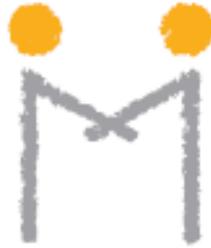


GETTING TO KNOW YOU



Classroom Activities for
Starting Off the School Year
from Morningside Center

GETTING TO KNOW YOU:

Classroom Activities for Starting Off the School Year from Morningside Center

Written by Tom Roderick

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Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility

GETTING TO KNOW YOU:

Classroom Activities for Starting Off the School Year

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Introduction

As a new school year begins, teachers and students renew relationships after the long summer break, see new faces, and establish their routines for the year. The activities in this packet will help you get the year off to a good start by engaging you and your students in getting to know each other, practicing listening skills, and discussing the values that will shape your classroom community. There are separate sets of activities for grades Pre-K to 2, grades 3 to 5, and grades 6 to 12. They are adapted from exercises in our Resolving Conflict Creatively Program and our 4Rs Program (Reading, Writing, Respect & Resolution).

Activities for Grades Pre-K to 2:	page 2
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Activities for Grades 6 to 12	page 18

For additional activities, visit our on-line teacher resource center at www.teachablemoment.org.

For more information about the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program and The 4Rs, visit our website at www.morningsidecenter.org or contact Lillian Castro at 212 870-3318 x33 and LCastro@morningsidecenter.org.

Activities for Grades Pre-K to 2

• **Shout Out Those Names!**

Students will

- learn each other's names
- affirm those names by shouting them out
- have fun

Materials Needed:

- a soft ball, bean bag, or Hugg-A-Planet

Have the students stand in a circle. Toss a Hugg-A-Planet or other soft ball to a child. When a child catches it, the whole group shouts out the child's name. The child then tosses the ball to another child, and so on until everyone gets a turn. You'll be surprised how quickly this activity helps you and the students learn each other's names. 

• **Find Someone Who**

Students will

- reinforce their knowledge of each other's name
- learn things about their classmates
- have fun

Materials Needed

- For grades pre-k to 1: none
- For grade 2: copies of Activity Sheet #1 for all students

For pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, first grade, and other classes with children who aren't yet able to read:

Tell the students that they are going to play a game to find out things they may not know about each other. You'll tell them whom you want them to find and they'll walk around to find the person. When they find a person, they will shake hands and say their names. When they hear a signal from you, they will "freeze." By "freeze," you mean they will stand absolutely still and stop talking. Tell them what the signal will be (for example, ringing a little bell, turning off the lights, or simply saying "Freeze!"), and have them practice freezing in response to the signal.

Now the game can begin. Ask the students to find someone who is wearing the same color as they are. Give them a short time (no more than 30 seconds) to walk around the room (or the rug) and find someone. Give the signal and wait till they all freeze. Ask, who found a person wearing the same color as you? Call on a child and ask, What color is it? Ask the child and person s/he found to please say their names.

Repeat the process with other attributes. Keep the pace quick and involve as many children as possible in the group sharing. Make up your own "find-someone-who" items. Here are a few suggestions:

- Find someone who has a brother or a sister.
- Find someone who is wearing jewelry.
- Find someone who has a pet.
- Find someone who likes ice cream.
- Find someone who knows another language besides English.
- Find someone who can sing a song.

Finally, ask a couple of volunteers to share: How was this activity for you? What's something you learned about a member of your class?

For classes of children who can read

Tell the students that they are going to play a game to find out things they may not know about each other. Each of them will receive a sheet of paper listing the people for them to find. They'll walk around to find the people. When they find a person, they will shake hands and say their names. They will write the person's name on the sheet of paper. You'll give them a total of five minutes or so to find someone for every item on the sheet. They'll need to find a different person for each item. When they hear a signal from you, they will "freeze." By "freeze," you mean they will stand absolutely still and stop talking. Tell them what the signal will be (for example, ringing a little bell, turning off the lights, or simply saying "Freeze!"), and have them practice freezing in response to the signal.

Now the game can begin. Distribute the handout or display the chart you have made based on the handout. Read it aloud to the students first. Tell them to begin. Move around the room to check for students who may be having difficulty. Let them continue until a number of children have found a person for each of the items on the sheet.

Discuss with the group: Who found someone wearing the same color as you? Call on a child and ask, Who is the person you found? What color are you both wearing? Who found someone who has a brother or sister? Who is the person you found? Is the brother or sister older or younger? What is his or her name? Go over each item on the handout in this way. ✎

Activity Sheet # 1

Find Someone Who

Student's Name: _____ Class _____ Date _____

Find someone who is wearing the same color as you. _____

Find someone who has a brother or a sister. _____

Find someone who is wearing jewelry. _____

Find someone who has a pet. _____

Find someone who had breakfast this morning. _____

Find someone who likes school. _____

Find someone who likes ice cream. _____

Find someone who knows another language besides English. _____

Find someone who can sing a song. _____

• Listen Up!

Students will

- meet the class puppets who will help them as they develop their social and emotional skills throughout the year
- identify the elements of good listening
- practice good listening skills

Materials Needed

- two puppets
- chart paper and markers

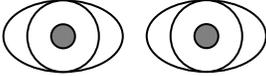
Introduce class puppets. (Purchase them or make them from socks or paper bags.) Say that the puppets will be helping us from time to time. You can name the puppets or you can involve the students in naming them.

Using one of the puppets, talk to the class about listening. The puppet asks the students to listen to noises of animals or machines the puppet makes and repeat them back. The puppet asks the students to guess what animal makes the noises. Then the puppet asks the students to make a noise and the puppet repeats it. If the puppet “sees” someone using good listening skills, the puppet can point out the student and mention the listening behavior. Continue as long as interest is high.

Discuss with the students: What do good listeners look like? We were good listeners when the puppet was talking. Let’s think about what we did to be good listeners.

- What did our bodies look like?
- What did our mouths do?
- What did our eyes do?

Chart the ideas generated by the students with a visual graphic:

Bodies are still.	Eyes are on the speaker.	Mouths are quiet.
Child sits cross-legged with hands on knees		Closed lips with finger over mouth

- **Play the Telephone Game – with a New Twist!**

Students will

- practice good listening skills
- generate ideas for improving group performance

First, play “Telephone” the usual way: Whisper a short sentence or the name of a color, animal, or food into the ear of the child next to you. That child will whisper it to the next person until it goes all the way around the circle. Chances are when it gets back around to you, the word or sentence will be completely different.

After telling the students what the original word or sentence was, ask if they can think of things they can do so that the word passes more accurately around the circle. Elicit such ideas as speaking clearly, asking the person to repeat it if you’re not sure, repeating it back to the person to make sure you got it right, and following the guidelines for good listening above (body still, eyes on the speaker, mouths quiet).

Now play the game again and see if the “telephone” transmits a more accurate message this time.

Discuss: What did you learn about listening from this activity? What can happen if we don’t listen well? What can we do to make sure we’ve heard correctly? 🌀

• **Make Community Agreements**

Students will

- think about agreements they want to make so that their classroom is safe and productive
- contribute their ideas to creating “community agreements,” or rules.

Materials Needed

- Chart paper and markers

Students are more likely to follow classroom rules if they’ve helped create them. Explain to the class that to do our best work together we need to have certain agreements, or rules.

Rules are agreements we make to help us work well together.

Give students a few minutes to speak with the student next to them about some ideas for classroom agreements: What will make the classroom a safe place where they have can do their best work? Give students a chance to share ideas with the whole class. Write them down as the students say them.

Elicit three or four key rules or practices that must be followed every day. For example,

- One person speaks at a time. Listen to the speaker.
- Respect each other’s feelings. No put-downs.
- Respect each other’s bodies. No hitting or fighting.

Ask for suggestions of a simple picture you can draw that will remind students of the rules, such as an ear for listening.

Ask students to go back to their seats and draw pictures of themselves following one of the class rules. These pictures can be displayed with the list of rules. 

Activities for Grades 3 to 5

• **Shout Out Those Names!**

Students will

- learn each other's names
- affirm their names with a "shout-out"
- have fun

Materials Needed

- a soft ball, bean bag, or Hugg-A-Planet

Ask the students to form a circle. Toss a soft ball or bean bag to someone in the group. Ask that person to say his or her name and then ask the whole group to shout it out in chorus.

Have the student with the ball toss it to someone else. Again the student receiving the ball says his or her name, and then the whole group shouts it out in unison.

Continue the process until everyone has had a chance to say his or her name and get a shout-out. No one gets the ball twice. To help the student with the ball see who hasn't had a turn, ask students who haven't gotten the ball yet to raise their hands.

Discuss: How was this activity for you? Did it help you learn other students' names? Why is it important that we learn each other's names? 

• Find Someone Who

Students will

- learn new things about their classmates
- talk with students they don't usually talk to
- have fun

Materials Needed

- Copies of Activity Sheet #2 for all students

Tell students that they are going to play a game to find out things they might not know about each other. You will give them a few minutes to fill out as much of a survey sheet as they can. When they hear a signal from you, they are to “freeze” in their places.

Distribute the handout. Explain that students are to walk around the room and find people who have the characteristics described on the sheet. If they can't find someone to match the description, that's fine. They can go on to the next item. When they find someone, they write the person's name in the blank provided. They should also ask the person for more information. For example, if they find someone who plays a musical instrument, they should ask, What instrument? Ask them to find as many different people as possible. They must find a different person for each item.

Begin the game. Continue until at least several students have completed the activity sheet. This will probably take about five minutes. Move around the room and check for students who may be having trouble with the task.

Ask students to return to their seats (or the rug) and sit down. If a student got all of the items (or came close), ask that student to go over each item and say who they found and what they learned. For example, Sarah plays a musical instrument, and the instrument she plays is the flute. After each item, you might ask who else in the class the item applies to. For example, Does anyone else in the class play an instrument? If so, what do you play?

Discuss the process: What did you notice about yourself and others during this game? Did you learn anything new about someone? If you were making up questions for this worksheet, what are some things you'd like to ask? 

Activity Sheet #2

Find Someone Who

Student's Name: _____ Class _____ Date _____

Find someone who

- is wearing the same color as you. _____
- has an older brother or sister at home. _____
- is wearing jewelry. _____
- plays a musical instrument. _____
- has visited another state. _____
- has a pet. _____
- has a birthday the same month as you. _____
- speaks two languages. _____
- is the oldest in his or her family. _____
- saw the same movie as you did recently. _____

• Listen Up!

Students will

- review the elements of good listening
- practice skills of good listening

Materials Needed

- chart paper and markers

To review the elements of good listening, ask: Can you think of a time you felt someone was really listening to you well? What was that like? How did it make you feel to have someone listen to you well? What are some signs that people give us with their bodies that show they are listening? What are things you might say to let someone know you are interested?

Develop the following list with the class and write it on chart paper.

Checklist for Good Listening

- Maintain **eye contact**.
- Express interest through your **body language**.
- Let the speaker finish. **Don't interrupt**.
- Focus on the speaker. **Don't do other things**.

Explain that students will be taking turns talking about a topic you will suggest. While one person talks, the listener's job is to listen as well as possible. You will keep the time and give a signal when it is time for the speaker to stop talking.

Model the activity with one of the students. Ask the student to tell you about something s/he likes to do outside of school. Model good listening and ask a few questions to get more information.

Have the students work in pairs.

Choose one of the following topics and have one person in each pair begin talking about the topic. Allow about a minute. Reverse roles so that the person who was listener becomes the speaker.

- Something I like to do outside of school
- A friend I like and why
- Something that happened recently that I feel good about
- A place I would like to visit

Discuss: How did your partner let you know he or she was listening? How did that feel? 🌀

• **Cooperative Story Telling**

Students will

- use their listening skills to create a group story

Materials needed

- a good opening line for the story (see below)

Explain that the class will make up a story as a group. You will give them the opening sentence and they must build on the story from there. Everyone in the class will contribute a sentence or two as you go around the group.

Develop your own opening sentence or choose from the list below:

- The large, gray cat lifted its back and hissed.
- Jose had always wanted to know what was on the other side of that door.

Go around the group so that each person can add a sentence. Assist anyone who is stuck by reviewing the story so far and asking, What might come next?

Discuss: How was this activity for you? What did you have to do to be able to add to the story? Did anything surprise you about the story? 🌀🌀

• **Make Community Agreements**

Students will

- think about agreements they can make that will make the classroom a safe and productive place for everybody
- contribute their ideas to creating class “community agreements,” or rules.

Materials needed

- chart paper, markers, and masking tape

Students are more likely to follow classroom rules if they’ve had a role in creating them.

Explain to the class that to do our best work together we need to have certain agreements, or rules. Rules are agreements we make to help us work well together.

Give students a few minutes to speak with the student next to them about some ideas for classroom agreements: what will make the classroom a safe place where they have can do their best work? Give students a chance to share ideas with the whole class. Write them down as the students say them

Elicit three or four key rules or practices that must be followed every day. For example,

- One person speaks at a time. Listen to the speaker.
- Respect each other’s feelings. No put-downs.
- Respect each other’s bodies. No hitting or fighting.

Write the community agreements on a piece of chart paper. Ask for two volunteers to decorate the chart to make it beautiful, leaving room for an additional agreement or two if the need arises. Post the chart in a prominent place in the classroom and refer to it as needed (at least once a day during the first few weeks of school). 

• Think Differently

Students will

- share their opinions
- observe that people, even friends, can have different opinions
- practice listening
- practice supporting their opinions

Materials Needed

- Three signs: “Strongly Agree,” “Strongly Disagree,” “Not Sure”
- Chart paper and markers for noting guidelines for speaking and listening (see below)
- Masking tape

Here’s an activity you can use throughout the year in any subject area to find out where your students stand and generate lively discussions that develop students’ higher order thinking skills.

Begin by asking, What is an opinion? Briefly explore the definition. Elicit from the students that it’s a strong belief that people have, sometimes based on fact and sometimes not.

Tape the sign reading “Strongly Agree” on one side of the room and the sign reading “Strongly Disagree” on the other. Tape the “Not Sure” sign to the floor midway between the two. Tell students that when you give them a statement, you want those who strongly agree to stand on one side of the room. Those who strongly disagree should stand on another side of the room. Those whose opinion falls somewhere in between should range themselves across the room between the two extremes. Stress that you are asking for opinions and that there are no right or wrong responses to the statements.

[**Note:** If for some reason having students stand or move around the room is not appropriate for your class, tape the signs along a continuum on the chalkboard. Then, instead of having students show their opinions by moving to a corner, you can have them raise their hands. Write the count above the “Disagree,” “Not Sure,” and “Agree” signs.]

Read the first of the following statements and have students find their places on the continuum:

- Vanilla is the best flavor of ice cream.
- When someone hits you, it's best to hit back.
- Young people should wear uniforms to school.

Ask one student, Why did you choose to stand where you are standing? After that student has given an explanation, have him or her ask another student to explain the choice s/he made. Continue until several students have had a chance to share their views and rationales. Sometimes students decide to change where they are standing after hearing the discussion, and that's fine.

If the students get engaged in discussing the issue back and forth, you may want to let the discussion continue. If the discussion gets heated, acknowledge that the temperature is rising, and say that the discussion can continue only as long as students treat each other respectfully. One way to calm things down is to require that before anyone speaks s/he first has to paraphrase the comments of the previous speaker.

Repeat the process with the other statements or substitute statements based on your knowledge of the interests of your students. You can also use this activity to get students thinking about controversial issues in history, literature, politics, and science. You can also ask students to contribute ideas for topics.

Discuss: How did you decide where to stand in the room? How did it feel to take a stand? Were there any times it was harder for you to stand where you wanted to stand? Why? What did you notice about how people felt about these topics? Was there a time when you were standing in a different place from a friend of yours? When?

Elicit from the students guidelines for speaking and listening in the "Think Differently" activity or in any class discussion. Here are some suggestions:

1. Talk one at a time. Don't interrupt the person who is speaking.
2. Pay attention to the person who is speaking. Hear him or her out.
3. If you disagree, state your opinion without attacking the person with a different opinion. No put-downs.
4. Explain the reasons you hold the opinion you hold. For example, you might say, "I disagree with. . .because. . ." This is sometimes referred to as "accountable talk."

Summarize: Because we all have different experiences and have often been given different information, opinions can vary greatly. In this class, when we have differences of opinion, we will discuss them respectfully. This means we practice good listening and we don't attack or put down those who disagree with us. 🌀

Activities for Grades 6 to 12

• **Shout Out Those Names!**

Students will

- learn each other's names
- affirm their names with a "shout-out"
- have fun

Materials Needed

- a soft ball, bean bag, or Hugg-A-Planet

Ask the students to form a circle. Toss a soft ball or bean bag to someone in the group. Ask that person to say his or her name and then ask the whole group to shout it out in chorus.

Have the student with the ball toss it to someone else. Again the student receiving the ball says his or her name, and then the whole group shouts it out in unison.

Continue the process until everyone has had a chance to say his or her name and get a shout-out. No one gets the ball twice. To help the student with the ball see who hasn't had a turn, ask students who haven't gotten the ball yet to raise their hands.

Discuss: How was this activity for you? Did it help you learn other students' names? Why is it important that we learn each other's names?

• **Link Names and Gestures**

Students will

- learn each other's names
- have fun

Here's another name game. Have the students form a circle. Explain that each person is going to say his or her name while making a gesture. Everyone in the circle will repeat the person's name in chorus while imitating the gesture. Model the activity by going first to say your name while making a gesture.

• Find Someone Who

Students will

- learn new things about their classmates
- talk with students they don't usually talk to
- have fun

Materials Needed

- Copies of Activity Sheet #3 for all students

Tell students that they are going to play a game called "Find Someone Who." It's an icebreaker that will help them learn things they might not know about each other.

Distribute copies of Activity Sheet #3 to all students. Explain that they are to walk around the room and find people who have the characteristics described on the sheet. When they find someone, they should write the person's name in the blank provided, and ask them for more information. For example, if they find someone who plays a musical instrument, they should find out what instrument. They need to find a different person for each item on the sheet. They will see that the sheet is laid out in a grid as in Bingo. They can try for Bingo by going diagonally, vertically, or horizontally. Or they can try to get a person for every item on the sheet.

Begin the game. Continue until at least several students have completed the sheet or come close. Ask students to return to their seats. Choose a student who completed all or most of the items on the grid. Ask that student to go item by item and say whom s/he found and what s/he learned about the person. For example, "Sarah plays a musical instrument; she plays the flute." After each item, you might ask who else shares the characteristic. For example, "Who else in the class plays a musical instrument? What do you play?" If interest remains high, ask another student to share whom s/he found.

Discuss the activity: What did you notice about yourself and others during this game? Did you learn anything new about someone? If you were making up items for the activity sheet, what are some you'd like to include?

Activity Sheet #3

Find Someone Who

<p>Can speak at least three sentences in another language besides English</p> <p>Name:</p> <p>Language:</p>	<p>Plays a musical instrument</p> <p>Name:</p> <p>Instrument:</p>	<p>Was born in another country</p> <p>Name:</p> <p>Country:</p>	<p>Was born and grew up in New York City</p> <p>Name:</p> <p>Borough:</p>
<p>Was born in the same month as you</p> <p>Name:</p> <p>Month:</p>	<p>Has one or more younger brothers or sisters</p> <p>Name:</p> <p>How many?</p>	<p>Has one or more older brothers or sisters</p> <p>Name:</p> <p>How many?</p>	<p>Saw a movie s/he liked recently</p> <p>Name:</p> <p>Movie:</p>
<p>Has a job for which s/he is paid</p> <p>Name:</p> <p>Doing what:</p>	<p>Helped someone solve a conflict recently</p> <p>Name:</p> <p>What conflict:</p>	<p>Had fun with a friend recently</p> <p>Name:</p> <p>What you did:</p>	<p>Took a trip out of the city last summer</p> <p>Name:</p> <p>Where you went:</p>
<p>Does exercise ("works out") on a regular basis</p> <p>Name:</p> <p>Activity:</p>	<p>Enjoys music</p> <p>Name:</p> <p>Favorite kind:</p>	<p>Has a favorite TV show</p> <p>Name:</p> <p>What show:</p>	<p>Has a favorite sport</p> <p>Name:</p> <p>What sport:</p>

• **A Little Respect...Goes a Long Way**

Students will

- explore the meaning of “respect” and “disrespect” by creating word webs

Materials needed

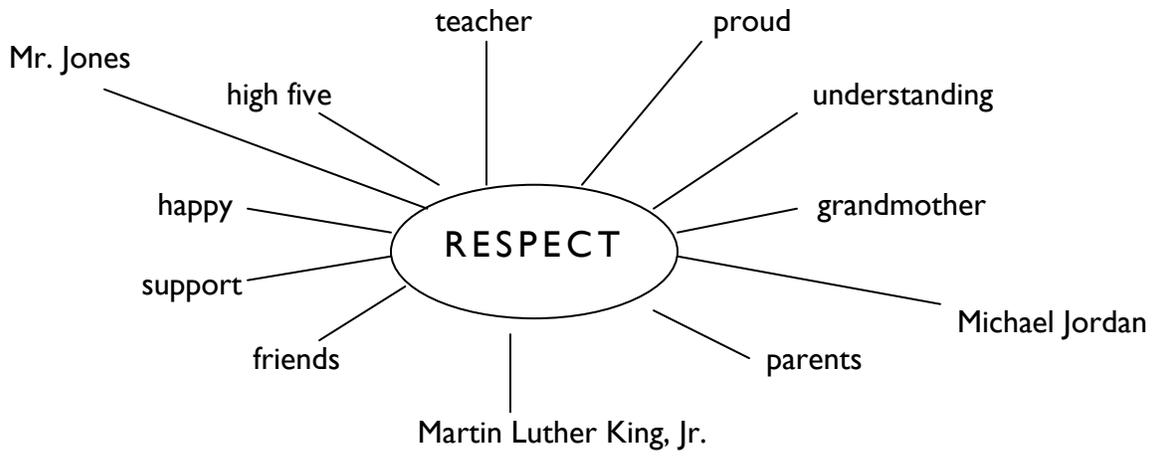
- chart paper, markers, and masking tape

Middle and high school students throughout the country have identified disrespect, teasing, and bullying as serious problems in their schools. Obviously, students and teachers can't do their best work in an atmosphere of disrespect. Morningside Center's research-based programs “increase the respect” when they are carried out consistently in classrooms and schools. We give students and adults tools for building a school community in which people support and respect each other.

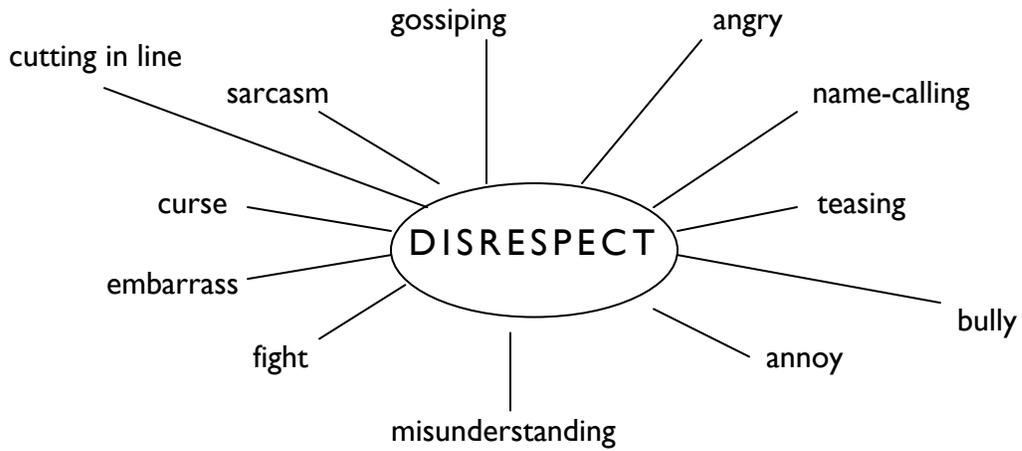
In this activity we explore the meaning of respect. We all want to be treated with respect, but what does respect mean exactly? What does “respect” look like and feel like? Does it look different with different people and in different situations? When is it easy to treat others with respect? When is it difficult? What can guide us as we try to live our lives so that other people respect us and we respect other people? Those are some of the questions we address in this activity and the next. We'll begin by creating webs for “respect” and “disrespect.”

Tape a piece of chart paper to the wall and write the word “Respect” in the middle of it. Ask students to share their free associations with the word “respect” and chart their responses. Continue for a few minutes while interest remains high. When you have a good number of words that students associate with respect, draw lines from “respect” to the words, creating a web. Ask the students if they want to make any comments or observations about the web.

A sample web might look like this:



Repeat the activity for the word “Disrespect.” A sample web might look like this.



Discuss: When is it easy to treat another person with respect? When is it difficult? Be sure to save these webs since they will be needed for the next activity.

• Defining “respect” and “disrespect”

Students will

- create working definitions of “respect” and “disrespect”

Materials needed

- “respect” and “disrespect” webs created in the previous activity
- chart paper, markers, and masking tape

Show the students the webs they created in the activity above. Explain that the webs may help them with today’s challenge: to come up with working definitions of respect and disrespect. Ask the students what the word “respect” means to them. How they would define it? Chart the first definition offered and then edit it as students contribute other ideas. Feel free to play devil’s advocate; ask questions to deepen their understanding. Do the same with “disrespect.” Your aim is to elicit definitions from the students that they own, not to come up with a dictionary definition. See the students’ definitions as “works in progress” that you may continue to edit as the students clarify their thinking.

Here are some of the key aspects of a definition of “respect” that you may want to keep in mind as the students offer their definitions: Respect is way of treating yourself, another person, or a thing. We can talk about self-respect, respect for others, and respect for things. In treating someone or something with respect, we acknowledge their value. Because we value them, we do all that we can to avoid hurting, humiliating, or damaging them. We treat the person or thing with courtesy, care, dignity. Value, caring, courtesy, and dignity are helpful words in describing the meaning of respect.

“Disrespect” is treating others in a way that violates their dignity. Examples are mean-spirited teasing, bullying, and insults. We show disrespect for ourselves when we do things that we know are harmful to our bodies and our future.

Make “respect” and “disrespect” themes in your classroom throughout the year. Continue to develop and deepen these definitions and discuss how they apply to situations you and your students confront in their reading and in their lives.

NOTE TO THE TEACHER:

This discussion of the meanings of respect and disrespect may well lead your students to ask, Do all people deserve to be treated with respect at all times? What if the other person has “dissed” me and made me angry? What if they’re from another country or believe in a different religion or have a way of life I don’t agree with? What if they’re our “enemy”?

Welcome such questions. They are an indication that students are beginning to wrestle with the tough issues related to respect and disrespect. Encourage students to air their views and disagree with each other (respectfully, of course!).

Of course, as teachers we want to give our students the strong message that every human being has value and deserves to be treated with dignity. But it’s not always easy to live our lives based on always treating others with respect. We need to acknowledge the real challenges students (not to mention adults) face in living by this principle and support them as they grapple with difficult real-life questions it raises.

• Make Community Agreements

Students will

- think about agreements that will make the classroom a safe and productive place for everybody
- contribute their ideas to creating rules, or “community agreements,” for their classroom

Materials needed

- chart paper, markers, and masking tape

Students are more likely to follow classroom rules and procedures if they’ve played a part in making them.

Give students a few minutes to speak with the student next to them about some ideas for classroom agreements: what will make the classroom a safe place where they have can do their best work? Give students a chance to share ideas with the whole class. Write them down as the students say them.

Elicit three or four key rules or practices that must be followed every day. For example,

- One person speaks at a time. Listen to the speaker.
- Respect each other's feelings. No put-downs.
- Respect each other's bodies. No hitting or fighting.

Write the community agreements on a piece of chart paper. Ask for two volunteers to decorate the chart to make it beautiful, leaving room for an additional agreement or two if the need arises. Post the chart in a prominent place in the classroom and refer to it as needed (at least once a day in the first few weeks of school).

• **Think Differently**

Students will

- share their opinions
- observe that people, even friends, can have different opinions
- practice listening
- practice supporting their opinions

Materials Needed

- Three signs: "Strongly Agree," "Strongly Disagree," "Not Sure"
- Chart paper for noting guidelines for speaking and listening
- Masking tape

Here's an activity you can use throughout the year in any subject area to find out where your students stand and generate lively discussion.

If necessary, begin by reviewing the definition of “opinion.” Elicit from the students that it’s a strong belief that people have, sometimes based on fact and sometimes not.

Tape the sign reading “Strongly Agree” on one side of the room and the sign reading “Strongly Disagree” on the other. Tape the “Not Sure” sign to the floor midway between the two. Tell students that when you give them a statement, you want those who strongly agree to stand on one side of the room. Those who strongly disagree should stand on another side of the room. Those whose opinion falls somewhere in between should range themselves across the room between the two extremes. Stress that you are asking for opinions and that there are no right or wrong responses to the statements.

[**Note:** If for some reason having students stand or move around the room is not appropriate for your class, tape the signs along a continuum on the chalkboard. Then, instead of having students show their opinions by moving to the appropriate place in the room you can have them raise their hands. Write the count above the “Disagree,” “Not Sure,” and “Agree” signs.]

Start with something trivial, such as:

- Vanilla is the best flavor of ice cream.

Then you can move on to statements that address more serious issues of a social, educational, historical, or political nature, for example:

- Alcoholism is a big problem among teenagers.
- Students should wear uniforms to school.
- Students in our school get too much homework.
- Slavery was the main cause of the Civil War.
- The United States should immediately withdraw its soldiers from Iraq.

After students have taken their places along the continuum in response to a statement, ask them to take a moment to notice who is standing where. Then ask one student, Why did you choose to stand in the place where you are standing? After that student has given an explanation, have him or her ask another student to explain the choice s/he made.

Continue until several students have explained their positions. This may well lead to a spirited exchange of views. If the discussion begins to get heated, you can acknowledge that the temperature is rising and say that the discussion can continue only as long as people treat each other with respect. Another way to calm things down is to suggest that before anyone speaks, s/he first has to paraphrase the comments of the previous speaker.

Repeat the process with the other statements or substitute statements based on your knowledge of the interests of your students. You can also ask students for ideas.

Discuss: How did you decide where to stand in the room? How did it feel to take a stand? Were there any times it was harder for you to stand where you wanted to stand? Why? What did you notice about how people felt about these topics? Was there a time when you were standing in a different place from a friend of yours? When?

Elicit from the students guidelines for speaking and listening in the “Think Differently” activity or in any class discussion. Here’s a suggested list:

1. Talk one at a time. Don't interrupt the person who is speaking.
2. Pay attention to the person who is speaking. Hear him or her out.
3. If you disagree, state your opinion without attacking the person with a different opinion. No put-downs.
4. Explain the reasons you hold the opinion you hold. For example, you might say, “I disagree with. . .because. . .” This is sometimes referred to as “accountable talk.”

Summarize: Because we all have different experiences and have often been given different information, opinions can vary greatly. In this class, when we have differences of opinion, we will discuss them respectfully. This means we practice good listening and we don’t attack or put down those who disagree with us.



Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility

Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility has a 25-year track record of successful work in the New York City public schools. Through our evidence-based programs for grades pre-k through 12, we help all members of the school community (students, school staff, and parents) deal better with conflict, create positive learning environments, and take leadership in shaping a more peaceful world. Our approach is engaging and interactive, employing small-group sharing, brainstorming, skills practice, role-playing, and discussion. We tailor our work to address the needs of each school or group, so costs vary.

Morningside Center offers professional development services to foster students' social and emotional learning as described below:

The 4Rs Program (Reading, Writing, Respect & Resolution). The 4Rs Program integrates social and emotional learning (SEL) and language arts for grades pre-k to middle school. Morningside Center provides workshops and classroom coaching to prepare teachers to teach weekly 4Rs lessons. The 4Rs curriculum is grade-specific and uses high-quality children's literature and engaging interactive activities to develop students' skills and understanding in seven areas: building community, feelings, listening, assertiveness, problem-solving, diversity, and making a difference. A recently completed gold-standard scientific study found that students in 4Rs schools developed more positively—socially, emotionally, and academically—than their counterparts in the control schools.

Peer Mediation and Peace Helper Programs (Elementary). Through our peer mediation programs, selected young people (typically third, fourth, and fifth-graders) learn foundation skills in nonviolent communication, and then master a specific step-by-step mediation process. Our peace helper programs prepare children in grades k-2 to be peace helpers in their classrooms, working with their teachers to set up peace corners and then being available to help students who want support in dealing with feelings and/or conflicts.

Resolving Conflict Creatively Program (RCCP). Founded by Morningside Center and the NYC Board of Education in 1985, the RCCP is one of the nation's oldest and most effective school-based conflict resolution programs. Morningside Center provides workshops and classroom coaching to prepare teachers, grades k to 12, to teach weekly RCCP lessons based on an engaging, interactive curriculum. A rigorous scientific study showed that students who received weekly instruction from their teachers in the RCCP curriculum developed more positively – socially, emotionally, and academically – than their counterparts who did not experience the curriculum.

Peer Mediation and Peer Leadership (Middle & High School). Through our peer mediation programs, selected young people learn foundation skills in nonviolent communication, and then master a specific step-by-step mediation process. They apply these skills on a daily basis, mediating disputes among their peers in the playground, lunchroom and class and often become leaders in their schools. Students might also be trained to conduct diversity workshops and organize community service projects.

Advisories. Carefully planned advisories can strengthen the bonds among students and between students and adults; help young people feel more connected to school; and develop students' social and emotional competencies. Morningside Center helps schools create a program tailored to its needs and provides a customized curriculum for advisories as well as professional development for advisory teachers.

Planning for Social & Emotional Learning (SEL). SEL is the process by which students develop their social and emotional competencies. It is also a powerful lever for school improvement. Our SEL coaches support principals and their leadership teams in creating a vision of a school infused with SEL, assessing needs and resources, and creating and implementing an action plan for sustained school-wide high-quality social and emotional learning.

Eliminating Bullying & Building Community. Our research-based Pathways to Respect Program takes a whole-school approach to countering bullying and building community. On the school level, we work with a planning team to analyze the problem and develop school-wide initiatives to eliminate bullying. On the classroom level, we provide a curriculum and professional development to support teachers in implementing it. And on the individual level, we provide professional development to support school staff in working with students being targeted for bullying and with students doing the bullying.

Holistic Discipline. Based on years of helping schools implement SEL programs, Holistic Discipline is Morningside Center's approach to discipline and classroom management aligned with SEL. We provide workshops and classroom coaching for teachers, facilitate collaborative planning to help schools develop and implement effective discipline plans, and provide consultation to help schools develop effective procedures for managing problem areas. Through Holistic Discipline students develop social and emotional skills that lead to caring, responsible behavior.

Peace in the Family. Our Peace in the Family workshops help parents develop their social and emotional skills and strengthen their relationships with their children. Parents come together to discuss common issues they face, and they develop skills in communication and problem-solving. We also implement intensive leadership development programs for parents and provide training to prepare parents to facilitate Peace in the Family workshops for other parents.

TeachableMoment.org. Morningside Center has pioneered inquiry-oriented approaches for exploring controversial issues and current events. Hundreds of thousands of teachers turn to our website www.TeachableMoment.org for materials to help their students learn about important issues, consider opposing points of view, and develop critical thinking skills. To introduce social studies teachers to Morningside Center's approach to promoting inquiry and critical thinking, Morningside Center also offers training and classroom coaching.

For more information about our services to schools, please contact Lillian Castro, director of administration, at LCastro@morningsidecenter.org or 212-870-3318 x33 or visit our website at www.morningsidecenter.org.