



Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility

Activities to Start the Year

K-12 Lessons & Guidelines
For a Caring Classroom

Introduction

What we do in our classrooms during the first days and weeks of school can help us establish a caring and inclusive classroom community that will last the year. This kind of culture can sustain us and our students, even and especially in hard times.

The K-12 classroom activities in this pdf include a range of ideas and approaches to help you and your students get off to a good start – from getting-to-know-you activities and games to self-care strategies to creating community agreements. They are drawn from Morningside Center’s TeachableMoment resource collection (which includes 1000+ free lessons). Authors include: Emily Feinstein, Jason Jacobs, Amy Martin, Jenny Seaquist, Laurine Towler, Kristin Stuart Valdes & Marieke van Woerkom.

Most of the activities here are geared for the in-person classroom, although they can be adapted for remote. Some circle-based activities include the use of a talking piece that is handed from person to person. See these alternatives to the talking piece during the Covid era: www.morningsidecenter.org/stories-voices/alternatives-talking-piece-time-coronavirus

We send you and your students our warm wishes for the school year!

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Community Building

Getting to Know You Questions

The first few days of school are the perfect time to establish a caring community in your classroom. Start by getting to know each other.

At the beginning of the year, we need to take the time to get know our students, and give them a chance to get to know each other, and us, as well. This helps us create a welcoming, collaborative environment where students can experience a sense of belonging.

Ask yourself: What is important for you to know about your students? What would you have liked your teachers to have known about you?

Below are some ideas for questions you might consider using early in the year. They can be used in morning meetings, restorative circles, advisory gatherings, or in writing assignments. Discussing questions such as these can provide you with useful information as you get to know your students early on.

Questions to consider exploring in the first days of school, and beyond:

Your name

- What is the name you'd like to go by?
- What should we know about your name?

Your passions and strengths

- What are you passionate about? Why is that?
- What do you see as your greatest strength?
- Talk about a time you were able to use it. What happened? How did it make you feel?
- How can we best use it in class?
- What else do you want us to know about you (so we can better understand you perhaps)?

Your heroes

- Who are your heroes and why?
- What about them appeals to you?
- How have they influenced your life?
- What is one characteristic you'd like to work on developing/strengthening this year?

What you need from us?

- What are the qualities you look for in a teacher?
- How can I best support/encourage you? How can I best challenge/push you?
- How do you like to be recognized for your efforts?
- What would success at the end of the year look like for you?
- What do you need from us to be successful?

And remember, relationship-building is a two-way street. It's as important for you to share as it is for your students to do so. In fact, sharing of yourself in meaningful ways, can break the ice, especially early in the year as you set the stage for students to do the same.

Creating a Kind Classroom

Students think about how to create a kind, caring classroom using an interactive poem and a drawing activity. (Elementary School)

Materials

- Hugg-a-planet or other "talking piece" (See our [Introduction to Circles](#) activity for an explanation of talking pieces. You can also use one of these alternatives to a talking piece, instead of passing an object from person to person: <https://www.morningsidecenter.org/stories-voices/alternatives-talking-piece-time-coronavirus>)
 - Paper or large index cards and markers
 - Print out of poem or poem written on the board for students to follow along
-

Name game welcome

Invite students to stand in a circle. Go around one student at a time asking students to introduce themselves in the following way:

"My name is _____ [person's name]"

Have the rest of the class welcome the person by responding:

"Hello _____ [person's name]!"

Debrief this opening go round by asking some or all of the following questions:

- What was that like for you?
- How did it feel?

Summarize what students share and add that it feels good to be part of a welcoming community, where people greet us, welcome us and are kind to us. That's what we'll be talking about today.

Circle share out

Next, invite students to sit in a circle on the rug. Send the hugg-a-planet, or another talking piece, around, asking students to share their name, once more, and one thing they enjoyed doing over the summer.

Mother Nature Interactive Poem

Invite students to stand up in a circle. Share with them the following poem while students follow your movements.

(Note: This poem is from the book *Conscious Discipline*. Author Becky Bailey writes that "some poems lend themselves to the addition of stretching movements. Children also can write their own poems that promote the stretching of the body and encompass deep breathing." She offers the following poem, which is modified from Martha Belknap's work.)

I bow to mother nature (everyone does a forward bend)
I reach to father sky (reach up with both arms straight over head)
I open to the sun (open both arms to be parallel with the ground)
And the clouds going by (arms sway overhead)

I welcome the rain (lower your arms to the side with fingers moving)
That flows to the sea (roll your shoulders forward and backward)
I respect the kindness (turn to a partner and bend to take a small bow)
In you and in me (point to your partner and then to yourself)

Debrief this poem/activity by asking some or all of the following questions:

- What did you think about the poem?
- How does the poem invite us to treat mother nature, father sky and the environment as a whole?
- How can we do that?
- What does it say about kindness?
- How does that relate to our classroom environment?
- What would kindness in our classroom environment look like?

Drawing a kind classroom

Ask students on a small piece of paper or large index card to draw a picture of "respecting kindness" in the classroom. What does kindness to each other look like? What does it feel like? For younger grades, use some questions to scaffold the activity:

- Think about a person in your life who is kind. What do they do when they're being kind?
- Think about yourself when you're being kind. What do you do when you're being kind?
How do other people respond to you when you're being kind?

Back in the circle, ask students to present and share their drawings with the rest of the class, explaining what they drew and why.

Consider having a place available in your class for the drawings to go up after students have had a chance to share. This will be a way to return to the idea of a kind classroom throughout the year. Students can keep working on their art, and reflect on it when unkind acts interfere with the kind of classroom community you're all trying to build.

Introductions in the New School Year

Students share their names and a high point of their summer, learn a little about their similarities and differences, and begin considering what kind of community they want to create in their classroom. (Middle School, High School)

Gathering

(10 minutes)

Before the class begins, arrange the chairs in your classroom into a circle. Sitting in a circle allows for all participants to see each other in an unobstructed way (no tables or other furniture in between). Sitting in a circle encourages equal participation in the process for all. Also have ready a “talking piece” that students

Once class begins, welcome students to the circle, and explain that in this activity, we'll be getting to know each other a bit. As part of the activity, students will be using a "talking piece." This can be any small item that students can pass around the circle. You can also use one of these alternatives to a talking piece, instead of passing an object from person to person:

<https://www.morningsidecenter.org/stories-voices/alternatives-talking-piece-time-coronavirus>

The talking piece is sent around the circle in order, from one person to the next. The person holding it is invited to speak or pass, while everyone else practices active listening. With every go-round, people have the opportunity to share without interruption what is on their mind and listen to what's going on for others in the group.

Ask students to think about a highlight of their summer that they can share in a go-round. Pass the talking piece around the circle, asking each person to first say his or her name, and then share a high point of their summer. Start the process by sharing yourself, then pass the talking piece to the student next to you.

Stand up and applaud

(20-30 minutes)

In this next activity, the group can learn about some of their similarities and differences. Participants also explore what it feels like to be part of a group and/or to stand alone; and what it feels like to be welcomed and affirmed by the group.

Instruct the participants to stand up if:

- they are the oldest sibling

- they are the youngest sibling
- they are a middle child
- they are a twin
- they are an only child
- they grew up in a city
- they grew up in the suburbs, a small town, or the country
- they are into sports
 - ask those to remain standing if they are into sports as a fan (what sport?)
 - ask those to stand up/remain standing if they are into sports as an athlete (what sport?)
- they like pizza (what toppings?)

For the next part ask participants to applaud for those who stand up if:

- they speak more than one language (what languages?)
- they play a musical instrument (what kind?)
- they had their birthday over the summer, etc.

Choose what stand up prompts are relevant for your group. Keep them relatively light, as this is your first gathering for the year, but interesting enough for students to learn about each other, whether it's a group coming together for the first time or a group of students who already know things about each other.

With a show of hands ask who preferred standing as a group and who preferred standing alone.

Next, send the talking piece around, asking students: What did they prefer about standing alone or as a group? Why do they think that is?

Send the talking piece around once again, asking students: What did they think of the applause? How did it make them feel?

After students have shared their experience with the activity, summarize their answers.

Talk about how we'll be learning about each other over the course of the school year, learning about what we have in common as well as what makes us different. Touch on the idea of being able to stand up for who you are and what you believe in, whether that's something you share with others (standing as part of a group) or something that makes you unique and different (standing alone).

Ask students to imagine the kind of classroom community where people feel welcome, comfortable, and safe sharing who they are, what they believe, and how they feel about things. What does it take to create such a classroom community?

In a subsequent lesson, you may want to follow up on this discussion by having students develop a set of community practices - ways that they want to relate to each other in the classroom. (See our [Getting to Know You](#) booklet for one approach to doing this.)

Pair-Share Gift Drawings

This activity helps students get to know each other through art. They pair up, interview each other, and then create a drawing or collage based on what they heard that they can share with each other and the class. This activity can be adapted for online platforms such as Zoom.



Preparation

Before beginning the activity, ask students to assemble from around the house any materials that they can use to make a drawing or collage. This might include any kind of paper; pencils; colored pencils; markers; scissors; fabric; pictures or text from magazines, books or newspapers; string; glue sticks – or any other items that can be made into art.

You might also consider setting up yourself and your students to use free online applications for drawing or creating a collage, such as:

- ABCya, a paint program: https://www.abcya.com/games/abcya_paint
- Padlet, a program that allows users to post photos and add comments to a virtual bulletin board: <https://padlet.com/>

Make a Gift Drawing

1. Review guidelines for active listening
 - One mic
 - Give the person who is speaking your full attention
 - Be aware of your body language and expression
 - Encourage the other person to speak
 - Respect confidentiality

2. Explain that students will pair up with someone and after talking with them, make a drawing, collage, or artwork based on what they heard and understood.
3. Post the questions below for students to read. Feel free to add questions appropriate for your group.
4. Ask students to decide in advance which five to seven questions they are going to ask their partner. Tell them that if their partner doesn't want to answer a particular question, they should move on to the next question.
 - What is something you are proud of?
 - Who is someone you care about?
 - Who is someone who made a difference to you and how?
 - Do you have any hobbies or things you love to do these days at home?
 - What's been challenging during these times?
 - What would you like to change in the next few months to a year in the world?
 - What's one thing you will do to help make that happen?
 - What's another goal you have in the next 5-10 years?
 - What help do you need?
5. Pair students up in breakout rooms and ask them to take turns asking one another the questions they have decided to ask. Remind them that if the other person doesn't want to answer a question, they should move on to the next one.
6. When each pair has finished answering the questions, bring them back to the main room and have them make a drawing or collage based on what they heard. Encourage them to include something that may help or make a difference to their partner.
7. When students have completed their artwork, have each student share what they made for their partner:

- If possible, ask students to show the drawing or collage on camera. If that is not possible, ask students to describe their artwork to the class.
 - Ask them to appreciate their partner and their drawing gifts.
 - If possible, students can take a picture of their drawing and email it to their partner or send it via snail mail.
-

Large Group Processing

Invite students to share:

1. What did you think about this activity?
2. What did you like about it? What, if anything, was challenging about it?
3. What was it like sharing with your partner?
4. If you were going to do this again, what would you do differently? What questions might you ask?

Values: A Circle to Start the New Year

An introductory circle invites participants to consider values that are important to them and the group. (High School)

This activity uses a circle format (see our [Introduction to Circles](#)) to help students consider values that are important to them and the class -- without putting students on the spot this early in the year. Following the activity are several suggestions for coming back to these values later in the year.

Materials Needed

- Chairs set up in a circle
 - A center piece
 - A talking piece You can also use one of these alternatives to a talking piece, instead of passing an object from person to person: <https://www.morningsidecenter.org/stories-voices/alternatives-talking-piece-time-coronavirus>
 - A bag
 - Values cards
-

Opening Ceremony

Read the following out loud, slowly, pausing as needed.

Slow Me Down

by Wilferd Peterson

Slow me down
Ease the pounding of my heart
By the quieting of my mind.
Steady my hurried pace with a vision
Of the eternal reach of time.
Give me, amid the confusion of the day, the calmness of the everlasting hills.
Break the tension of my nerves and
muscles with the soothing music of the
singing streams that live in my memory.
Help me to know the magical, restoring

power of sleep.

Teach me the art of taking minute vacations
of slowing down to look at a flower, to chat
with a friend, to pat a dog, to read a few lines
from a good book.

Slow me down, and inspire me to send my roots
Deep into the soil of life's enduring values that they may grow
Toward the stars of my greater destiny.

Introductory Go Round

Send the talking piece around asking students to share one thing that helped them to slow down and relax over the summer break.

The poem mentions minute vacations. During the school year, as things start to get busy again even hectic at times, it's important to find ways to center ourselves and remain calm. We can do this through taking "minute vacations."

The poem mentions slowing down to look at a flower, chatting with a friend, patting a dog, or reading a few lines from a good book as minute vacations.

Send the talking piece around again asking students what might be a "minute vacation" for them – what helps them slow down or calm down, especially when their days are far from calm, when the world around them is chaotic.

The Nature of Circles

Begin by giving students a little information about what circles are. (See our [Introduction to Circles](#).) Then elicit and/or present the five characteristics of a circle:

- Sitting in a circle
- Using a talking piece
- Having a center piece at the center of the open space between participants
- Using an opening & closing ceremony

Keep this introduction short. Elicit as much information as possible from participants. Circles, after all, are about participatory learning. As the circle keeper, you'll be drawing on the knowledge of the group; bringing out different voices and perspectives; asking open ended questions, summarizing and contributing as a participant, not necessarily as an expert.

If your students are not familiar with circle process yet, questions to consider asking are:

- What do you notice about today's classroom set up?
- Have you ever participated in a talking circle before? What was that like?

- Who has ever used a talking piece? What was that like?

Elicit or say something about circle time being a time apart from the regular school day for people to share of themselves and get to know others in the community in new and engaging ways. It is a place for people to practice being their best self, become more aware, feel empowered and build connections over time.

Explain that for all this to be possible it's important to do some community building, to get to know one another but also to come up with a set of shared values to help ground and guide the community.

The poem we read as part of the opening ceremony ends with the lines:

Slow me down, and inspire me to send my roots
Deep into the soil of life's enduring values that they may grow
Toward the stars of my greater destiny.

It is these values that we'll be focusing on for the rest of our time together today, in the hope that we can build a circle that supports all of us to "grow toward the stars of our greater destiny."

Core Values Grab Bag

Explain to students that values are principles or qualities that are important and desirable when groups of people come together. Values can support people in creating a safe space where they can share openly and honestly. Values are at the root of healthy, strong communities.

Explain that you have a range of different values written on cards in a bag that you will send around the circle so that everyone can pick one. See below for suggested values for the cards. (Alternatively, arrange the cards on a desk or table for students to select.) Ask students to read the value they picked, before passing the bag to the next person in the circle. Students can exchange their value if they don't know what the value means and/or can't relate to it in any way.

Ask students to think about an experience they had in which this value played an important role - either because it was present or because it was lacking.

Send the talking piece around asking each student to describe this experience.

Ask each student to contribute their value to the center piece after they shared.

Explain that these are the kinds of values for us to consider as we build our circle community. In future circles, let's consider which of these values resonate with us the most, which we consider

most important and whether there might be others we'd like to add.

Closing Ceremony

Ask students if they were to forget everything else about today's circle, what is the one thing they'd like to remember and hold on to.

Below find some words describing values that you might use for the Circle. Leave some blanks for students to add more values for your community to consider as needed.

MUTUAL SUPPORT	RESPECT	APPRECIATION OF DIVERSITY
EMPATHY	PARTICIPATION	KINDNESS
CARING	EQUALITY	ENCOURAGEMENT
CONCERN	FAIRNESS	SHARING
GENEROSITY	JUSTICE	OPEN-MINDEDNESS
COMPASSION	HONESTY	LOVE
TEAMWORK	UNDERSTANDING	
COURAGE	PATIENCE	

Core Values Go Rounds for Future Circles

Core values, shared and discussed, are at the foundation of a strong and functioning circle community. For this reason, you might want to consider returning to them at different points not only early on as you're still building the circle community, but also later, when you get into more challenging conversations with your group.

Consider asking students to look at the values distributed across our center piece, then ask them to:

- Pick one of the values that you think will be important for us, as we come together as a group over the course of the coming year. Why do you think this value would be important to have as a foundation of our circle process?
- What might get in the way of this value as we continue to come together in our circle?

As you prepare the circle for a particularly difficult conversation (or if you're already in a difficult conversation), consider asking students to return to the values on the center piece and ask them to consider:

- What value do you think will be important for us as we embark on a challenging conversation; as we talk about this issue; as we try to listen to one another even though some things may be hard to hear, or we may strongly disagree. Why do you think this value is important at this time?

And as you look back on a particularly difficult conversation, consider asking student to return to the values on the center piece and ask them to consider:

- What value did you find most challenging to uphold in our circle just now? Why do you think that is?

Good Listening

Model poor listening and good listening for the class – then have students pair up and practice it.

Ask for a volunteer from the class to come up front and tell you something. While the person is talking, model poor listening (looking away, fidgeting with clothes or hair, doing something else). Ask how the person felt while you were doing this. Ask the class what they noticed.

Now have the person tell you the same information, but model good listening (attention focused on the speaker, positive body language, no interrupting, repeat back what was said). Ask the class what they noticed this time. What exactly was different?

Ask students to pair up with each other and practice good listening for about 30 seconds each. Make a good listening checklist to post on the wall. A kindergarten class might create a pictorial list of just two or three good listening qualities, while third-graders could create a longer list of words.

You can model good listening at every morning meeting. Each morning, write a message on the board for children to discuss. (For instance, "Talk to the person sitting next to you about what happened in the story we read yesterday.")

Ask students to pair up and to listen well to each other as they each talk about the message for about 30 seconds. Afterwards, ask the children to name the ways their partners listened well. Add new strategies to the chart.

Ask if there are strategies that are easier to do than others (for example, keeping eyes on the speaker may be easier to do than repeating back what was said).

Put-downs & Put-ups

Discuss what put-downs and put-ups are, how they feel – and then practice giving put-ups.

Introduction:

Ask, "What is a put-down?" Sometimes people say hurtful things to one another. Such remarks tell a person that he or she is no good, not important, and "less than" other people. That's why they are called "put-downs."

Ask for two or three examples of put-downs. It's better not to list the put-downs on the board or on chart paper: Writing them may provide reinforcement for the language.

Discuss:

- Where do people learn put-downs?
- How do put-downs make people feel?
- Why do we say put-downs?
- If people in the class say these things to one another, how might it affect the group?

Ask the class to think of put-ups, that is, kind and friendly things to say to each other. List the contributions on chart paper.

Discuss:

- How would these words make someone feel?
- What would be the effect on the class if we used these phrases instead of put-downs?

Have students turn to the person next to them and share a put-up with them. Add more ideas to the chart.

Put-Up Box

Create a box for put-ups. Ask students to write new put-ups on a card whenever they say a put-up or when they hear someone else say one and deposit the cards in the box. (You may want to provide a certain time of day for the students to contribute to the put-up box so that it doesn't become a distraction).

Every morning meeting, you can pull an idea from the box and share it with the class. Remind students to write their names on the put-up cards so they can be recognized and to ensure that a variety of students participate. Add their new ideas to the put-up chart.

Start the Year with Community Agreements

Begin by asking students, "What do you need to feel safe, comfortable, and excited to learn?"

The beginning of the school year is the ideal time to start building a positive classroom climate. One of the first things that many of us do is to go over the "classroom rules." Often this is a list of warnings teachers present to students aimed at keeping order in the classroom – things like "keep your hands and feet to yourself," "sit in your own spot," and "raise your hand if you want to speak."

Although these are all valuable guidelines for classroom behavior, we suggest an alternative approach.

Instead, consider working with the class to generate a list of "community agreements." These differ from "classroom rules" in several ways. Community agreements are co-created with students and include suggestions from students. Community agreements apply to teachers as well as students. Community agreements address the needs of students as well as the needs of teachers. Community agreements include things the class aspires to do, not only things the class wants to avoid doing.

Creating community agreements can help your class think about how they want to relate to each other. This can lead to agreements such as "one person speaks at a time" and "no put-downs."

You can also ask students to consider what conditions they personally need to focus and do their best learning. You might ask your students, "What do you need to feel safe, comfortable, and excited to learn?" This question may elicit surprising answers like:

- I need to work alone sometimes.
- I need to move around sometimes.
- I need to ask if we can turn off the fluorescent lights because they hurt my eyes.
- I need to sit on a chair. The rug is not comfortable for me.
- I need to have fun while we are learning.
- I need people to be kind to me.
- I need to know it is okay to make mistakes.

After allowing your students to think about their responses, write each student's offerings on the board without comment or judgment, alongside your own ideas, which may include those traditionally found on a classroom rules list. Then, as a group, ask the class which of the ideas they can all agree on.

With a bit of discussion, you may come up with ways to build in a movement break every now and then, or dim the fluorescent lights in the afternoon when the sun is bright. While these ideas

are not what we would normally find on a classroom rules document, they may go a long way in creating a positive classroom climate that lets students do their best work.

Keep your community agreements posted throughout the school year – and add to it as needed. It is a living document for all to use.

No matter how many years of teaching experience we bring to the classroom, every year is different. Each class has its own character that is influenced by the individual students within it, their relationships with one another, and the social and emotional skills that they have developed. Starting the year by getting to know your students and their unique set of needs can go a long way in creating a positive classroom climate.



Self-Care

Two Quick Techniques for Calming Down

These practices can help both young people and adults stay grounded when anxiety arises.

It can be helpful for us, and for our students, to learn simple practices we can use to calm ourselves when we are feeling tense or anxious.

The activities described below, 5-Sense Memory and 2:1 Breathing, both activate the body's parasympathetic nervous system, which decreases heart rate, blood pressure, and muscular tension, preparing the body for rest, sleep, or digestion.

Consider doing these two activities together, in either order.



5-Sense Memory

This is a good technique for grounding yourself during moments of anxiety.

Keep your eyes open and go through this process whenever needed, in whatever space you're in.

Sit comfortably with your feet on the floor, your hands on your legs, your spine comfortably straight. Close your eyes if you can. Otherwise, focus on a spot in front of you. Take a deep breath and let it out slowly. Repeat.

Imagine one of your favorite places from any part of your life. As you remember it, start to walk toward it in your mind.

As you walk into it, find...

- 5 things that you can see

- 4 things you can touch
- 3 things you can hear
- 2 things you can smell
- 1 thing you can taste

Acknowledge and take in all of the positive feelings this place holds for you.

Know that it is forever with you, and you can come back here anytime you want to.

As you back away from this memory, take the gifts of this memory with you to help and sustain you today.

2:1 Breathing

2:1 breathing is simply exhaling for twice as long as one inhales. For example if you inhale on a count of 3, you would exhale for a count of 6. If you inhale for 4, exhale for 8, etc.

- Sit in a comfortable position with your feet flat on the floor, spine comfortably straight. Hands can be in your lap or resting gently on your belly. You can close your eyes or not. If your eyes are open, try to focus on a point in front of you.
- To begin, take a couple of deep gentle abdominal breaths. Don't worry about what the count is at this point. The objective is to just calm the breath.
- Now, take a deep gentle abdominal breath in for 3 seconds. Hold it for a count of 1. Then release it for a count of 6. Hold for a count of 1 and then repeat for at least 3 breaths. Do the counting in your mind and let the numbers flow softly and easily.
- To help extend the exhale, make sure to use your abdominal muscles to gently push out all of the air. Your shoulders should not be helping you breathe. They move as a consequence of being on top of your abdomen, not to help you draw in a breath.
- As you exhale, let the tension in your body leave with your breath. Let it drain down from your head, your shoulders, your hands, your legs, your feet.
- As you inhale, bring in calm, peaceful energy.

Variations

If this activity follows the 5-Sense Memory, breathe in the positive feelings from that memory.

As you inhale, you can breathe in your intent for the rest of the day, and let it fill you. Each breath in of your intent will fill you further. Fill your arms, your legs, your hands, feet, neck, and face.

When doing the activity with a group of people, model the technique, then tell participants that you'll be doing the activity for a certain range of breaths (perhaps 3-4) - and ask them to find their own rhythm.

For educators: Practicing gratitude as a form of self-care

Gratitude can reduce stress and reshape the brain. Here are two steps for practicing it.

Being an educator is stressful – in fact, it’s one of the most stressful professions in the country. No wonder so many educators are looking for ways to combat our stress, or at least take it down a notch. Research shows that one way to do this is to cultivate gratitude as a nurturing self-care practice. Practicing gratitude on a regular basis has been associated with enhanced optimism, better sleep, fewer physical ailments, and lower levels of anxiety and depression.

Gratitude practice can also reshape the brain. While we used to believe that our brains were fixed in adolescence, in recent years neuroscientists have discovered that we can continue to grow and reshape our brains well into old age.

Say you’re a complainer. You’re always looking for what’s wrong with a person or situation. Not only does this negative outlook impact how you feel, your accompanying thoughts manifest as a neural pathway in the brain. And as you travel down this negative path more and more often, new connections between neurons are created to facilitate this particular thought process. Eventually the pathway may even be insulated, using a process called myelination, which further increases the speed with which these neurons fire together.

But if instead you turn your thoughts to what’s good about a particular moment, a different set of neurons start to fire together. With practice, the connection between them is strengthened and a new neural pathway comes into being. This more traveled path becomes the default as the “what’s bad about the person or situation” path is pruned back, in a process called “synaptic pruning.” Over time, the physical structure of the brain is re-wired.

Here are two practices to prime and re-wire the brain for increasingly more positive thoughts:

1. Focus on gratitude

Try these two steps first thing in the morning – or at any point in the day:

- Think of something you are grateful for. It could be anything, large or small. Consider, for instance, feeling grateful for waking up in a warm bed, having hot water for your morning shower, or having a good cup of coffee to start your day. You might be grateful for having a job, for your family, for supportive colleagues or the students in your class. Whatever it is, direct your mind to go there.

- Consider how it makes you feel. Take a few moments to sit with that feeling before moving on to the rest of your day.

2. Redirect negative thinking

If you find your mind going in a negative or complaining direction, try redirecting your thoughts. Try to recognize what's good about the person or situation you are inclined to complain about. Taking this step can radically change the way you feel in the moment. And if you get into the habit of redirecting our thoughts in this way, you contribute to a different – positive and strengths-based – neural pathway in your brain.

For example:

- You think: *I hate getting up early.*
Search your mind for any positive in the situation, such as: *I love the quiet, first thing in the morning.*
- You think: *The train is late. Again.*
Redirect your thought to: *I'm really enjoying this podcast I've been listening to.*
- You think: *Why does my student have such a bad attitude?*
Try a strengths-based approach: *She made it to school despite the fact that she's obviously having a bad day. Good for her. I so appreciate her commitment to this class.*

Gratitude practice is not just a form of nurturing self-care. Taking charge of our thoughts in this way can shift our feelings in a positive direction and improve our attitude. That improved attitude can lead to a shift in our behavior (perhaps we are more calm or thoughtful) – and *that* can result in improved outcomes in our classrooms. Just imagine those improved outcomes ... and feel your stress levels drop!



SEL Tip

Practice gratitude as a form of self-care

Practicing gratitude on a regular basis has been associated with enhanced optimism, better sleep, fewer physical ailments, and lower levels of anxiety and depression. Here are two practices to prime and re-wire the brain for increasingly more positive thoughts:

Focus on gratitude

1

Try these two steps first thing in the morning – or at any point in the day:

- Think of something (large or small) that you are grateful for: having hot water for your shower or a good cup of coffee. You might be grateful for having a job, for your family, for supportive colleagues or the students in your class. Whatever it is, direct your mind to go there.
- Consider how it makes you feel. Take a few moments to sit with that feeling before moving on to the rest of your day.

Redirect negative thinking

2

If you find your mind going in a negative direction, try redirecting your thoughts to recognize what's good about the person or situation.

- You think: The train is late. Again.
Redirect your thought to: *I'm really enjoying this podcast I've been listening to.*
- You think: Why does my student have such a bad attitude?
Try a strengths-based approach: *She made it to school despite the fact that she's obviously having a bad day. I appreciate her commitment to this class.*



morningsidecenter.org/teachable-moment/lessons/sel-tip-practice-gratitude-form-self-care

Self-Care for Pre-K-5: Breathing

This lesson has young people explore different ways to use breathing to care for themselves during times of stress.

About Self Care With Students

In the process of engaging young people in social and emotional learning (SEL) and mindful awareness practice, we naturally begin to teach them about self-care. One of the core competencies of SEL is “self awareness.” With increased self-awareness, students can begin developing practices and skills that they can employ to take care of themselves. This can include learning how to center themselves, stay grounded and present, calm themselves down, gain insight and perspective, and decide on possible next steps to meet their needs – all while recognizing and respecting the needs of others.

Rather than telling young people what to do and how to do it, our goal should be to support students in cultivating the awareness, skills and practices, that they find useful. They need to be able to make their own choices in the moment about how to handle themselves and the situation at hand – whether we, as adults, are around or not.

Before we continue, you might consider [the tree of contemplative practices](#) created by the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society. Consider the multiple branches as ways to practice different kinds of self (and community) care and healing.

Think about your own practices. What has worked for you? How did you come to that practice? Now think about your students, their life experiences, their personalities, and who they are in the world. What might work for them? Have you asked? Have you given them opportunities to try different ways, to share practices that have worked for them perhaps?

Consider this series on self-care as a joint exploration with your students so that you can all learn together.

Introducing Students to the Breath

Simple breathing exercises can help students transition from one space into another, from one activity into the next, especially when they need to focus their attention. Exercises that help students breathe more mindfully can also help them regulate their feelings. Breathing of this kind can help kids deal with their stresses, frustrations, fears, and concerns. It can help to ground them and be more present in the moment.

Consider talking young people through the process of why taking some deep breaths, in through the nose, and out through the mouth, can be useful.

First, explain what happens in the brain when we experience stress, using some of the following language:

There is a part of the brain called the amygdala. It is always on the lookout to make sure we are safe. When the amygdala notices something scary, stressful, or worrisome, it sets off alarm bells. When this happens, our bodies respond with what we call “fight, flight, or freeze.” Sometimes this response can help keep us safe, but other times it just makes it hard for us to think straight.

[Fight, Flight, Freeze – A Guide to Anxiety for Kids](#) is a useful video to explain what happens in the brain when we experience anxiety or stress and our “fight flight or freeze” response is triggered.

You can also try to explain the “fight, flight or freeze” response yourself, especially for some of your youngest students, using some of the following language:

Think about a peaceful place or something that makes you feel peaceful. Try to go there in your mind. Think about what you see there. What colors and shapes do you see? What sounds do you hear? Are there other people? Who? Check in with yourself. How does your body feel? It’s likely to feel calm and relaxed. Check your heart rate. It’s likely to be slow and steady. What about your breathing? It too is likely to be slow and steady.

Now think about the last time you surprised or startled someone, maybe you got startled yourself. How did they react? How did you? Some people react by leaning in. They might look angry. This is what we call a fight response. Others might turn or back away. This is the flight response. Still others may just stand there speechless and shocked. This we call the freeze response.

These are not things we choose to do. They are automatic responses to the amygdala setting off our brain’s alarm system. When this happens, our heart beats more quickly, we might get flushed, with sweaty hands and start breathing more quickly. We all have “fight, flight or freeze” responses, though most people have one reaction more often than others.

One of the ways to counteract “fight, flight or freeze” is to take a few deep breaths in through the nose. This may take practice for some of us because, since we were very little, many have lost the practice of breathing deeply in through the nose. We may instead have learned to use shallow breathing from the chest and breathe mostly through our mouths.

The deeper breathing is known as “belly breathing.” Some of today’s breathing exercises will help us work up to belly breathing. If we practice, we may get better at it, so that we can use it to help us when stress or anxiety kick in.

Note to the teacher about deep breathing for students with high chronic stress:

Deep belly breathing is a soothing practice for many, but not for all. Students living with chronic stress or PTSD may have developed coping mechanisms that have stopped them from breathing (and feeling) too deeply. It can be overwhelming to go inside a body that is holding too much hurt and anxiety. For these students, being asked to breathe deeply, especially for longer periods of time, can be triggering, disorienting, or anxiety-provoking – the opposite of the relaxation

we're going for. Be aware of this possibility when introducing breathing exercises to your students, and be sure to take it slow and observe students' reactions.

The breathing activities we provide below are short, no more than a few minutes, so as not to push students too far or too deep all at once. In addition, several of the breathing activities use touch and visuals, in addition to the breath. This allows students to use what we call an "external anchor," a place to focus their attention that is not inside, where the hurt and anxiety reside.

Just remember, for some people deep breathing takes time, because they first need to feel safe in their own bodies. So don't push students to breathe too deep, too soon.

On a similar note: Never tell students what kind of mindful awareness practice they should adopt or be rigid about how the practices are done. Always use invitational language and provide options. For example, if you think having students close their eyes for an activity might be helpful, don't tell them to close their eyes. Instead, you might say, "I invite you to close your eyes," or "You can close your eyes," or "Maybe close your eyes," or "If you like, you can instead rest your gaze on the rug or wall in front of you." It is important for people, young and old, to find their own way, go at their own pace, and to be in charge of their own practice.

Take Five or Five-Finger Breathing

Talk students through the Five Finger Breathing method.

- First invite them to stretch their hand out like a star. Show them how by holding up your hand in this way, palm facing the screen.
- Have the pointer finger of your other hand ready to trace your fingers up and down. Start by placing the pointer finger at the bottom of your thumb.
- Invite students to do the same and as you invite them to breathe in through their nose, have them slowly slide their pointer finger up their thumb, as you do the same.
- Then as they breathe out through their mouth, have them slide their pointer finger down the thumb on the other side, as you do the same.
- Breathing back in through their nose, show them how to slide their pointer finger up the opposite pointer finger, and as they breathe back out through their mouth, down that same pointer finger.
- Keep going until you're done tracing every finger, including the thumb.

Ask students at the end:

- How did that make you feel?
- Would you like to do another cycle or two?

If you'd prefer to have a video guide you and your students in this process, consider these:

- [Kids Meditation – Five Finger Breathing](#)
- [Take 5 Breathing: A Breathing Exercise for Kids](#)

A slightly different audio version of Take Five can be found on the Mindfulness Without Borders website. This activity, and other guided meditations (audio only, in both English and Spanish) can also be found on the site.

- [Take 5 Breathing](#) (audio)

Box Breathing or Square Breathing

Box breathing is a powerful relaxation technique that can help us to return our breathing to its normal rhythm. It is a way of resetting the breath and can help people deal with stressful situations.

The practice involves inhaling to a count of four, holding the breath for four counts, exhaling to a count of four, and again holding it for four counts. (The activity is called box or four-square breathing because the four steps can be visualized as the four sides of a box.) The count can be faster or slower depending on where your students are at.

Repeat the process 4 to 5 times to start with as you familiarize students with this form of breathing. As you introduce box breathing more often and it becomes a practice, you can slow down the count, or work up to a 5 or 6 count box breathing.

You can invite young people to close their eyes, as you talk them through the practice, or have them rest their gaze on the floor, wall, or screen in front of them.

You can have them trace an imaginary box with their pointer finger in the air in front of them or use the outline of a window in their room. Some kids might find the physical edges of an item (like a picture frame, small box, a book, a post-it, or the computer monitor) easier to trace. [A square on the screen](#) in front of them might help, as well. Of course, students can also print out a square breathing image at [Coping Skills for Kids](#) or draw their own to trace on paper during the breathing exercise.

show a video to follow on their screens.

- [Kids Meditation – Square Breathing \(focus & calm\)](#)
- [Meditation Breathe GIF](#)
- [Box breathing animation](#)

If this resonates with young people, consider triangle, star, and figure eight breathing as well. Images for students to trace can be found for free at [Coping Skills for Kids](#).

Bubble Breathing

Another way to practice breathing that can help us slow down and calm ourselves is the “bubble blowing” or “bubble breathing” technique.

If possible, have your students show up to “class” with soap solution and a bubble wand. (If that’s not possible, or some students don’t have these items, you can blow imaginary bubbles using an imaginary wand and soap solution.)

Practice blowing bubbles together, as a way to learn to breathe well. Explain that this kind of breathing can help us to manage our stresses and anxiety.

As students dip their wand into the solution, invite them to breathe in slowly through their nose, then lift the wand up to their mouths and blow out slowly and continuously through the hole in the wand to create bubbles. Have students practice like this for a minute or so, using these slow, calming breaths.

Next, even if everyone has wands and soap solution, practice “blowing bubbles” without these tools. Talk students through this practice yourself or use one of the breathing apps/videos, below.

To talk students through:

- Explain that we can imagine blowing bubbles like this any time we’re feeling stressed, worried, scared, or anxious.
- Start by taking a deep breath in through your nose, then slowly out through your mouth, pursing your lips, as you imagine blowing bubbles, lots of pretty bubbles.
- Remember, we have to do this slowly because we don’t want your bubbles to pop.
- So take a deep, slow breath in through your nose, maybe hold it for a second as you pretend to lift the wand to your mouth, then slowly breathe out through your mouth, imagining the bubbles you’re creating.
- Continue this practice for a minute or so.

Videos and apps to consider using for this practice:

- [LitUp Mind Bubble breath deep breathing video-aided](#) (3 minutes)
- [The Best Tee – Bubble Breath](#) (2:20 minutes) in English and Spanish
- [Breathe In Calm App | Breathing Exercise Sea](#) (2:11 minutes)
- [Breathe In Calm App | Breathing Exercise Jungle](#) (2:18 minutes) with pause

Teaching Self-Care for Middle & High School: Breathing

This lesson has young people explore how we can use breathing to care for ourselves during times of stress – and reflect on how that works for different people.

Note to the Teacher

See the previous activity for preK-5 students for guidelines on self-care with students and on introducing students to the breath.

A note on chronic stress and trauma: Deep belly breathing is a soothing practice for many, but not for all. Students living with chronic stress or PTSD may have developed coping mechanisms that have stopped them from breathing (and feeling) too deeply. Telling them to breathe deeply, especially for longer periods of time, can be triggering, disorienting, and anxiety provoking, the opposite of the relaxation we're going for. Keep this in mind when introducing breathing exercises to your students.

For people who live with chronic stress or PTSD, having what is known as an internal anchor when practicing any kind of mindful awareness can be problematic. It is hard to go inside a body, that is holding much hurt and anxiety. It can be overwhelming.

For this reason several of the breathing activities below use touch and visuals, in addition to the breath. This allows students to use, what we call an external anchor, a place to focus their attention that is not inside, where the hurt and anxiety reside. Moreover, the breathing activities below are short, no more than a few minutes, so as not to push students too far or too deep all at once.

Just remember, for some people deep breathing takes time, because they first need to feel safe in their own bodies. So don't push students to breathe too deep, too soon.

And while we're on the topic, never tell students what or how to do any kind of mindful awareness practice. Always use invitational language and provide options, e.g. don't tell students to close their eyes. If you think it might be beneficial for the activity, consider some of the following language instead: "I invite you to close your eyes ..." "You can close your eyes ..." "Maybe close your eyes ..." "or you can find a spot on the rug or wall in front of you to look at." It is important for young people to find their own way, go at their own pace, and be in charge of their own practice.

Take Five or Five Finger Breathing

Five Finger Breathing brings several of the senses together at the same time. You watch and feel your fingers, while you're also paying attention to your breath. This requires multisensory and it multi locational awareness – you're feeling two of your fingers, one on each hand, as well as your breath. This takes a lot of brain capacity, easily crowding out any worry thoughts you might be having. As you do this for a minute or two, you also calm your physiology, so that if (when) those worry thoughts come back they won't take hold in the same way because they won't have the same emotional charge as before.

Talk students through the Five Finger Breathing method, by inviting them to stretch their hand out like a star. Show them how, by holding up your own hand in this way, palm facing the screen. Have the pointer finger of your other hand ready to trace your thumb and fingers up and down. Start by placing the pointer finger at the bottom of your thumb. Invite students to do the same. And as you ask them to breathe in through their nose, have them slowly slide their pointer finger up their thumb, following your lead. Then as they breathe out through their mouth, have them slide their pointer finger down the thumb on the other side, again following your lead.

Breathing back in through their nose, show them how to slide their pointer finger up their other pointer finger, and as they breathe back out through their mouth, have them slide their finger down that same pointer finger. Keep going until you've traced every finger. Consider going back again to the thumb for a slightly longer activity.

Ask students at the end:

- What was that like for them?
- How did they feel at the start? How do they feel now?
- Would they like to do another cycle, or two?

And if you'd prefer to have a video guide you and your students, in this process, variations are:

- [Simple Mindfulness Strategy – Take Five](#)
- [Take 5 Breathing: A Breathing Exercise for Kids](#)

A slightly different variation of Take Five can be found on the Mindfulness Without Borders website, as an audio both English and Spanish at

- [Take 5 Breathing](#) (and other guided meditation audios)

Different Shapes to Help Us Breath

Triangle breathing is a simple breathing technique that can help reduce stress and improve our moods. Imagine a triangle or if your students do better with a visual, one can be found [here](#) or at [Coping Skills for Kids](#). Start at the bottom left of the triangle. Breathe in through your nose for three counts, as you trace up the side of the triangle in your mind's eye, or with your pointer finger in the air in front of you. Hold the breath for three counts, as you trace down the other side

of triangle. And breathe out through your mouth, for three counts as you go along the bottom of the triangle back to the starting point.

Continue the breathing and tracing, another 4 or 5 times to start with. Consider having students print or draw their own triangle they think they'd do better with a hard copy to trace.

Videos to consider using for triangle breathing are listed below:

- [Triangle Breathing](#) (1 min)
- [Relaxation for Caregivers: 03 Triangle Breathing](#) (3 minutes)
- [Breathe In Calm App ... Breathing Exercise Jungle](#) (2:18 min). The bubble in this app is used to guide us through an actual "triangle breath."

Star Breathing is a variation of triangle breathing but rather than starting anew with the triangle after each breath, you can keep going. Consider using a [star breathing image](#) as your guide.

Another image can be found at [Coping Skills for Kids](#) or you can have your students draw their own.

In your mind's eye start with any (breathe in) side of the star. Maybe imagine using your finger to trace the star, if you think that would help. As you breathe in through your nose for three counts, trace up the (breathe in) side of the star to the point. Hold the breath for three counts on the point. Then breathe out through your mouth for three counts as you trace down the (breathe out) side. Going up to the next point of the star, breathing in through your nose, for three counts. Hold the breath for three counts. And trace back down the other side of the point for three counts as you breathe out through your mouth. Continue this process until you get back to where you started.

Box or square breathing is another simple breathing technique that can help reduce stress and improve our moods. It slows down the breath a bit further as we move to a four count with two pauses.

Box breathing invites us to inhale to a count of four, holding the breath for four counts, exhaling to a count of four, and again holding it for four counts. The count can be faster or slower depending on what works for your students. Repeat the process 4 to 5 times to start with as you familiarize students with this form of breathing. As you introduce box or square breathing more regularly, and it becomes a practice, you can slow down the count, or work up to a 5 or 6 count box breath.

You can invite young people to close their eyes, as you talk them through the practice, or have them rest their gaze on the floor, wall or screen in front of them. You can also have them trace an imaginary box with their pointer finger or the outline of a window in their room. Some kids may find it helpful to trace the physical edges of an item (like a picture frame, small box, a book, a post-it, or their computer monitor). Tracing a [square on the screen](#) or piece of paper can also help. Invite students to print out a square breathing image at [Coping Skills for Kids](#) or they can draw their own, to trace on paper during the breathing exercise.

Videos to consider using for box breathing are listed below:

- [Square Breathing Technique](#) (1:11 min)

- [Square Breathing Technique](#) (1:15 min)
- [Breathing Exercise Square](#) (2:10 min)
- [Audio Meditation – Equal Breathing](#) (5:51 min)
- [Box Breathing GIF](#)

If students find it hard to breathe in, out, or hold their breath, for a full four seconds, consider the following videos that use a slightly faster count, in different places, to get started. Don't feel you need to use the full length of the longer videos right from the start. Longer breathing sessions may be something to work up to as you practice triangle, star, box or any other breathing that resonates with your students:

- [Box Breathing Exercise](#) (2:33 min)
- [5-minute Anxiety Relief – Guided Box Breath](#) (4:41 min)
- [Guided Box Breathing – 5 Minute Meditation \(4-4-4-4\)](#) (5:25 min)

Breathing with Imagery and Sound

Having practiced some of the other breathing exercises, with your students over time, you might try the following guided breathing meditations as you work with students towards slowing and deepening their breath. Invite students to keep their eyes open if they like to focus on the clouds, river or waves.

The videos below use imagery and sound as focal points

- [Guided Candle Meditation // Meditation for Stress and Anxiety](#) (5:50 min)
- [Guided Meditation \(ASMR\) The River Flows – Calming ripples & my voice](#) (8:30 min)
- [Guided Breathing Exercise \(Clouds\)](#) (4:51 min)

And if guided meditation doesn't work with you students, maybe simply sitting with some soothing video imagery and sound for a few minutes will help them relax and slow down their breath. Try the following videos for however long makes sense for your students:

- [Relaxing Ocean Waves](#) (5:00 min)
- [Relaxing Water Flow | Gentle Waterfall](#) (5:03 min)
- [Rainfall 5 Minute Meditation](#) (4:27 min)

Have students check in with themselves at the end of any of these breathing activities by asking:

- What was that like for you?
- How did you feel before? How do you feel now?
- Out of the various practices, we've tried together, which worked for you?
- Which would you be interested in trying again/more of?



Games

Find Someone Who

This fun activity is a quick way for students to connect with one another and overcome shyness.

Introduction

Tell students that they are going to play a game to find out things they might not know about each other. They will have a few minutes to fill out a survey sheet. When they hear a signal from you, they will "freeze" in their places.

- Distribute the Find Someone Who survey sheets (below). Explain that students are to walk around the room and find people who have the characteristics described on the sheet. When they find someone, they write the name in the blank provided. Ask them to find as many different people as possible, using each person's name only once.
- Begin the game. Continue until several students complete the worksheet. This will probably take about five minutes.
- Ask students to return to their seats. Ask a student who completed the entire survey to go down the list, saying who s/he found for each item and acknowledging that person. Where appropriate, ask for more details. (For example, if Yvette has a pet, ask what pet she has.)

Discuss

- 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?

Find someone who:

Name: _____ ...is wearing the same color as you.

Name: _____ ...has an older brother or sister at home.

Name: _____ ...is wearing jewelry.

Name: _____ ...has visited another state.

Name: _____ ...has a pet.

Name: _____ ...has a birthday the same month as you.

Name: _____ ...is the oldest in his or her family.

Name: _____ ...saw the same movie as you recently.

Name: _____ ...has read a Harry Potter book.

Name: _____ ...plays a musical instrument.

Name: _____ ...has lived outside NYC for a year or more.

Name: _____ ...speaks a language other than English.

Name: _____ ...cooked a meal recently.

Online Games to Get Your Class Engaged & Connected

Here are some online games that can help you and your students get to know each other better, cooperate, and build empathy and connection.

Introduction

Engaging games can help you and your students get to know each other, cooperate, and build empathy and connection.

Below are eight fun games that students can play together using Zoom or similar platforms:

Beginners

Gesture Relay
Cooperative Counting

Intermediate

Connect Me
Move Together
Unfortunately/Fortunately

Advanced

Yes And
What Are You Really Saying?
Assertive Message Game Show



GESTURE RELAY

(online version of the “Group Juggle”)

Objective: Builds group focus and cooperation, encourages active participation and demonstrates the importance of each individual in the group pattern.

Steps

1. Make sure everyone in the group can see each other. (Everyone should have camera ON, Microphone ON, and “Gallery View”).
2. Explain that you will establish a pattern by sending a CLAP to someone on your screen, and saying their name. They will then send the CLAP to someone else and say their name. Everyone should receive the CLAP one time only. The last person to receive the CLAP passes it back to the facilitator. If necessary, help participants identify who has not yet received the CLAP.
3. Tell participants to remember WHO they received and sent the CLAP to. Explain that our first goal is to establish a pattern that can be repeated.
4. Send the CLAP through the group again, SAYING THE NAME of the recipient, while following the same pattern.
5. When the group has successfully sent the CLAP through the same pattern twice, pause when you receive it. Tell the group you are now going to send through the same pattern, WITHOUT saying the name of the person you are sending it to.
6. Optional intermediate step: When/if the group masters sending the CLAP without saying the names for 2-3 rounds, announce that after sending the CLAP, you will start sending a second movement in the same order. (This can be a SNAP or something else you choose). Our goal is to keep both gestures moving through the established pattern.
7. Optional advanced step: When/if the group masters sending two gestures around consistently, announce that you will add a third gesture. (This can be a WAVE or something else). Try to keep all three gestures moving through the pattern consistently. This will probably take some practice and playing the game a few times.

Reflection

Invite students to share:

- What did we have to do, individually and as a group, to keep the gestures moving around?
- What is challenging about this game?
- What skills are we building with this game?

Tips

- It’s best to make sure each gesture is different from the others, so they are clear to see.
- You can invite students to suggest the three gestures.

- Once participants know the game, you can call on a student to be the leader and start sending each of the gestures.
 - Conversation during the game can confuse things, so point out that if we're talking, we may lose track of the gesture.
 - Strategy tip: Always keep your focus on the person you are receiving gestures from. (Better to let participants discover this themselves)
 - Keep track to ensure that both gestures continue to move around the group in the pattern. When a gesture gets dropped, you can say "We lost our CLAP movement, I'm going to start it again."
-

COOPERATIVE COUNTING

Objective: This activity builds group cooperation, focus, and concentration.

Steps

1. This game can be played with cameras off/on, or a mix of both.
2. The goal is to count to 20 as a group. Someone will start with "1," then someone else will say "2" and so on. (NO assigned order)
3. Anyone can say a number. However, if two people speak at the same time, you go back to 1 and start again from the beginning.
4. If the group gets to 20 and wants to continue, the group can see how high they can count, or go backwards from 20 to 1.
5. Optional: Depending on the size of the group, you can require that every person contributes at least one of the numbers.

Reflection

Invite students to share:

- What was challenging about this?
- What did we have to do as a group to work together?
- How could our group take it to the next level the next time we play?

Tips

- If the group finds this challenging, ask, "What could we do as a group to do better?" Encourage suggestions that build teamwork such as listen closely, everyone only say one number, remember who has gone before, etc.
- Discourage short-cuts such as establishing a pattern or using nonverbal signals.

CONNECT ME

Objective: This is a fun writing activity that can promote empathy and connection.

Steps

1. This game should ideally be played with all cameras ON, although adjustments can be made if necessary.
2. In the chat box, the facilitator will type in a word or a phrase, one at a time. Examples: strawberry, New York, sky, ball ,one year.
3. Participants have 1-2 minutes to write something about themselves associated with the word or phrase - or something they associate with the word or phrase.
4. Facilitator types a speaking order in the chat box and sets a timer for 2 minutes.
5. Sentences are shared.
6. The facilitator enters the next word or phrase in the chat box.
7. After one round or more, there can be a brief reflection before going on to the next word.

Reflection

Invite students to share:

- What was this activity like for you?
- Did you discover anything?
- How did this activity make you feel?
- What did you learn about other people today?

Tips

- Depending upon the groups' level of maturity, a participant could suggest a word and send it to the facilitator via the chat box.
- Depending on the group's median age, words (like justice, hope, safety, etc.) can be more evocative and challenging, and touch off deeper conversation.

MOVE TOGETHER

Objective: This embodied, team-building activity builds visual focus and concentration, and invites non-verbal connection.

Steps

1. This is a physical game that requires participants be on camera.
2. Explain that you will start a movement, and everyone should try to follow you and move together.
3. Keep the initial moment simple and slow, and encourage participants to work together nonverbally. Focus on the movement we all see on the screen, and remind the group your goal is for everyone to move together.
4. As the group gets more practice with moving on screen together, ask another participant to take over as the “Leader.” You can rotate the “Leader” role so everyone has a chance to lead the group through movement.

Reflection

Invite students to share:

- How is moving together on-screen different than moving in real space?
- How is moving on-screen different than talking on-screen?
- What skills are we building as a team when we move together nonverbally?

Tips

- On Zoom video settings, there is a box called “Mirror My Video.” For this game, it’s recommended that everyone turn this feature off, so that everyone works with the same screen orientation.
- Advanced challenge: If the group likes movement and finds this to be easy, challenge everyone to move together without any single leader.

UNFORTUNATELY/FORTUNATELY

Objective: This activity promotes active listening and encourages group focus and creative team-building.

Steps

1. The facilitator explains that the group is going to create a story together with each person contributing one sentence.
2. The speaking order is assigned via the chat box. (If there are an odd number of participants the facilitator will start the story.)
3. The first speaker begins with a sentence beginning with the word “Unfortunately,” as in “Unfortunately, there was some turbulence on my flight.”
4. The next participant adds one sentence that begins with the word “Fortunately,...”

This pattern continues.

For example:

- “Unfortunately, my flight hit some turbulence.”
- “Fortunately, it didn’t last too long.”
- “Unfortunately, the turbulence caused an engine to fail.”
- “Fortunately, there were parachutes on board.”

Reflection

Invite students to share:

- What is challenging about this activity?
- What skills are we building with this activity?
- What does it require as a group to create a story together?

Tips

- You may want to propose a theme or character before beginning the story
- When you set the speaking order, you can ask participants to consider whether they are contributing to the BEGINNING, MIDDLE, or END of the story.

YES/AND....

Objective: This activity is based on a classic improvisation game that teaches the idea of accepting others’ ideas and cooperation.

Steps

1. Set up a speaking order and list it in the chat box.
2. Explain that this is a game where every sentence starts “YES, AND...”. You will make a first statement (i.e. “It’s warm today”) and the next person replies with “Yes, and... (i.e. “Yes and I really want some ice cream). As each person speaks, they build on the previous statement with a “Yes, and.” The story can be as creative as you want, as long as everyone uses “Yes, and” to start each sentence.
3. Optional intermediate step: Invite two volunteers to improvise a scene with all “YES, AND” statements. Encourage the pair to see how long they can continue their scene.

Reflection

Invite students to share:

- How does it feel to have your ideas accepted?
 - How does it feel when you have an idea and others don’t like it or put it down?
 - What’s the value in accepting each other’s ideas and building on them?
-

WHAT ARE YOU REALLY SAYING?

Objective: This activity helps us understand how our intention and our tone of voice are felt and perceived by others, when we speak. It builds sensitivity and empathy.

Steps

1. A pair volunteers. One will be A and the other B.
2. A is given a neutral phrase to say to B like: “Is that your lunch?” (Other suggestions below).
3. Using the chat box, the facilitator provides two active verbs to Participant A: one is positive (e.g., to encourage, to praise, to charm, to cheer, to calm, to please, to soothe, etc.). The other is negative (e.g. to scold, to mock, to attack, to belittle, to frighten, etc.).
4. Participant A says their line (exactly as written) to B, with the intention of fulfilling one of the action verbs through the way they say the phrase. (That is, they say “Is that your lunch?” in either a positive way or in a negative way, e.g., in a scolding way.)

5. The rest of the group tries to guess the action verb and explain what they hear that makes them say that. The facilitator moderates the feedback.
6. Participant A reveals the action verb they used.
7. Then, A says the same line again with their other action verb.
8. The group tries to guess that action verb as well. Again, what did they hear in the voice or tone that made them make that guess? The facilitator moderates the feedback.
9. Participant A reveals their second action verb.
10. Participant B then shares how they felt hearing that line with two different intentions.
11. Now, Participant B is the actor and the activity is repeated with a new neutral line and two new action verbs – one positive and one negative. And the process is repeated.

Reflection

Invite students to share:

- What can we learn from this game about how we speak to others?
- How does it feel when someone puts us down with their tone of speech?
- How does it feel when someone lifts us up with their tone of speech?
- Is it possible for our voice to suggest an intention that we don't actually have (such as an intention to put the other person down)? Why?

Tips

This activity can repeat with another pair and another neutral line and different action verbs in the chat box. Other neutral line suggestions:

- You seem nice.
- I think you're a really interesting person.
- You're wearing that?
- I'm sitting here.
- Once participants understand the game, invite them to suggest a list of active verbs to use for the game.

ASSERTIVE MESSAGE GAME SHOW

Objective: This activity helps participants practice assertive messaging and reflect as a group on effective statements.

Steps

1. Using a game-show format, the “Host” explains that they are going to describe a scenario that calls for a natural assertive message. They will define assertive as “ putting yourself forward or standing up for yourself in a way that respects the needs and boundaries of the other person.” They will define a natural assertive message as “a simple, straightforward statement of what you'd like the other person to do.”
Then the facilitator gives the following example: “ If my daughter has a snack and leaves her dishes in the living room, a natural assertive message would be, ‘Cynthia, please clean up the mess from your snack.’”
2. Type the definitions of the word assertive and a natural assertive message into the chat box for reference.
3. The Host delivers a scenario from the list below and participants raise their hands on camera to volunteer. When called upon by the Host, they deliver a natural assertive message they would give to the person in the scenario.
4. Accept 2-3 suggestions per each scenario.
5. Then move on to the next scenario.
6. Advanced Step: Depending on the group dynamic, you can add the opportunity for the group to vote on their favorite answer. Participants can vote by writing their favorite response into the chat box or by sending it to the host privately. The host tallies the responses and announces the winner of that round. The group then discusses why they found that response effective.

Possible Scenarios:

- Scenario one: You’re at the movies and the people in back of you are talking and interfering with your enjoyment of the movie. Deliver a natural assertive message.
- Scenario two: You're in class/at a school meeting and when you begin to speak, someone interrupts you. This is the second time in the meeting that the same person has interrupted you. Think of a natural assertive message.
- Scenario three: You are old friends. You've been waiting for 45 minutes when your friend finally shows up. This is the third time in recent months that you've had to wait 45 minutes or more for your friend to arrive. You've let it slide the first two times. But this time you decide to confront your friend. Think of a natural assertive message.
- Scenario four: You're at the supermarket check out. Someone cuts in front of you. Think of a natural assertive message.

Reflection

Invite students to share:

- What was this activity like for you?
- How did it make you feel?
- What skill are we building with this activity? Why is this important?
- What is challenging about making naturally assertive messages in the moment we need them?

Tips

- Feel free to choose among the scenarios, bearing in mind that the more practice people get speaking assertively, the stronger they get at it. You may also adapt them for the age and context of your group.
- The facilitator should hear from several different people with their hands raised for each scenario and try to pick different people for the next scenario.
- For the last couple of rounds, the facilitator might want to select participants who do not have their hands up to give them the opportunity to practice this skill.
- Depending on the group, participants could provide some scenarios, perhaps from their own lived experiences of times when they didn't know quite what to say.
- To make it more fun, the host should feel free to ham it up by imitating television game show hosts.



Additional Resources

Explore more resources on TeachableMoment

Getting to Know You Guides

- [GETTING TO KNOW YOU: Classroom Activities for Starting Off the School Year](#)
- [Getting to Know You - Virtually](#)

Self-Care

- [SEL Tip: Physiological Sigh](#)
- [Strategies to Support the Little Ones During Uncertain Times](#)
- [Looking for the Good during Challenging Times](#)
- [Music as Fuel for the Struggle](#)
- [Self-care for Educators & Caregivers During a Pandemic](#)
- [More Self-care](#)

On-Demand Webinars

- [Webinar: Improving Classroom Climate with SEL](#)
- [Creating an Affirmative Space for All](#)
- [Culturally Responsive Instruction: Tools to Create a Welcoming Classroom for All](#)
- [Webinar: Using SEL to Resolve Classroom Conflict](#)

Games

- [Fun Activities for Remote Learning: Pre-K-5](#)
- [TeachableMoment Fun Activities for Remote Learning: Middle and High School](#)
- [Games to Nourish Community](#)

Covid Crisis Support

- [Addressing Change & Loss for Grades PreK-2](#)
- [Addressing Change & Loss for Grades 3-5](#)
- [Addressing Change & Loss for Middle School & High School](#)
- [Covid Crisis: A Lesson on Feelings for K-2](#)
- [Covid Crisis: A Lesson on Feelings for Grades 3-5](#)
- [Covid Crisis: A Lesson on Feelings and Language for MS and HS](#)