat each other. That's the premise: **a school's culture is built by the students in it, one interaction at a time**, and the hour is about the small decisions that build it.

The presentation lands on two ideas, and installing them is what this guide is for:

THE RULE OF SHOE

Before you say something, before you do something — stop and put yourself in the other person's shoes.

BE CURIOUS, NOT JUDGMENTAL.

When you've already decided what something means, **you stop asking questions** — and that's the exact moment empathy stops.

One core session — a single advisory, SEL block, or health class — makes both concrete and gives every student a written calm-down plan.

Four optional extensions go deeper, one idea at a time. Run them over the following four weeks, run two, or run none. They stand alone, work in any order, and each one ends with something written down.

What you need

- This guide (you can read it cold — every prompt is scripted)
- The **Student Packet** (6 pages, one per student)
- Pencils. For Extension 1, a sheet of scrap paper per student

No prep reading. No slides. No technology.

How much time

	Length	Produces
Core session — Your Lens	35 min	A personal calm-down plan + one assumption rewritten
Extension 1 — Not Wrong, Just Different	30 min	A disagreement re-run as a conversation
Extension 2 — You Can't See the Hurt	30 min	A rewritten message, and one rule for themselves
Extension 3 — Mean, Mad, or Bullying?	30 min	Sorted scenarios, in their words
Extension 4 — Ten Seconds	35 min	A written bystander plan

Six things worth knowing before you facilitate

- 1. The breathing in this version is not the elementary version.** Middle school learned **in for 10, hold for 3, out for 12**. If you also teach fourth or fifth grade, theirs is 10-5-10. Teach each group the one they heard — students notice, and "that's not what he said" costs you the room.
- 2. "Bullying" is the word students over-use, and correcting that is half the job.** Robert is explicit: real bullying has three markers — **an intent to harm, an imbalance of power, and repetition**. Students who can tell the difference report the right things to you and stop reporting the wrong things, which is better for everybody. And say the other half out loud: not-bullying is still not OK. It just needs a different response.
- 3. Nobody is born a bully.** It's a learned behavior, which means it can be unlearned, and a student who has done something cruel is not a lost cause. Do not let this unit become a hunt for the bad kid. Robert's framing is that bullying shows the insecurity of the person doing it — *blowing out somebody else's candle doesn't make yours glow any brighter*.
- 4. Expect a student to recognize themselves.** A thirteen-year-old who feels branded defends the label; one who believes change is possible changes.
- 5. Robert tells his own story in the assembly, and it's the part students remember.** Seventh grade, six months of it from a freshman named Matt, ending with a boy he didn't know walking over and standing next to him. If you reference it, reference it accurately — it's in Extension 4.
- 6. Follow your reporting process.** This unit will surface things. Say your classroom norms at the start, and don't promise confidentiality you can't keep.

A note on the survey

If your school is running the Dynamic Influence student survey, give it **after the core session**, not immediately after the assembly. Several items ask what students actually decided or wrote down, and the core session is where they do that.

Core session — Your Lens

35 minutes • Student Packet pages 1–2

What students walk out with

A written calm-down plan — what they do when they feel it building, in three different situations — and one assumption about a real person, rewritten as a question.

Run it

0:00 — "I WOULD NEVER DO THAT" (5 MIN)

Open cold, no preamble:

Think of something somebody did recently that made you think: **I would never do that**. Don't say who. Just have it.

Give them ten seconds.

Keep it. We're coming back to it.

Then:

Here's a question. Everything you know — everything, all of it — where did it come from?

Take answers. You'll get school, parents, friends, the internet. Sort them out loud into Robert's three:

Formal education. School, teachers, books.

Personal experience. The stuff that's happened to you.

Outside influence. Family, friends, what you watch, what you scroll.

So every single judgment you make, you make through *that*. Your three. And nobody else in this room has the same three. **Which means when you look at somebody and think "I would never do that" — you're judging their decision using a set of information they don't have.**

0:05 — THE RULE OF SHOE (3 MIN)

At the assembly Robert pulled a card from a shuffled deck that said **Think First**, and it had a shoe on it. Then he opened a box that had been sitting there the whole time, and there was a shoe inside. Why a shoe?

Take an answer, then give it to them:

Before you say something, before you do something — stop and put yourself in the other person's shoes.

Write it on the board. Leave it up all week.

It's the Golden Rule. Everybody in here has known it since they were five. So why is it hard?

Let them land it. Someone will say *feelings*.

Right. Two things get in the way. **Your feelings**, which we'll deal with in a minute. And **being so quick to judge and label that you stop being curious**. Once you've decided what something means, you stop asking. That's it. That's where empathy ends.

So the version Robert leaves you with: **be curious, not judgmental**.

0:08 — THE VOLCANO (7 MIN)

Tell this as a story. They'll finish your sentences.

You wake up already in a bad mood. And here's what your brain does — once you've decided *today's going to be terrible*, **your brain starts hunting for proof**.

Phone's at 4%. *See?* No hot water. *Of course*. You get to school and you're looking at everybody like they've already wronged you — and they're looking back the same way, because that's what you're putting out.

And it stacks. One thing, then another, then another. Like a balloon getting bigger, waiting for one pin.

Then you get home. And your little brother comes around the corner going "**HI!**" — and you unload on him.

Pause.

Did he deserve it?

Then:

Who in here has done that to somebody who didn't deserve it?

Hands go up. Yours should too.

And then what do you say? "**Sorry, I didn't mean that.**" And you did mean it, in that second — you just didn't mean it about *them*. That's the whole problem. The person who gets it is almost never the person it was about.

0:15 — THE BREATHING (8 MIN)

So the question isn't how to never get upset. You're going to get upset. The question is what you do in the gap.

Give them the list from the assembly, fast:

Exercise. Music — and actually move, not just listen. **A gratitude journal:** three things a day, which sounds soft until you try it for a week and notice your brain has to go looking for good things instead of bad ones.

Then the one that matters:

And breathing. Which everybody says, and almost everybody does wrong.

Your brain controls your body. Your breathing controls your brain.

Run it with them. Stand up, phones away, do it yourself.

Breathe everything out first. Then:

IN FOR 10. HOLD FOR 3. OUT FOR 12.

Do **one** round together, counting out loud. Then ask:

Who ran out of room on the way in? Who rushed the way out? Who found that uncomfortable?

Most hands.

Good. **It's supposed to be.** That discomfort is what pulls your attention out of the part of your brain that's upset. One round does almost nothing. **Five rounds does a lot.**

Then the honest caveat, in Robert's words:

Mike Tyson said it: *everybody has a plan until you get punched in the face*. You can't invent a strategy in the middle of being furious. **That's why you write it down now** — so there's something to reach for when you're not thinking clearly.

0:23 — THE THREE BOXES (7 MIN)

Student Packet page 1. Three boxes, because what works in one place is unavailable in another.

At home. Music, moving around, going outside, writing.

At school. Something that doesn't get you noticed. This is the box most people leave blank, and it's the one you'll need most.

Anywhere. Almost always the breathing, because nobody can see you do it.

Then the question that makes it real:

Where will you actually be when you need this? Be honest. If your plan only works in your bedroom, it isn't a plan.

Also on the page: **one person I can talk to.** Give them a minute on that one and don't rush it.

0:30 — BACK TO THE START (5 MIN)

Student Packet page 2.

Go back to the thing you had at the beginning. *I would never do that.*

You don't have to decide they were right. Just answer this: **what would have to be true about their day, or their life, or what they know, for that to make sense to them?**

Give them three minutes to write it.

Now the second box. **Turn your judgment into a question you could actually ask them.** Not a trap question. A real one.

Take two or three out loud if the room is willing. Close with:

You don't have to agree with people to be curious about them. **Curious is just the thing you do before you decide.**

If you only have fifteen minutes

Run the volcano and the breathing, and have them fill in the three boxes. That's the piece students use most.

Extension I — Not Wrong, Just Different

30 minutes · Student Packet page 3

What students walk out with

A real disagreement, written out twice: once as a debate, once as a conversation.

Run it

0:00 — THE SANDWICH (6 MIN)

Peanut butter and jelly. Everybody's made one. How?

Take two or three answers out loud. You will get disagreement immediately.

Here's Robert's: peanut butter on **both** slices, jelly in the middle, then pinch the edges so it doesn't leak.

Expect noise. Let it run for a second, then:

Is that wrong?

Someone will say yes. Hold there.

It's a sandwich. It works. **It's not wrong — it's different.** And you had a reaction to it, which is the interesting part. You had a reaction to a *sandwich*.

0:06 — THREE OR FOUR (7 MIN)

Stand two students on **opposite sides** of the same object — a number on a card, a shape, your own hand held sideways between them. Set it so one of them counts four and the other counts three.

You see four. You see three. Same thing, same moment.

How do I get the one who sees four to see that there are three?

Take answers. The room will get there:

Go around to the other side.

That's it. That's the whole answer. Neither of them was lying and neither of them was wrong — **they were standing somewhere different.** And the entire time they argued about who was right, neither one asked

the question that would have ended it in four seconds: *wait — you see four? How?*

0:13 — THE ROPE (5 MIN)

If you have a length of rope or a jump rope, use it. Grab one end, have a student take the other.

Pull.

They pull. You pull back. Let the class watch for a few seconds.

What happens when I pull?

They pull back.

Every time. And notice: this stopped being about who's right about thirty seconds ago. **It's about being pulled.** That's every argument any of you has ever had with a parent.

So what's the alternative? Let go and walk over to where they're standing. Ask what they're looking at. It's slower. It's also the only thing that's ever changed anybody's mind.

0:18 — DEBATE VERSUS CONVERSATION (5 MIN)

Two columns on the board.

A debate has a winner and a loser. You're not listening, you're waiting — building your comeback while their mouth is still moving.

A conversation doesn't have a score.

Then ask the question Robert asks:

Think of a time you competed and won. Now think of a time you lost. **Which one taught you more?**

Let it sit.

That's why debate keeps us stupid. Winning teaches you nothing — it just confirms what you already thought. **The goal isn't to win. The goal is to learn.**

0:23 — WRITE IT TWICE (7 MIN)

Student Packet page 3. A real disagreement they've had recently, with anyone.

1. **What I said.** Word for word, as close as they can get.
2. **What I was actually after.** Being right? Being heard? Not looking stupid in front of somebody?

3. **One question I could have asked instead** — the *"wait, you see four? how?"* question.

Close: you don't have to end up agreeing. You just have to find out what they're looking at. **You can't argue somebody into your lens. You can only ask them about theirs.**

Extension 2 — You Can't See the Hurt

30 minutes · Student Packet page 4

What students walk out with

A message rewritten, and one rule they set for themselves about sending things when they're upset.

Run it

0:00 — "ROB, YOU'RE SO STUPID" (6 MIN)

Write that sentence on the board, with no other information.

What does this mean?

Take answers. You will get *insult* and you will get *joke*.

Right — and you can't tell. **Because almost nothing we actually mean is in the words.** It's in the face, the tone, the timing, whether we were smiling. Strip all of that out and you're left with letters on a screen, and the person reading them fills in the rest from whatever mood they're already in.

Which is why a text argument escalates and a face-to-face one usually doesn't. Both of you read it as the worse version. At speed.

0:06 — THREE BAD OPTIONS (6 MIN)

So somebody sends you something and it lands badly. What do people actually do?

Pull them out of the class and name them:

- 1. Fire back immediately.** Now there are two people who are upset and nobody is going to be the first to stop.
- 2. Post about them.** Not *to* them — *about* them. Vague enough to deny, specific enough that everybody knows.
- 3. Troll for sympathy.** The sad post. The "*hang in there*" cat. Robert's word for it is fishing — you're not telling anyone what happened, you're collecting "*omg are you ok??*" in the replies.

Then:

Has any one of those ever actually fixed anything?

And give them the sequence:

Put it down. Calm down. Then go talk to them. In that order. Out loud, in person, where they can see your face. It's the slowest option and it's the only one with a success rate.

0:12 — THE TAP (6 MIN)

Remind them of the trick, because this is the one they'll remember from the assembly:

Two students stood facing each other. One of them closed her eyes. Robert tapped the one whose eyes were **open** — and the one with her eyes closed felt it. **Same shoulder.**

Then the line that goes with it:

Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me. **That phrase came before the internet.** Back when all you had was sticks and stones.

Just because you don't physically touch somebody doesn't mean they're not going to feel it.

Then the part that makes it concrete:

Here's the problem with doing it through a screen. In person you can see somebody's face change, so you stop. **Online you don't see the reaction.** So *"this is so funny"* keeps going — and it stopped being funny for them fifteen minutes ago. You just didn't see it.

And because you're protected by that screen, it's easy to say things you'd never say to somebody's face. You can even do it anonymously. **Robert's word for that is cowardly**, and he says it to the room.

The biggest danger isn't that you're a bad person. It's that **you don't actually see the hurt you're causing.**

Worth asking the class directly, because they'll have a real answer:

Does roasting ever go too far? **How do you know?**

In person: *the person's crying*. You can see it. Online: **you don't know**. That's the whole gap.

0:20 — GOLDEN RULE 2.0 (4 MIN)

The old one: treat others the way you want to be treated.

The update: post about others the way you'd want posted about you. Same rule. New room.

0:24 — WRITE IT (6 MIN)

Student Packet page 4.

1. A message or post they sent when they were upset — or almost sent. Nobody reads it out loud.
2. **Rewrite it** as what they'd say in person, to that person's face.
3. **One rule for myself.** Theirs, in their words. *Nothing goes out after 10pm. I don't reply to it till the next morning. I say it out loud before I type it.*

A rule they wrote has a far better survival rate than one you gave them.

Extension 3 — Mean, Mad, or Bullying?

30 minutes · Student Packet page 5

What students walk out with

A set of real scenarios sorted, in their own words, and a working definition they can actually use.

Run it

0:00 — THREE MARKERS (6 MIN)

Start where Robert does, because the sorting is the point:

Everything we've talked about so far — the bad mood, the misread text, the argument you couldn't let go — **that's emotions, and how we interact. That isn't bullying. Bullying is a little different.**

And the word gets used for everything, which costs you: when everything's bullying, nothing gets the right response, and the adults start tuning out the reports.

Three things on the board. All three, at the same time:

- 1 • **Intent to harm.** The point is to hurt that person.
- 2 • **An imbalance of power.** Popularity, size, numbers, a secret, a position.
- 3 • **It repeats.** Not once.

Then the correction nobody makes, and the reason this session matters:

Calling something "not bullying" does not make it OK, and it does not mean nobody does anything.
Somebody being mean to you is still somebody being mean to you. It just gets a different response than bullying does.

0:06 — THE FORMS (7 MIN)

Build this list *with* them — ask what counts, and fill the gaps.

Insults. The obvious one, and the least common.

Rumors. Started about somebody, spread by people who have no idea if it's true.

Outing. Telling something about somebody that was theirs to tell. This one gets left off every list and it's one of the most damaging.

Leaving people out — on purpose, and making sure they know. The photo posted *specifically* so the person who wasn't there sees it. There's nothing to point at, which is exactly why it works.

Rating people. Lists, numbers, tier charts.
Roasting — when the person isn't laughing.

Ask:

Which of those would an adult actually notice?

Usually: the first one. That's the point worth making.

0:13 — WHY (6 MIN)

So why does somebody do it?

Take answers first, then:

Almost always because something is wrong with them, not with the person they picked. They don't know how to deal with their own thing, so it comes out sideways at somebody who isn't the cause.

It's insecurity. Every time. Putting somebody else down doesn't move you up — it just moves them down.
Robert's line:

"BLOWING OUT SOMEBODY ELSE'S CANDLE DOESN'T MAKE YOURS GLOW ANY BRIGHTER."

And here's the part you have to say out loud: **nobody is born a bully.** It's learned. Somebody showed them — a sibling, a parent, a group, a feed. Which is good news, because **learned behavior can be unlearned.**

0:19 — SORT REAL ONES (11 MIN)

Student Packet page 5. Read each aloud. Students write **misunderstanding** · **mean** · **bullying** and, in four words, *why*.

1. Somebody knocks your books out of your hands in the hallway and keeps walking.
2. Your friend snaps at you at lunch. She apologizes by last period.
3. A group chat you're not in posts a photo from a party and adds *"so glad it was just us."* Third weekend running.
4. Somebody you barely know tells people a thing about you that you told one person.
5. A kid in your class gets called a nickname he hates. Everyone uses it. Including teachers now.
6. Somebody makes a joke about your shoes. Once. You both laugh.

Debrief the ones they disagree on — that's where the learning is. Number 5 is worth the most time: it repeats, it's an imbalance (everyone versus one), and nobody involved thinks of themselves as doing anything. Close with the point of the whole session: **three of those weren't bullying, and that doesn't make them fine.** Knowing the difference just means asking for the right kind of help.

Extension 4 — Ten Seconds

35 minutes • Student Packet page 6

What students walk out with

A written bystander plan: what they would actually do, and who they would actually tell.

Run it

0:00 — WHY WE DON'T (4 MIN)

Open with the honest version, because it's what they're actually thinking:

Most of you are not the one being targeted and not the one doing it. **You're watching.** So why don't we do anything?

Take answers. You'll get *it'll make it worse, it's not my business, they'll come after me instead.* Then Robert's answer:

Sometimes we think **it's always going to be this way, and there's nothing I can do.**

That isn't true. And the rest of this session is the proof.

0:04 — ROBERT'S STORY (8 MIN)

Tell it straight. Don't dramatize it; it doesn't need it.

Robert was in seventh grade, in a building that also had the high school in it. A freshman named Matt — two years older, bigger — decided he had a problem with Robert, because Robert was friends with a girl Matt liked.

Six months. Gum thrown in his face. A water bottle emptied down the inside of his backpack.

Then one day, in the hallway before English, Matt and three of his friends backed him up against the lockers. Everybody else had cleared out. Robert describes it as the wild west — tumbleweed rolling past. Fists clenched. Nowhere to go.

And a kid walked over. Another freshman. Robert had seen him in the football locker room and that's it — **did not know his name.** He stood next to Robert and said, *"Hey. What's going on?"*

Nothing happened. A few seconds later he said, *"Cool — come on, let's go,"* and the two of them walked away.

What he said after: *"Don't worry about them, they're stupid. If you ever need help, let me know."*

Then the ending, which matters:

Robert told his sister, a junior, three years older than him. Matt never spoke to him again.

He says he took two things out of it. One: don't mess with my sister. And two — **if he ever saw somebody in that spot, he'd be the one who walked over.**

Ask one question and let the room answer it:

That kid didn't fight anybody. He didn't make a speech. **What did he actually do?**

He walked over and stood there. That's it.

0:12 — TEN SECONDS, AND FOUR THINGS THAT ACTUALLY WORK (6 MIN)

Robert's claim: **if you step in as the bystander, you can stop it inside ten seconds of it happening.** Ten seconds. That's the whole window, and it's why small things work.

Build the list on the board — and point out that **every one of these is something that kid in the story actually did:**

- 1 • **Go stand next to them.** No words required at all. This is the one that worked.
- 2 • **Ask what's going on — calmly.** *"Hey. What's going on?"* Not a challenge. A question.
- 3 • **Give them a way out.** *"Cool. Come on, let's go."* You're not winning the moment, you're ending it.
- 4 • **Say something afterward.** *"Don't worry about them. If you ever need help, let me know."* Thirty seconds, remembered for years — Robert still remembers it.

And the fifth, which is also from the story and is the one students discount:

Tell somebody. Robert told his sister, and it stopped. **Telling is not the backup plan — in his own case it's the thing that actually ended it.**

0:18 — HOW TO STEP IN WITHOUT MAKING IT WORSE (8 MIN)

This is the part that separates a plan from a wish. Walk through it slowly; it's the content most students have never been given.

Stay calm. You are not going to out-escalate somebody who is already escalated.

Don't make it a shouting match. If you raise it, they raise it, and now there are two of them.

Allow space. Don't get in their face. Don't crowd them.

Hands visible, open, at your sides. Not pointing. Pointing reads as an attack.

Stand at an angle, not squared up — squared up is a challenge. And **don't turn your back.**

Don't stare them down.

Then: **listen. Ask why. Acknowledge that they're angry** — you are not agreeing with them, you are lowering the temperature. **Offer a way out** — anything that lets them leave without losing face.

One limit to add yourself. Robert's own rule for a situation that's turning physical is *first your feet, then your voice* — leave, then tell somebody. Say the schoolhouse version of that out loud, in your own words, before students leave the room:

If it's physical, or about to be, you don't step in. You go get an adult, and you go fast. Nobody is asking you to get hurt. Walking over is for the ten seconds *before* it gets there.

0:26 — KEEPING YOUR POWER (4 MIN)

If it's aimed at you: what is the person actually after?

A reaction.

Everybody with a sibling already knows this one. They know exactly which button to press, and the whole point is the moment you blow up.

So: **you don't fight fire with fire. You fight fire with a fire extinguisher.** If somebody made fun of Robert it'd be about being bald, because people aren't original. His answer: *"You're totally right. I am. You've got a nice head of hair — it's styled a lot of different ways."* Nothing to push against.

Run two or three more with the class, out loud:

"You're so stupid." → **"I know, right? So dumb. That's why I'm in school — trying to get smarter."**

"You're ugly." → **"I know. This awkward stage is lasting forever."**

"You're an idiot." → **"Nailed it."** Or just a thumbs up.

They don't have to believe a word of it. And the question underneath all of it: **why would you hold what they think of you higher than what you think of yourself?**

One caveat, and don't skip it:

This is a tool, not a standard. **If you reacted, you didn't fail.** And if you're scared, if it's physical, or if it won't stop — Robert's self-defense rule applies: **first your feet** (you leave), **then your voice** (you tell somebody).

0:30 — WRITE THE PLAN (5 MIN)

Student Packet page 6.

1. **One thing I would actually do.** Pick from the list. Honest, not impressive.
2. **One adult in this building I would go to.** By name.

3. One person I could build up this week — and how.

Close with the line from the end of the assembly:

You're the one deciding what this hallway feels like. Not the teachers. **You.**

Running this well

If a student discloses

It will happen, and most often in the margin of the packet rather than out loud. Thank them, don't interrogate, and follow your school's process the same day. Say your norms at the start of every session so nobody is surprised.

If the room goes cynical

Middle school classes test whether you mean it. The two things that work: **tell your own volcano story** — the time you snapped at somebody who hadn't done anything — and **do the breathing yourself, badly, in front of them**. Adults who participate get participation. Adults who facilitate get performance.

If somebody in the room is the one doing it

Likely. Keep the frame on behavior, never on identity: *nobody is born a bully, and learned behavior can be unlearned*. Handle the specific incident privately, through your process, not in the session. A student who feels exposed in front of peers will dig in, and you'll have made it worse.

The language that carries

Use Robert's exact phrases. Students recognize them and that recognition does real work.

"Be curious, not judgmental."

"Put yourself in their shoes."

"Not wrong — just different."

"Wait — you see four? How?"

"Put it down, calm down, then go talk to them."

"Blowing out somebody else's candle doesn't make yours glow any brighter."

"Nobody is born a bully."

"What's going on?" / "Cool, come on, let's go."

"Fight fire with a fire extinguisher."

What to tell families

Everything on the parent page is free: the recording of the assembly, a parent guide, and a set of conversation cards. If you're running these sessions, **say so in the newsletter** — *"students are continuing this work in class"*

— because that's the difference between an assembly families half-remember and a change they notice at home.

About Robert

Robert Hackenson Jr., MBA, CAOL is the founder of Dynamic Influence, a professional magician and certified hypnotist, and a professional member of the National Speakers Association. He has spent more than twenty years as a prevention educator, working with students, parents, and educators in 49 states and internationally.

His approach is deliberately non-fear-based — magic, demonstrations and audience participation rather than scare tactics, because fear wears off in about a week and understanding doesn't.

"**Let's Talk Respect**" runs for upper elementary and middle school. "**Kindness & Respect**" is the lower elementary version. There are also programs on goal setting and perseverance, digital and social media safety, and substance awareness.

dynamicinfluence.com