

Secondary lesson plan

What keeps people silent?

Age	Secondary, approximately 11–16
Time	50–60 minutes
Theme link	Break the Silence
Can be reused year-round	Yes

Learning aims

- explore why people may remain silent around bullying
- consider the roles of peers, witnesses and group dynamics
- think about what makes speaking up safer or harder
- examine how adults and institutions can either open or close routes to disclosure
- identify practical actions that do not assume one response will work for everyone

Important note for staff

Use fictional situations rather than inviting personal disclosure.

If a student shares information that raises a safeguarding concern, follow the school's safeguarding procedures.

1. Opening question

Display:

Who can be silent when bullying is happening?

Ask students to think beyond the person directly experiencing the behaviour.

Possible answers might include:

- the person being targeted
- friends
- witnesses
- people joining in because they are afraid not to
- staff
- parents or carers
- organisations or institutions
- someone displaying harmful behaviour who does not know how to ask for help

Then ask:

Why might silence feel safer than speaking?

Do not immediately challenge their answers. Let the complexity emerge.

2. A situation with no script

Give small groups this fictional scenario:

A student has gradually become the focus of jokes within a friendship group. At first they laughed too. The jokes are now happening most days, images are being shared online, and other students have begun joining in.

Several people know it is getting worse. Nobody has said anything.

Ask groups to identify:

Who knows something?

Who has influence?

Who might be frightened?

Who might believe they are “only joking”?

Who could change what happens next?

The aim is not to decide immediately who is the bully and who is the victim.

Focus instead on behaviour, relationships, power and choices.

3. The silence map

Ask each group to draw the people or groups around the situation.

For each one, add:

Why might they stay silent?

and:

What might make it easier for them to act?

Students may identify things such as:

- fear of becoming the next target
- loyalty to friends
- embarrassment
- uncertainty
- not trusting adults
- believing nothing will change
- worrying about punishment
- not recognising the behaviour as serious

4. What could happen next?

Give groups a choice of possible responses:

- confront the group publicly
- tell a teacher
- privately check on the student
- refuse to forward an image
- save evidence
- speak to another witness
- report something anonymously
- ask an adult for advice without naming anyone initially
- do nothing for now

Ask:

What might be helpful about this response?

What could make it risky?

Would it work for everyone?

Encourage disagreement.

The point is not to identify one correct answer.

5. When adults are part of the silence

Ask:

What can adults or organisations do that makes speaking harder?

Possible responses could include:

- dismissing something as banter
- blaming the person reporting it
- discussing something publicly
- immediately demanding proof
- promising action and never following up
- reacting so dramatically that the young person regrets speaking
- treating every situation in exactly the same way

Then ask:

What would make speaking easier?

This gives students an opportunity to describe what trustworthy adult responses might look like.

6. From witness to defender

Ask students to complete:

"Someone watching can make a difference by..."

Responses do not have to involve direct confrontation.

They might include refusing to join in, changing the subject, checking on someone later, recording what happened, reporting safely, standing beside somebody or challenging a friend privately.

Make clear that personal safety matters. Nobody should be expected to put themselves at serious risk in order to intervene.

7. Finish: what breaks silence?

Return to the opening question.

Ask students individually to write one response to:

"People are more likely to speak when..."

and one response to:

"People are more likely to listen when..."

Finish with:

Breaking the silence is not simply about telling people to speak. It is about creating conditions in which speaking feels possible and listening leads somewhere.

Follow-up

Students could use their responses to create:

- a tutor-group discussion
- short campaign messages
- questions for staff or school leaders
- a school display
- a peer-support activity
- ideas for reviewing the school's anti-bullying policy