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# CREATE A CULTURE OF KINDNESS IN MIDDLE SCHOOL

**48** Character-Building  
Lessons to Foster Respect  
and Prevent Bullying



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PUBLISHING®

Naomi Drew, M.A., with Christa M. Tinari, M.A.

# *Praise for* CREATE A **CULTURE OF KINDNESS** IN MIDDLE SCHOOL

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"*Create a Culture of Kindness* begins as if you are having a conversation with the wisest and most supportive teachers you have ever spoken to. This is worth the price alone, but you will soon see that the lessons also reflect wisdom and deep respect for children's competence and potential. This book gives you the tools needed to create an organized, respectful classroom filled with students who are more mindful and therefore more ready to engage in learning and positive relationships. Its lessons on compassion, in particular, should be mandatory in every middle school."

—Maurice J. Elias, Ph.D., Rutgers University and author of *Assessing Social, Emotional, and Character Development* and *Emotionally Intelligent Parenting*

"The vast majority of students we talk to agree that bullying is bad and kindness is cool. But they often lack basic strategies to show compassion to their classmates. This book offers dozens of practical, hands-on lesson plans educators can use to teach students how to be kind (and why that matters so much). The lessons encourage students to stand up for what is right, and give them the tools to do it. If you want to 'Create a Culture of Kindness in [your] Middle School,' this book is for you."

—Dr. Justin W. Patchin and Dr. Sameer Hinduja, codirectors of the Cyberbullying Research Center and authors of *Words Wound*

"This book is exactly what educators need, now more than ever: A blueprint for providing kids with the skills not only to prevent bullying, but to fundamentally change their schools and their world. With *Create a Culture of Kindness in Middle School*, Naomi Drew and Christa Tinari have added a timely and valuable resource to the literature on empathy, respect, school climate, and bullying prevention."

—Michele Borba, Ed.D., author of *The 6Rs of Bullying Prevention*

"*Create a Culture of Kindness in Middle School* is the single most impactful book I've seen on transforming a culture of bullying into one that reliably promotes kindness. It is essential reading for every middle school educator and for every parent of a middle school student. It takes intention, courage, and powerful protocols to create a school culture that empowers students to flourish, both emotionally and academically. Naomi Drew and Christa Tinari deliver the goods in this practical, wise, and inspiring guide."

—Marilee Adams, Ph.D., best-selling author of *Teaching That Changes Lives: 12 Mindset Tools for Igniting the Love of Learning*

"*Create a Culture of Kindness in Middle School* brilliantly covers all the bases, with a hands-on approach to building important skills like compassion, empathy, listening, anger management, coping tools, personal responsibility, and respect for diversity. This timely and important manual includes practical activities, questions, and resources to engage students and help them recognize their interconnectedness, their capacity to change deeply held beliefs, and the potential they each have to make a difference—all while helping to preserve civility, respect, and common decency in our world."

—Jane Bluestein, Ph.D., author of *Creating Emotionally Safe Schools* and *The Win-Win Classroom*

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Every student who walks through your door is an unpolished gemstone. Every facet you create will stay with that student for life. Your work is that important. So we want to dedicate this book to you and your students. And we want to thank you. Thank you for the hard work you do every day. Thank you for the heart you bring to the students you educate. And thank you for caring enough to use this book. We know it is in good hands and you will teach its lessons wisely and well.

Now, go and help your students shine. Our deepest hope is that their collective light will someday change the world.

—Naomi Drew and Christa M. Tinari

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—Naomi

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—Christa

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- All the students who shared their stories during interviews



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# Introduction



“The mission of schools must include teaching kindness. Without it, communities, families, schools, and classrooms become places of incivility where lasting learning is unlikely to take place. . . . Kindness can be taught, and it is a defining aspect of civilized human life. It belongs in every home, school, neighborhood, and society.”

—Maurice Elias, director of the Social-Emotional Learning Lab, Rutgers University

## Creating a Culture of Kindness in Your School

One of the most important jobs educators have is to teach, model, and reinforce respect, compassion, kindness, and other prosocial skills. Doing so builds a school climate and culture where kids feel more connected to their teachers and to one another. It leads to greater emotional health for students and teachers alike. And it can create a fundamental shift in school climate—a tipping point at which bullying and cruelty become a rarity. Academic gains will likely follow. According to the American Institutes for Research, “Positive school climate is tied to high or improving attendance rates, test scores, promotion rates, and graduation rates.” Better test scores and higher rates of student achievement are inextricably related to a school climate of kindness and support.

Changing a school’s culture can start with a single teacher. We saw a great example of this when we interviewed eighth-grade teacher Kiren Chanda. When she started teaching her students about social responsibility, they came up with the idea of doing random acts of kindness for the entire school—from teachers and administrators to custodians, support staff, and students. Motivated by the intrinsic value of doing good for others, Kiren’s class transformed into a team on a mission. And the impact went way beyond the walls of their classroom. Ripples of kindness started spreading through the entire school. Before long, kids were holding open doors for each other, writing thank-you notes to teachers, and giving each other compliments.

Kiren says, “A feeling of niceness and camaraderie started popping up all over the building. Kids were feeling so good about what was being done for them, they wanted to do good for others.” And the recipients of these pay-it-forward acts of kindness were inspired to do similar acts themselves. Ultimately, the climate of the entire school changed. As Kiren’s principal, Steve Roos, said: “We don’t have a bullying problem in our school. Our kids feel accepted here. People take care of one another.” And it all started with one teacher and a bunch of eighth graders who were inspired to do good.

*Better test scores and higher rates of student achievement are inextricably related to a school climate of kindness and support.*

This story is a perfect demonstration of how, when seeds of peace, kindness, and compassion are planted, they can spread through an entire school.

## Making Kindness Contagious

What happened in Kiren Chanda’s school is a great example of something researchers have quantified and documented: Kindness is contagious. A study by James Fowler and Nicholas Christakis published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* revealed that “cooperative behavior is contagious and spreads from person to person to person. When people benefit from kindness they ‘pay it forward’ by

## THE REVEALING POWER OF SURVEYS

In order to find out what students are experiencing when it comes to conflict, bullying, and other negative and unkind behaviors, we studied the research and also conducted two national surveys of our own. In total, we surveyed over 1,000 students in schools throughout the United States in sixth through eighth grade. We surveyed kids in different demographic areas, of varying races and socioeconomic groups, and from cities as well as suburbs and rural areas. Our participating schools were both public and private. Because our surveys were anonymous, students often revealed things they hesitated to speak of face-to-face in the dozens of one-on-one interviews we also conducted. On pages 244–247, we have included a similar student survey that you can use at your school.

helping others who were not originally involved, and this creates a cascade of cooperation that influences dozens more in a social network.”<sup>1</sup>

Planting the seeds of compassion and respect in classrooms and schools is essential, not only to reduce bullying and other cruel behaviors, but because empathy and kindness are so essential to all human relationships. But just as these positive behaviors spread, so can cruelty and callousness. As a Harvard study of 10,000 middle school and high school students reported, 80 percent were more concerned about their own success and happiness than they were about others. The report states something all of us have seen: “When caring takes a back seat, youth are at risk for being cruel, disrespectful, and dishonest.”<sup>2</sup> As one eighth-grade boy told us, “I was a bully because I never put myself in the other person’s shoes. I never stopped to think what the other kid was feeling.”

On the other hand, when kids start standing up for others, more are likely to follow. That’s partly because “mirror neurons” in the brain prompt people to mimic other people’s behaviors. According to neuroscience researchers Sourya Acharya and Samarth Shukla, mirror neurons are activated when people

observe others’ actions. This helps explain why kids learn through imitation. Mirror neurons also spark the spread of empathy and emotions. This is why it’s so important to fill classrooms and hallways with enough empathy, kindness, and respect to motivate every student.<sup>3</sup>

## The Need to Foster Acceptance of Diversity

Day by day the world is becoming visibly more diverse. People from different cultures interact in schools, communities, workplaces, and online more than ever before. Schools strive to meet the needs of diverse students, including dual language learners, students with learning differences and disorders, students with disabilities or behavioral challenges, students who identify as gender variant, and those whose families have recently immigrated.

Yet the challenges are many. Racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, ableism, and other forms of bias and bigotry impact students on a daily basis. People who are not part of a society’s dominant group (or groups) may be subject to unfair treatment, restrictions on rights, physical attacks, bias-motivated crimes, and more. And particularly relevant to educators is this fact: The FBI reports that 33 percent of all hate crime offenders, and a similar percentage of victims, are under age eighteen.

A study published in the *American Journal of Public Health* about the negative impact of bullying on kids concludes that “bias-based harassment is more strongly associated with compromised health than general harassment.”<sup>4</sup>

Helping kids develop respect and appreciation for diversity decreases their likelihood of harming others due to perceived differences. Teaching students to respect and value differences is therefore a critical part of bullying prevention. In tandem with these goals, educators can also help kids see their many similarities as human beings on a shared planet. This is why this book includes certain key understandings and skills, such as fostering empathy and appreciation of differences, cultivating awareness of our own biases, and developing the fine art of perspective-taking. Lessons 25 and 26, for example, raise awareness of the ways bias, stereotyping, and prejudice bring harm. The lessons provide strategies for students to use in



preventing bias-based bullying behaviors and reinforcing a culture of care and respect.

## Encouraging Upstander Behaviors

Along with building empathy, compassion, and acceptance, another critical piece in creating an atmosphere of kindness is teaching kids how to step out of the role of passive bystander and into the role of upstander.

Taking this step is often challenging for kids of all ages for a variety of reasons. A study published in the *Journal of Early Adolescence*, for example, found that bystanders often don't step into the role of upstander "because they lack the skills that are needed to help victims and because they are afraid of retaliation."<sup>5</sup>

*"It's not our job to toughen our children up to face a cruel and heartless world. It's our job to raise children who will make the world a little less cruel and heartless."* —L.R. Knost

Many lessons in this book help build the necessary skills, providing practical strategies to help you teach kids how to effectively intervene when peers are mistreated. Some of these skills may be different from what you expect. For example, the first step is instilling the understanding that our actions matter. A National Institutes of Health (NIH) study shows a direct link between kids' mindsets and their willingness and ability to support peers who are mistreated. If students believe they can make a difference, and feel capable of doing so, they're more likely to take action when someone's being picked on.<sup>6</sup> (For more information on mindsets, see page 5.)

The NIH study also gave the following key actions that educators can use to foster upstander behavior:

- *Clearly communicate* to kids that they are expected to include and support anyone who's mistreated.
- *Show kids* how to include, support, and encourage others so they feel confident in doing so.
- *Encourage the understanding* that bullying is wrong and that helping others is the right thing to do.<sup>7</sup>

Kids also have a lot to say about what works based on their personal experiences. The Youth Voice Survey looked at data from more than 13,000 students in fifth

through twelfth grades to find out what helped most in responding to bullying and victimization. This study's findings challenge some conventional wisdom and shed light on the strategies that really work best. Here's some of what the survey revealed.<sup>8</sup>

### **The single most helpful strategy for kids who are targets of bullying:**

Seek support from an adult at school or from a friend.

### **Another highly effective strategy for kids who are targeted:**

Don't think like a victim. Kids who told themselves that the bullying wasn't their fault, and that there was nothing wrong with them, proved to be more resilient in the face of bullying.

### **The least helpful strategies for kids being targeted:**

- Telling or asking the person bullying them to stop.
- Telling the person how they felt.

### **The most helpful things bystanders can do when they witness others being bullied:**

Include and support those being bullied in the following ways:

- Walk with them and spend time with them at school.
- Give them advice and hope.
- Help them get away.
- Distract the person who's bullying them.
- Help them tell adults.
- Encourage them.
- Talk to them at school to give support and show that you care.
- Call them at home to give support.
- Listen to them.
- Hear their concerns without judgment.
- Show that you care.

### **The most important adult strategies to help kids who are bullied:**

Kids surveyed by the Youth Voice Project also addressed adult behaviors that made a difference. They reported that the three most helpful things any adult can do are:

- Listen to them.
- Encourage them.



The “brain sculpting” that happens during teen years sets up patterns for life. It’s important to let students know this and to make sure they appreciate the implications. For example, if they binge-eat, overdose on video games, drink, or use drugs, their neural pathways become more prone to long-term addiction. At the same time, however, a teen’s neural pathways for *healthy* life patterns are also uniquely primed. Kids who nurture intellectual, artistic, and physical talents will be stronger in these areas for life. The same is true when it comes to social and emotional skills. Kids who learn them now may, in fact, have them forever. The pages of this book are filled with ways to expand your students’ capacities for kindness and empathy, as well as for self-control, problem-solving, moral courage, and altruism. These skills are essential to a kinder climate and culture, within your school and as your students go out into the world.

**Note:** For important information and current research on the impact of electronic media, which you may choose to share with parents, see “The Impact of Media Violence” in the digital content for this book.

Stress is another major issue for many kids this age. One seventh-grade girl from our survey said, “In middle school, people have mood swings and get angry more easily than when we were younger. We’re getting more homework and have after-school pressures, plus other stuff, too. It’s easier to release stress toward other people than deal with it ourselves.” The teen brain is especially susceptible to stress and its side effects. Family issues like illness, divorce, money problems, and substance abuse can take a huge toll, and some kids have the added strain of acting as substitute parents for younger siblings. Others may be dealing with physical and emotional abuse. All of this can lead to a sense of powerlessness. Since bullying is commonly driven by a need for power, some kids will be more apt to bully as a result. Others will be more susceptible to being bullied, especially those being victimized at home. For kids who already feel overwhelmed by stress, bullying can sometimes feel like too much to bear.

Thankfully, most adolescents are resilient. But when multiple risk factors exist at the same time, some teens will gravitate toward drugs, alcohol, promiscuity, self-harm (such as cutting), and isolation. Some will develop eating disorders. And some will develop suicidal thinking. Again, bullying can be the

factor that pushes them beyond their limits—whether they are observing, being targeted by, or carrying out the bullying.

These are among the many reasons why it’s important to create the compassionate, kind, and connected school culture the lessons in this book explore, build, and reinforce. Doing so will not only decrease bullying but can also provide kids who need help with a greater sense of support and connection.

## The Importance of Mindsets

This book is fundamentally about change. When we believe change is possible, it is. When we believe it isn’t, we close off to possibility and act accordingly. The brain actually changes when our mindset is open to growth. That’s neuroplasticity in action.

*Some of the first lessons in this book are designed to help your students create a growth mindset—and the understanding that every new strategy they learn will literally change their brains.*

Neuroscientists are giving us new ways to use this plasticity and to harness the power of the brain as problem-solver. Helping kids develop a “growth mindset”—as opposed to a “fixed mindset”—is critical. Stanford University neuroscientist Carol Dweck found that growth mindsets enable us to see our abilities as ever-evolving. And this has enormous potential for counteracting bullying and fostering kindness. For example, a study by Dweck’s colleague David Yaeger revealed that kids who’d learned about the power and plasticity of the brain showed a 40 percent decrease in depressive and aggressive responses to bullying.<sup>12</sup> Acquiring a growth mindset helped them understand that change is possible—for kids who’ve bullied, for kids who’ve been bullied, and for themselves.

Based on this science, some of the first lessons in this book are designed to help your students create a growth mindset—and the understanding that every new strategy they learn will literally change their brains. Take a look at the “Brain Graphic” on page 30. It’s used in many lessons to help kids grasp new concepts. These lessons contain strategies and

information to help kids understand how their brains work. In turn, this understanding can lead to greater resilience in the face of conflict, bullying, and more.

## WHY IS IT SO HARD FOR KIDS TO TAKE RESPONSIBILITY?

This is a question that frustrates many educators as they witness kids' denials, excuses, and justifications for bullying and other cruel behaviors. New research sheds light on this phenomenon, revealing that the fear of getting in trouble isn't the only reason kids avoid accepting responsibility for negative actions. A new study in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science* reveals that denials and justifications of morally questionable acts are common because of something termed "unethical amnesia"—the tendency to forget or justify acts too uncomfortable to confront honestly. This allows people to perceive certain bad things they do as "morally permissible." Perpetrators of cruel acts, for example, might say the other person deserved it. They justify "dehumanizing the victim."<sup>13</sup> And this is a common practice among kids who bully.

While this study was conducted with adults, other research shows that its implications extend to people of all ages. For example, a 2011 study of kids ages nine to thirteen showed that those who bullied were "woefully deficient" in moral compassion, and easily justified their actions.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, a study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found that adolescents, whose prefrontal cortexes are still developing, are more susceptible than adults to making bad decisions, including harming others.<sup>15</sup> Being aware of these factors gives educators a starting point for guiding their students toward the right path. You'll find many exercises in the lessons of this book that will help kids take responsibility and make good choices. You'll also find two lessons and three handouts to foster conscience (Lessons 27 and 28), and one lesson on moral courage (Lesson 46).

## What Student and Teacher Surveys Tell Us About Bullying, Conflict, and School Violence

Let's start with the good news: Educators, parents, and communities are making real, tangible progress in the mission to reduce bullying and violence in our schools. According to the National Institutes of Health, the rate of bullying among teens in U.S. schools has dropped more than 9 percent since 1998. The latest National Crime Victimization Survey tells us that the rate of bullying among students ages twelve to eighteen is now 21.5 percent—the lowest rate ever reported in this survey. (Past years' rates were 28 percent in 2005, 2009, and 2011, and 32 percent in 2007.)<sup>16</sup>

Additionally, fewer middle school students are afraid of being harmed at school than in the past. The rate of students who report feeling fearful of physical harm at school has fallen by 8 percent overall since 1995. The drop is even more dramatic for students of color, among whom the rate has fallen by 15 percent.<sup>17</sup>

The work that educators are doing across the country is paying off! Yet there's still room for progress. That's why we wrote this book. We want cultures of kindness to be the norm in middle schools, not the exception. All kids need to feel safe, supported, and accepted. The fact that 21.5 percent of twelve- to eighteen-year-olds still report being bullied is unacceptable.

Listen to the words of students from the two national surveys we conducted:

- "I was bullied because I was small and I really had no one to go to. I used to self-harm with a razor blade." —7th-grade girl
- "They call me weird, emo, and a weird gay person. They say, 'You suck at everything!' and 'You're horrible at sports!' Sometimes I can't take it." —6th-grade boy
- "There are kids in our class who go home and cry every night over things that people do to them. Some of them have family problems and the problems at school make it worse. The teachers don't even know." —8th-grade girl



- “They say, ‘lesbian, stupid idiot, go back to where you came from. You should just end it.’” —8th-grade girl
- “Things go viral sometimes. Some kids make fun of people in a really mean way. They’ll send screenshots of personal texts that are meant just for them. It’s like bullying and harassing at the same time.” —7th-grade boy
- “Kids say I’m bad and shouldn’t be allowed to go to this school. I’m so sad that I can’t sleep. Why do they treat me this way?” —7th-grade boy

As we read through our survey results and as we interviewed middle schoolers, we repeatedly saw how deep the pain of bullying goes for far too many. Often, kids hide this pain as they sit in classrooms and walk through the halls. Yet it interferes with their learning and affects their emotional and physical well-being. Here is some of the other information our surveys revealed:

#### **Frequency of mean words, conflicts, and rumors:**

- 81% of the kids surveyed said that they hear kids saying mean things to one another every day.
- 64% said that they see conflicts happening at their school sometimes, often, or every day.
- 42% said that they hear kids spreading rumors or mean gossip every day.
- 14% said that other kids say things to hurt their feelings every day, and 19% said that this happens one to three times a week.

Going beyond this overarching information, our surveys asked students to select their top three choices for each of the items that follow. Here is what their answers revealed.

#### **The top reasons kids said they are teased or bullied:**

- looks or body size: 59%
- how they dress: 41%
- physical ability or disability: 28%
- race: 14%

#### **The top places where kids said bullying and teasing occur:**

- at lunch: 84%
- in the hallways: 55%

- on the bus or walking to school: 43%
- in the bathrooms: 33%

#### **The top conflict starters:**

- rumors and gossip: almost 60%
- being teased or made fun of: about 46%
- name-calling: 40%

**Note:** Although conflict can lead to bullying, the above refers to more common conflicts that tend not to escalate into bullying.

#### **People kids said they would go to if they were being bullied:**

- a parent: 33%
- a friend: 20%
- a counselor: 16%

One piece of information that especially concerned us was this: Only 14 percent of the kids we surveyed said they would go to their teachers if they were being bullied. When we delved deeper, we found out why. Some kids are ashamed to admit what’s happening, or they’re afraid of getting in trouble. Others don’t want to risk being seen as a tattletale or snitch. And, sadly, some kids simply don’t believe their teachers can or will help. Unfortunately, the data support this view in many cases. In their 2012 report, “Bullying in U.S. Schools,” two of the world’s top bullying experts, Susan P. Limber and Dan Olweus, found that 41 percent of middle schoolers say their teachers have done “little or nothing” or “fairly little” to cut down on classroom bullying. Limber and Olweus also found that 39 percent of kids who reported being bullied said it lasted for over a year.

Equally troubling are the following statistics from the *2013 National School Climate Survey* of students by GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network): “56.7 percent of LGBT students who were harassed or assaulted in school did not report the incident to school staff, most commonly because they doubted that effective intervention would occur or the situation could become worse if reported.” Furthermore, “61.6 percent of the students who did report an incident said that school staff did nothing in response.” The same survey revealed that “51.4 percent of students reported hearing homophobic remarks from their teachers or other school staff.” Additionally,

“74.1 percent of LGBT students were verbally harassed (e.g., called names or threatened) in the past year [at school] because of their sexual orientation and 55.2 percent because of their gender expression.” The same study reported that “36.2 percent were physically harassed (e.g., pushed or shoved) in the past year because of their sexual orientation and 22.7 percent because of their gender expression.”<sup>18</sup>

Another disturbing piece of data comes from the National Center for Educational Statistics: 20 to 30 percent of kids who were bullied didn’t tell *any adult*. Yet telling an adult is one of the most effective tools kids have against bullying. As one teenage boy said in retrospect, “I wish I’d spoken up sooner, because it really would have made life a lot easier. If I had just spoken up after the first day, or first couple of days, I could have ended the whole thing.”

One of the most important insights we gained in the process of talking to students and conducting our national surveys was this: Although many schools have anti-bullying assemblies and give kids the clear message that bullying and other mean behaviors are not acceptable, kids are too rarely given enough specific, practical information on how to handle real-life bullying situations. They know the why-nots, but not the how-tos. The main message often tends to be simply, “You shouldn’t do it.” And even if they *do* have more detailed how-tos, they often aren’t given enough time—or any time at all—to practice implementing what they’ve learned.

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*Kids are too rarely given enough specific, practical information on how to handle real-life bullying situations. They not only need the right words, they need time to role-play and rehearse using them. Without this practice, kids often end up vulnerable and unprepared.*

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What became clear is that kids not only need the right words to use to confront and prevent bullying, they also need time to role-play and rehearse using them. Without this practice, kids often end up vulnerable and unprepared. Assemblies aren’t enough. Imagine doing an assembly on baseball, talking about it in class a few times, then sending

kids out on the field to play the game. This tends to be how schools and districts often approach teaching anti-bullying strategies.

In addition, many kids we talked to described ways bullying and conflict interfere with all aspects of their lives at school and beyond. A theme that came up over and over in our student interviews was that many middle schoolers feel stressed out and distracted by conflicts they can’t resolve. This often leads to lost friendships, larger conflicts, and—especially in the case of many girls—time wasted replaying the details in their heads. For girls and boys, conflict and anger can lead to incidents of bullying. For example, one kid might get mad at another and want to get even. He might engage friends in harassing the person he’s mad at. Before long, texts are flying, the classroom is buzzing with rumors, and the put-downs continue online. The kid who’s been targeted can feel as though there is no escape.

Here are a few more things the kids we talked to expressed:

- Many believed that talking to a teacher about a bullying situation actually made things worse.
- Most didn’t feel comfortable intervening when they saw someone being picked on.
- Many didn’t feel like they had the right skills for dealing with an angry person.
- Quite a few wished that their classes allowed time for weekly lessons that would help them get better at skills for dealing with bullying.

One of the biggest changes we hope this book will make is to help kids feel more hopeful and less powerless in the face of bullying—especially those who are bullied, but also bystanders and the kids who do the bullying.

## **A Word About Crisis Situations**

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), most kids who are bullied *do not* engage in suicide-related behaviors. However, as mentioned earlier, bullying *can* increase the risk of self-harm when combined with other risk factors, such as exposure to violence, family conflict, emotional distress, problems in relationships, feeling a lack of connectedness to school or not feeling supported at school, alcohol or drug use, physical

disabilities, and learning or behavioral differences.<sup>19</sup> It's also important to remember that kids with physical disabilities or learning differences are among the most vulnerable. And, as stated earlier, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender kids are bullied far more often than their peers. In addition, suicide rates among LGBT kids are much higher than the average.<sup>20</sup> According to another CDC study, gay, lesbian, and bisexual students in seventh through twelfth grade were “more than twice as likely to have attempted suicide as their heterosexual peers.” Studies have also shown a significantly elevated suicide risk among transgender youth.<sup>21</sup>

Whether bullying takes place in person or online, it can take a steep toll on kids, contributing to problems ranging from depression to disengagement in school, and, in some rare cases, suicide. This is true not just for those who are targeted, but for those who target others. Kids who bully are at an elevated risk for depression, suicide, substance use, trouble with the law, and violence as they grow into adulthood.<sup>22</sup>

Bystanders—those who witness bullying—are adversely affected as well. According to a report by the Centers for Disease Control, “Even youth who have *observed but not participated in bullying* behavior report significantly more feelings of helplessness and less sense of connectedness and support from responsible adults (parents/schools) than youth who have not witnessed bullying behavior.” And kids who both bully and are bullied are at greatest risk of experiencing negative repercussions. The CDC notes, “Youth who report both being bullied and bullying others (sometimes referred to as bully-victims) have the highest rates of negative mental health outcomes, including depression, anxiety, and thinking about suicide.”<sup>23</sup>

One of the most important protective factors against suicide and despair for any young person, including those affected by bullying, is a sense of connection and support. School is absolutely critical in this regard. This is true for all kids. But it's especially important for kids with difficult home lives and other risk factors. Feeling connected to and accepted by teachers, counselors, and peers can spell the difference between hope and despair. The lessons in this book will help you foster this connection and acceptance. In addition, we've included the lesson “When Bullying Leads to Self-Harm” (page 230) to help you address the difficult topics of suicide and self-harm.

## HANDLING CONFLICT VS. BULLYING

Schools with a lot of conflict—such as peer disagreements, fights, name-calling, or an overall atmosphere of mistrust—tend to have more bullying. And while conflict can lead to bullying, the two issues can't be solved in the same way. In fact, it is *never* appropriate or helpful to try to mediate a bullying situation or to get kids to “talk it out” using conflict resolution skills. In bullying situations, which often involve a serious power imbalance, putting the involved parties face-to-face can be damaging to the student who's being targeted. For more information on handling bullying situations, see “Addressing and Preventing Bullying” on page 14.

You'll find tools and resources for your students, as well as a handout for parents. And at the end of this book (page 248) is information for hotlines and other sources of support.

## About This Book

All forty-eight lessons in this book are designed for teachers, counselors, group leaders, social workers, religious educators, and facilitators of out-of-school activities. Each one is based on current research and information gleaned from our national surveys as well as from our face-to-face interviews with middle school kids, teachers, principals, and counselors. Additionally, the lessons and strategies in this book can mesh with any existing anti-bullying program you may be using in your school, such as Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, Second Step, or Responsive Classroom.

Each lesson takes thirty minutes or so, and contains discussion topics, activities, and concrete strategies that foster critical thinking and language development. Optional follow-ups at the end of each lesson can be completed on another day or as homework. You'll also find creative, thought-provoking enrichment activities that support, reinforce, and expand the content of each lesson. These, too, are optional, and how you use them is up to you. Some

lessons also list helpful online resources that expand on key points.

Every lesson also has handouts for kids to complete during your meeting time or as homework. The handouts are designed to help students apply what they've learned. If at all possible, make time to talk about the handouts after they're completed. (These handouts are available as downloadable digital content. See page ix for details on how to access this material online.)

Also, to help you meet your district's character education goals, the "Character Connections" section at the top of each lesson indicates the key character traits related to the lesson.

Some lessons also include accompanying "10-Minute Time Crunchers." These quick activities reinforce and extend the concepts presented in their corresponding lessons. You can do these time crunchers immediately after completing the corresponding lesson or at a later date.

Here's the layout of the rest of this book:

### **Section 1: The Core Lessons**

These twelve activities have been carefully designed to reshape the way your students think, react, and interact, and many activities are rooted in current neuroscience. They set the stage for all the lessons and skills that follow.

### **Section 2: Fostering Courage, Kindness, and Empathy**

The ten lessons in this section give kids specific strategies and understandings that foster greater kindness, empathy, and courage.

### **Section 3: Celebrating Uniqueness and Accepting Differences**

These eight lessons challenge mindsets that lead to cruelty. They also help kids honor their own uniqueness and the uniqueness of others, fostering respect and the understanding that individual differences enrich us all.

### **Section 4: Dealing with Conflict**

This section's nine lessons are full of practical strategies and understandings to help students handle conflict and anger respectfully, peacefully, and productively.

### **Section 5: Coping with and Counteracting Bullying**

These nine lessons are filled with real-life stories and realistic strategies to prevent bullying and address it

when it happens. Some of the lessons will help kids stop bullying.

### **Writing Prompts**

In this section you'll find bonus writing prompts to help students reflect on concepts in each section of the book and gain deeper understanding of certain topics.

### **Student Survey**

The survey on pages 244–247 is similar to the one we used in our research. It will help you learn how your students are affected by conflict, bullying, and other mean behaviors—as well as how kind, caring, and willing to do the right thing students might be.

### **Recommended Resources**

At the end of the book is an annotated list of high-quality books, websites, organizations, and other resources. There's also hotline information in the event that you need to handle crisis situations.

## **Using This Book**

We highly recommend doing at least one lesson a week. If that's not possible, try to aim for three a month. Many teachers find advisory period to be the best time. Others find it helpful to alternate with colleagues on their team, each teaching a lesson a month wherever they can fit it in. That way, students get several lessons a month, and each teacher or counselor has to lead only one. The material in each lesson ties in with many content areas, including language arts, social studies, and health. So if you're a classroom teacher, you may choose to align these lessons with the curriculum. Or, if you're a school counselor, you might join classrooms and teach these lessons there or pull out kids for group lessons. Decide what works best for you, your students, and your school. However you do it, we are confident you'll find that the results are worth the effort.

## **Getting Started**

The climate of your building can change if everyone gets on board. Chat with your principal about the prospect of using this book schoolwide so everyone can reap the benefits. If you're using this book on your own, know that you may be planting seeds of change that reach beyond your classroom. People who notice positive changes in your students will



likely ask what you're doing. That's when the possibilities start expanding.

The following recommendations will help you use this book in ways that maximize its rewards and suit you, your students, and your school.

#### You'll need the following for most lessons:

- **Student journals and pens or pencils.** Ask each student to designate a notebook as his or her journal for these lessons. These journals will be confidential unless students choose to share certain entries with you or the group.
- **Agreement for Classroom Discussions.** You'll create this agreement with your students in Lesson 2 (page 20).
- **"Brain Graphic" poster.** This graphic is introduced in Lesson 4 (page 27) and is also included in this book's digital content.

**If everyone in your school is using this book, consider doing a whole-school launch.** Kids receive a powerful message when their entire school commits to common values and strategies. Starting the school year with a unified activity gets kids excited and creates enormous motivation. For example, one of the best start-of-the-year kickoffs we've heard of linked the entire community, bringing home the message that kindness, respect, acceptance, and decency were highly valued and expected within the school and beyond. Each year at this school, students, staff, administrators, and support personnel were joined on the school's lawn by the mayor, chief of police, board of education chair, parents, and selected town dignitaries. The local press reported on the event and published photos of the festivities, including a procession in which kids from each grade marched out with huge handmade banners representing different character education traits. All students were given the unmistakable message that their school and community valued respect and kindness.

Another school's launch engaged students in team-building activities at the start of the year, emphasizing the expectation that respect was paramount. Every kid knew they could go to designated adults for support throughout the year, and every adult was ready to deliver. Kids who otherwise

## AN INNOVATIVE SOLUTION TO THE TIME CRUNCH

If you're using this book schoolwide, and if your administrator's open to creative solutions, read on for one of the most ingenious time crunch solutions we've heard about. Middle school principal James Walsh shared with us his creative approach to a scheduling challenge. When he realized that regular class meetings might be the way to reduce bullying and other bad behaviors, he wracked his brain to figure out how teachers could fit two meetings a month into an already packed schedule. That's when an inventive idea came to him: shortening the day's eight class periods by four minutes every other Tuesday, thus freeing up the necessary thirty minutes for the "Tuesday Talks" that teachers conducted. He adjusted the bell schedule accordingly, and set his plan in motion.

Says Walsh, "Everyone got on board, and teachers started seeing changes right away. Now, four years later, kids look forward to these meetings, and it never feels like a chore for any of us." Walsh reports that the results at his school far outweigh the effort it takes to juggle the schedule. He says, "We all agree we're getting better classrooms, better behaved kids, and more time to teach due to fewer discipline distractions. It's really working."

Your school may want to consider Walsh's method. If it's not possible to implement it schoolwide, work with your team or department to come up with an innovation that works for your particular setting. A little creativity can go a long way!

might have feared being labeled snitches felt safe to speak up if they were being bullied, buoyed by the collaborative environment initiated on day one. As weeks went on, student-led morning announcements about respect and kindness echoed messages on student-made posters that were posted around the school. Lessons on compassion, kindness, and anti-bullying strategies were just part of this school's



writing activity, have your students open their journals and pick up their pens. Tell them that when you say *go*, they're going to write for one to three minutes without pause. Spelling and neatness don't count, and no one else will see what they write unless they choose to share. This is a great way for kids to unblock and channel thoughts they didn't even know were there.

**Enforce confidentiality.** Make sure students understand that they should not bring other people's personal information into group discussions or role-plays. Remind students not to use real names when describing bullying or conflict experiences or other sensitive situations. Coach them to say things like, "Someone I know," "This kid," or "A relative of mine." In addition, ensure that student journals are confidential unless kids choose to share certain entries with you or the group.

**Have students share in pairs.** Many lessons in this book include sharing with a partner. This practice increases communication between students who otherwise might not interact socially and fosters openness in kids who are reluctant to share in front of the group. To optimize your paired sharing time, here are some tips:

- Put students into pairs. (Pick partners for them rather than having them choose their own.)
- Remind them to listen respectfully and to take turns speaking.
- Share the question, prompt, or topic for discussion before partners begin their discussion.
- Announce the allotted time frame. Cue pairs to switch halfway through, so they each get a chance to share.
- Circulate and give coaching where needed.
- When the time has elapsed, have partners thank each other.

**Try the circle configuration.** Most lessons in this book can be done in a circle if you so choose. The advantage of a circle is that it allows kids to see each other's faces, and helps them tune in and listen attentively. However, if a circle doesn't work for you, use whatever configuration does. Some middle school teachers pass a "talking object" to each

## KNOWING WHEN AND WHAT TO REPORT

There are, of course, limits on confidentiality. Certain things need to be reported, depending on the rules in your area and depending on whether you are a mandatory reporter. Follow your school or district protocol for notifying proper personnel if a student reveals red-flag issues such as cutting, suicidal thoughts, or abuse.

speaker, which alleviates interrupting and fosters greater focus. You can use any object that can easily be passed from hand to hand. One middle school teacher we know uses a koosh ball. Another uses a soft globe. Or you might use a "talking stick," decorated with bright colors by a student. (To see examples, search online for "talking stick.")

**Honor diversity.** Model and reinforce an attitude of acceptance and respect toward all differences—in ethnicity, race, gender, sexual identity, culture, ability, or any other area of diversity. Emphasize that people's unique differences bring richness and texture to our world, to your school, and to students' individual lives. Many lessons in the book incorporate these ideas. When welcomed, diversity in any form is one of our greatest strengths, leading to deeper understanding, greater compassion, and more expansive ways of thinking. When students embrace diverse people and perspectives, they become better prepared to thrive and succeed in a changing world.

**Have kids use the strategies you teach in real life.**

It is critically important to check in regularly with students about how they're applying what they've learned. Each time you conduct a lesson, be sure to remind students you'll be asking how they're applying the strategies in their relationships at home, in school, on the playing field, and elsewhere. Many of the lessons and handouts in this book include "Real-Life Challenges." Let your students know that you expect them to try these challenges, and that during parent conferences, you may discuss with family adults how students are applying what they've learned.





**Talk to your administrator about positioning staff in “hotspots” in your school.** Your surveys will reveal where most bullying takes place. Adult presence in those spots is a powerful preventative measure. Whoever is there should be trained in how to respond if bullying occurs.

**Know what to do if you see bullying taking place.**

By conducting the lessons in this book, you will hopefully have fewer and fewer instances in which you'll need to directly intervene. However, it's important to know what to do, should those cases arise. Here are the steps we recommend:

- Intervene immediately.
- Separate the students.
- Offer support to the target of the bullying.
- Refer to your school's anti-bullying policy for designated disciplinary consequences. This may vary from school to school. Consequences are generally based on the severity and frequency of the bullying and the degree of harm it causes. Examples include temporary removal from the classroom, losing certain privileges, behavioral assessment, counseling, peer support groups, conferences with parents, detention, or restitution.
- Follow up with the student who was bullied. Check in the following day at a minimum, and more often if the bullying has been ongoing.
- Contact the parents or caregivers of each student.
- Offer continued follow-up to the student who was bullied. Checking back in is critical.
- When necessary, provide remedial counseling to the student who did the bullying.

**Provide easy, confidential ways to report bullying.**

Let kids text in reports of bullying. Many schools set up a special number for kids. You can also provide blank index cards kids can use to report bullying. Position boxes around the school where kids can place their cards, and check the boxes at least once a day. And make sure all staff members give a clear message that they'll support any student who comes to them.

**Acknowledge and reward kindness and positive behaviors.**

Certificates, bulletin boards, special assemblies, coupons, fun events, and verbal compliments—kids love to be acknowledged, and it works! Punitive measures, on the other hand, often don't. You'll create and strengthen an atmosphere of kindness by using positive feedback to reinforce the behaviors you most want to see.

## One Last Thing

We wish you all the best as you undertake this mission, and we would enjoy learning about your journey. Please feel free to contact us in care of our publisher at [help4kids@freespirit.com](mailto:help4kids@freespirit.com). We would love to hear your experiences, thoughts, and ideas.

In peace,

**Naomi Drew and Christa M. Tinari**



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SECTION 1

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# THE CORE LESSONS





# Creating a Vision of a Peaceful School

## CHARACTER CONNECTIONS

### personal responsibility / kindness

*Lesson 1 guides students to envision the kind of school atmosphere they'd like to create and the kind of world they hope to have.*

#### Students will

- engage in the process of visualizing a peaceful school
- specify actions that would lead to a more peaceful atmosphere in their school
- understand their connection to the larger world and their role in creating a more peaceful future

#### Materials

- student journals

## Introduction

Say: Imagine going to school each day in an atmosphere of kindness, respect, and acceptance. What would that be like? Accept responses, and then say: Well, it's possible for us to create what you've described. There have been breakthrough studies proving that kindness is actually contagious. It goes from one person to the next. We have the power to start the chain of kindness.

Read aloud the following quote: "Researchers from the University of California, San Diego and Harvard provided the first laboratory evidence that cooperative behavior is contagious and that it spreads from person to person to person. When people benefit from kindness they 'pay it forward' by helping others who were not originally involved, and this creates a cascade of cooperation that influences dozens more."<sup>25</sup>

Say: You are the leaders, innovators, teachers, and parents of the future. What you do matters. Creating the kind of school—and the kind of world—that you want starts right here, right now. Invite student responses to these ideas.

## Discussion and Activity

Say: Here's what one middle schooler said about kindness and conflict at school: "*Without kindness and respect, society would break down and there would be fights everywhere. That's one of the reasons I like my school. There are rarely conflicts and kids get along with each other.*"

Ask: What are some ways you'd like to see our school change in terms of how kids treat each other?

Say: Envisioning what we want is an important part of making it happen. And having a clear vision of what we want—who we want to be, how we want to treat others, what kind of school we want to have—helps us take concrete steps to turn these visions into reality. Every great idea starts with a picture in the mind's eye!

Share this quote from social and behavioral scientist Frank Niles: "*Visualization works because neurons in our brains . . . interpret imagery as equivalent to a real-life action. When we visualize an act, the brain generates an impulse that tells our neurons to 'perform' the movement. This creates a new neural pathway—clusters of cells in our brain that work together to create memories or learned behaviors—that primes our body to act in a way consistent to what we*

*imagined. All of this occurs without actually performing the physical activity, yet it achieves a similar result.”<sup>26</sup>*

Say: **Let’s try visualization now.** Ask students to close their eyes. If some prefer not to close their eyes, have them look down and concentrate on a focal point as they visualize. Let them know that the key to visualization is to mentally picture what they wish to create, and then imagine the steps it would take to get there.

Say: **Take a slow, deep breath: in through the nose, then out through the mouth. Allow your body and mind to totally relax. Do this again, a little slower, lingering on the breath out.** Have students continue to breathe slowly and deeply as you speak.

Say: **Now, imagine coming to school every day and feeling safe, respected, and welcome. Take another deep breath as you picture this.** (Allow about twenty seconds of silence.) Say: **Picture people being nice to each other regardless of differences. Imagine being able to walk through any part of this school, inside or out, feeling secure, accepted, and happy. Envision it being this way every day.** Give students another minute to visualize this in silence.

When the visualization process is complete, say: **In your journals, please write down the details of what you pictured. You’re going to be sharing this with a partner. Don’t worry about spelling or neatness. Just let your thoughts run free.** After several minutes, have students get into pairs. Say: **Please share with your partner what you visualized.** Caution kids to listen with an open mind and not to judge or criticize what they hear. Say: **This is an important first step in creating the kind of atmosphere we all want at school.**

Give pairs about three minutes to share. Then have students reconvene in the large group and have a few students discuss what they envisioned. On the board, list the key elements of these ideas and visions. Next, ask students what specific actions people could take to make your school the way they visualized it. List these ideas on the board, as well.

## Wrap-Up

Tell students that each lesson you do as a group will move you closer to the kind of school atmosphere everyone envisioned. Say: **The future depends on you! You have the power to create the kind of**

**classroom, school, community, and world you want. That’s what we’re going to be working on together.**

## Follow-Up

If you have time to follow up on this lesson, put your students in “vision groups” of three to five people. Ask them to agree on two specific actions that can start bringing the entire school closer to what they envisioned. How can they get the word out about their goals? Have them put together an action plan. After they’ve had a few minutes to discuss ideas, reconvene the large group and invite groups to share what they came up with.

Choose a few representative students to share these ideas with your principal. If you like, go with them and ask permission for your students to take steps toward implementing some ideas that emerged from vision groups. If other educators at your school are using this book, chat with them and see how your groups could pool ideas. If you’re using this book on your own, help your students select a few activities that might appeal to the rest of the student body. This is critical. Students need to know they really have the power to change their school, and that adults are taking their ideas seriously. Also, consider ideas that apply just to your group or classroom. What can your students start doing right now to create a kinder culture?

## Enrichment Activity

If you can fit this into the schedule in a way that works for you, have vision groups continue to meet regularly during class or advisory time and start putting their plans into action. Feel free to customize this for your students, your group, and your school. For example, some schools have formed kindness groups, peace groups, and respect groups that are open to anyone who wants to join. They have monthly activities initiated by students and supported by staff. If you have a School Climate Committee or something similar, see if you can work together to create a plan for your school. Be sure to include some students when you meet. This is very empowering for them, and further reinforces that they are being heard and their ideas are valued.





# Creating Group Agreements for Classroom Discussions

## CHARACTER CONNECTIONS

**assertiveness / collaboration / respect / responsibility**

*Lesson 2 has students create a group agreement that ensures emotionally safe, productive discussions and interactions.*

### Students will

- reflect on what makes discussions positive or negative
- identify the behaviors and conditions that facilitate positive, productive discussions
- pledge to follow the "Agreement for Classroom Discussions"

### Materials

- handout: "Overcoming Obstacles to Productive Classroom Discussions (page 22)"

## Introduction

Say: When we met to talk about creating a vision of a peaceful school, we discussed creating an atmosphere in our school where people are kind, respectful, and accepting of others. How would you feel if we could really make this happen? Take responses.

Say: Throughout the coming weeks, we'll be having many more discussions that will help us make this a reality. In order for our discussions to go well, what are some things we can always do? Entertain a few answers. You'll be getting back to this question in greater detail later in this lesson.

## Discussion and Activity

Ask: What things can prevent classroom discussions from going well? Take some responses. Then distribute the "Overcoming Obstacles to Productive Classroom Discussions" handout to each student. Have kids think about the two prompts on the handout: "Classroom discussions don't go well when . . ." and "It's difficult for me to participate in a classroom discussion when . . ." Give students three to four minutes to circle the responses that are true for them and answer the questions at the end.

Afterward, ask students what they circled and discuss these responses. Then ask how they answered the questions at the end.

Say: Now let's talk some more about what makes discussions go well.

Write the following prompts on the board:

- Classroom discussions go well when . . .
- It's enjoyable for me to participate in classroom discussions when . . .

Ask students to share their responses to each prompt. As students share, have several student volunteers record responses on the board.

In a new spot on the board, write, *Agreement for Classroom Discussions*.

Next, have students look at the list on the board and think about which ideas are the most important agreements they can make as a group. Point to each item listed on the board and ask students to give a thumbs-up if they find it really important, a thumbs-down if it's not important, or a thumb to the side if they think it is somewhat important. Have a volunteer count the thumbs-ups for each item. Have another volunteer list the number next to the item. Circle the top seven or eight. Tell students that these will become your agreement for group discussions. Either have a student copy the top choices onto the board or do

so yourself. Tell students that during the next lesson you'll be asking them to sign this as a way of showing their willingness to honor these agreements.

## Wrap-Up

Ask: **Why do you think this agreement is important? How might it help us all have a really great year together? How might it help us both academically and socially?** Discuss.

## Follow-Up

- Type up the agreement and give copies to all students to keep in their notebooks or folders for the rest of the year or semester. Have each student sign his or her copy.
- If possible, make the agreement a permanent fixture in your space. You might make a copy on poster paper that you laminate and label with the name of your class or group.
- Send copies of the signed agreement home for family adults to sign as well. Write a brief cover letter explaining to family adults how the purpose of this agreement ties in with the purpose of these lessons. Encourage family adults to contact you with any questions they might have. Have students bring signed copies back to school.
- For the next several group discussions on any topic, ask a student to read the agreement aloud before beginning. After a few meetings, you should be able to simply refer to the agreement before beginning a discussion, without needing to read the whole thing.
- Regularly check in with students on how well they're abiding by each of the agreement's terms. Are there areas they need to work on? Are there areas anyone is really struggling with? From time to time, have students rate themselves as a group on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being the lowest and 5 the highest, on how well they're following the agreement as a whole. Ask students to consider areas where they personally may need to improve. Give coaching where needed.



# Overcoming Obstacles to Productive Classroom Discussions

Check the choices that stand out to you in the lists below. Then answer the questions that follow.

Classroom discussions don't go well when:	It's difficult for me to participate in classroom discussions when:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> we go off topic</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> people feel afraid to give their opinions</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> only some people talk</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> kids goof off or fool around</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> people can't hear each other</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> people aren't respectful</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> people aren't listening</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> the topic is difficult to discuss</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> anyone is criticized or made fun of</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> kids exchange looks or make gestures in response to what someone else is saying</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> I'm afraid I'll say something wrong</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> I'm not interested in the topic</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> I can't form my thoughts or opinions clearly enough</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> I'm worried about confidentiality</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> I have to talk in front of the whole group</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> I've been criticized, made fun of, or given a look</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> I feel like I'll be judged for things I say</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> I feel uncomfortable speaking my mind in my own words</li> </ul>

What else?

Now, what are the *best* classroom discussions like? How do people conduct themselves? How do they act toward others? How can we continue having positive group discussions where everyone is heard? What is the value of doing so?

Classroom discussions go well when:	It's easier for me to participate in classroom discussions when:



# Respectful Listening

## CHARACTER CONNECTIONS

**respect / personal responsibility / compassion**

*Lesson 3 teaches respectful listening skills that can be used all year long.*

### Students will

- understand the attitudes and behaviors of respectful listening
- reflect on how it feels to be listened to respectfully
- practice respectful listening skills

### Materials

- handouts: “Respectful and Disrespectful Listening Chart” (page 25) and “Respectful Listening Checklist” (page 26)

## Preparation

Before you begin, choose a student volunteer and have him or her think of a story to tell you for the “bad listening” role-play in this lesson. The story can be about a fun activity he or she did with a friend recently. Alert him or her to the fact that you will be interrupting and demonstrating other disrespectful listening habits. (If the volunteer you choose needs a more specific topic, feel free to brainstorm briefly with him or her.)

## Introduction

Ask: **How do you feel when people care about what you have to say and show it by the way they listen?** Take responses. Say: **That’s why listening to one another is a really important skill. There are lots of ways people listen. (Student’s name) has volunteered to help me demonstrate one style of listening. Please watch us carefully. Afterward, I’ll be asking you about specific things you noticed.**

Have the student you recruited tell his or her story as you display elements of disrespectful listening, such as interrupting, exhibiting closed body language, fidgeting, checking your phone, adopting negative facial expressions, using a sarcastic or bored tone of voice, and changing the subject.

## Discussion and Activity

Pass out the “Respectful and Disrespectful Listening Chart” handout. Ask students to quickly jot down things they noticed you doing in the “Disrespectful Listening Habits” column.

Then ask: **What did you notice about my body language? Facial expressions? Tone of voice? Words? General attitude?** After receiving a variety of responses, ask your student volunteer how he or she felt about being on the receiving end of bad listening. (Possible answers: ignored, hurt, or angry.) Stress that bad listening can send signals of disrespect and lack of care, and that this can result in conflicts and damaged relationships.

Say: **On the other hand, respectful listening is a gift we can give to anyone.** Ask: **How do you feel when someone really listens to you?** Accept and discuss responses.

Say: **Consider this quote by Simon Sinek: “There is a difference between listening and waiting for your turn to speak.”** Ask: **How is good listening more than just “not speaking”?** After taking some responses, have students list specific things good listeners do on the “Respectful Listening” side of the chart. After a few minutes, ask several students to share their responses with the group. See if any other respectful listening behaviors need to be added.



Now demonstrate a respectful listening role-play with another student volunteer, with this student also telling a story about a fun activity with a friend. This time, use the respectful listening behaviors students mentioned. Afterward, review the tenets of respectful listening that students noted, making sure they understand that attitude, body language, facial expression, tone of voice, and word choice all play an important part in being an attentive and respectful listener.

Next, break students into small groups of four or five. Hand out copies of the “Respectful Listening Checklist,” giving one to each student, plus one extra per group. Have group members compare their individual lists on the “Respectful and Disrespectful Listening Chart” and then combine their ideas into one “Respectful Listening Checklist” that they fill out for their small group. Remind students to practice respectful listening skills as they do this activity.

Throughout this activity, observe how well students are listening to each other, and coach them as needed by offering tips such as, “Remember to face one another.”

Here’s an example of what a completed “Respectful Listening Checklist” might look like:

#### **Attitude of a Respectful Listener**

- Open-minded
- Curious
- Caring

#### **Body Language and Facial Expressions of a Respectful Listener**

- Good eye contact (not looking at a phone, for example)
- Facing the speaker; engaged
- Nodding

#### **Words and Voice Tone of a Respectful Listener**

- Interested, alert tone of voice
- Not interrupting or changing the subject
- Asking relevant questions

#### **Wrap-Up**

Reconvene as the large group and have each small group share their “Respectful Listening Checklist.” Discuss why students chose to focus on the items they did. Also give small groups a chance to amend their charts as they see fit.

#### **Follow-Up**

- Have students do the Real-Life Challenge at the bottom of their “Respectful Listening Checklist” handouts.
- Refer to the “Respectful Listening Checklist” during group discussions. Have students rate themselves on how well they are listening.
- When students need a respectful listening reminder, ask someone to read aloud specific items on the “Respectful Listening Checklist.”

#### **Enrichment Activities**

- In small groups, have students work together to design and create Respectful Listening posters that include words and graphics to represent respectful listening skills (for example, a cell phone with a slash through it). Have students sign their posters. Posters can be displayed in classrooms, hallways, or other areas of the school.
- Have students write “Respectful Listening Tips” that students can read during all-school morning announcements if that works in your setting.



# Respectful and Disrespectful Listening Chart

“There is a difference between listening and waiting for your turn to speak.”  
—Simon Sinek

Respectful Listening Habits	Disrespectful Listening Habits

## Respectful Listening Checklist

"You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view."

—Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee

Respectful listening means listening with an open mind, giving your full attention, and caring about what the other person says. Brainstorm the qualities of a respectful listener.

Attitude of a Respectful Listener

Body Language and Facial Expressions of a Respectful Listener

Words and Voice Tone of a Respectful Listener

### REAL-LIFE CHALLENGE

- » Try to catch yourself when you are being a distracted or disrespectful listener. Then, refocus your attention, care, and concern on the speaker. Take note of how it feels to make that shift in attention.
- » Use respectful listening skills with your family and friends. Notice how they respond when you listen respectfully.
- » Pay attention to how your family and friends listen to others. Thank or compliment someone who is a respectful listener.

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