

EMPATHY IN ACTION: **HOW TO CREATE WELCOMING LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS**



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The affective domain — emotions, attitudes, and values — is a critical, but often overlooked, aspect of students' formal education. Valuing and validating children's diverse social-emotional needs and experiences is key to creating a space where all students feel they belong. This sense of belonging is a prerequisite for optimal development and learning.

The benefits of prioritizing a sense of belonging in your classroom or program include:



Elementary and middle school students who feel connected to school have higher attendance rates, fewer behavioral issues, and better academic performance. The benefits of belonging continue into high school and beyond, including higher rates of high school graduation and post-secondary education, particularly for traditionally marginalized communities.

Feeling connected and valued at school positively affects students' emotional well-being and ability to form healthy friendships with classmates. Belonging is also associated with lower levels of anxiety, depression, and drug abuse. Like the academic benefits of belonging, the social-emotional benefits extend beyond graduation and are correlated with emotional and physical health in adulthood.

On the other hand, when students regularly feel excluded or lonely, their motivation and ability to learn can decrease. A sense of exclusion can also lead to anxiety and depression. Belonging is especially important and challenging for students who feel like they don't fit in or are part of traditionally marginalized or underrepresented communities. For various reasons, some children and youth have a harder time fitting in and making friends. Children from BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) and low-income communities may be more likely to experience a lack of belonging, but any child can feel uncertain if they belong.

BELONGING IS MORE CHALLENGING FOR SOME STUDENTS

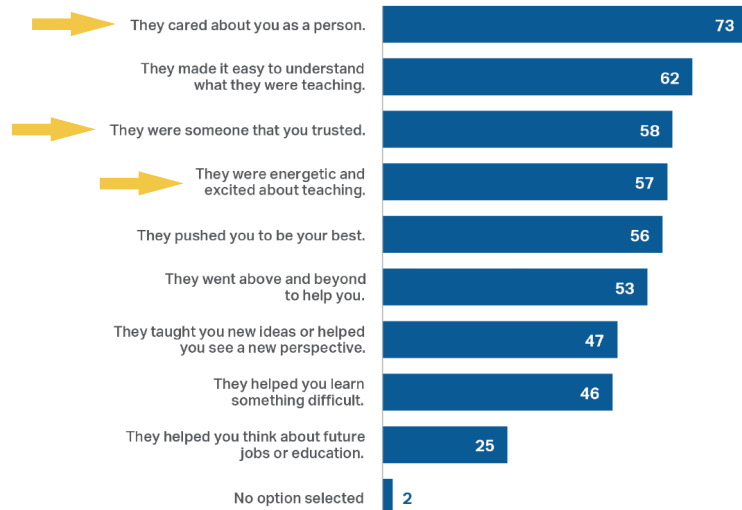
- In a [2023 survey by the Trevor Project](#), a majority of LGBTQ young people reported being verbally harassed at school because people thought they were LGBTQ.
- A [2022 Qualtrics study](#) reported that sense of belonging is lower for students who participate in free or reduced price lunch programs (49% vs 58%).
- During the height of the pandemic, [only 35% of students from marginalized communities](#) reported knowing an adult at school who knew and cared about them as a person – a key element of school connectedness – compared to 50% of all high school students.

Educators and other youth-serving professionals have a special opportunity to encourage belonging and friendship through their classroom management styles, attitudes, and actions. When asked to think about the qualities of their best middle or high school teachers, the majority of students surveyed mentioned trustworthiness, enthusiasm, and caring in addition to teaching ability. When educators lead with empathy and kindness, students are likely to develop and practice these prosocial behaviors as well. The result is an environment where friendships and collaboration are encouraged, and everyone feels a sense of belonging.

To support educators in creating safe spaces where all students feel they belong, First Book worked with the LEGO Group and The Kids Mental Health Foundation to provide a suite of accessible, expert-informed strategies and content to build inclusive and empathetic learning environments.

Please think about the best middle school or high school teacher you ever had. In your opinion, what made them the best teacher? Select all that apply.

% Selected



Among Gen Z K-12 students

Source: [Gallup-Walton Family Foundation State of Students in America](#)

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GETTING TO KNOW YOUR STUDENTS & SHOWING YOU CARE

[The Search Institute](#) has identified several guiding principles to foster meaningful relationships with students, including **expressing care**, **challenging growth**, **providing support**, and **sharing power**.

Express Care: *Show me that I matter to you.*

Educators and other professionals working with youth can express care by being dependable, warm, encouraging, and curious about students' lives.

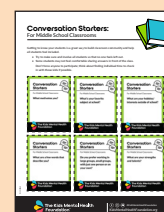


TRY THIS!

One way to show students you care about them as individuals is to **ask questions about their concerns, interests, and hobbies**, such as:

- What's your favorite/least favorite subject?
- What's your favorite activity/topic?
- What concerns do you have about the school year?
- What makes learning fun for you?
- What do you love about school?
- What can we do as a class to help you love school even more?
- What makes learning fun for you?
- What do you love about school?
- What can we do as a class to help you love school even more?

Download The Kids Mental Health Foundation's [Elementary School](#) and [Middle School](#) conversation starters for more questions to help you get to know your students.



Challenge Growth: *Push me to keep getting better.*

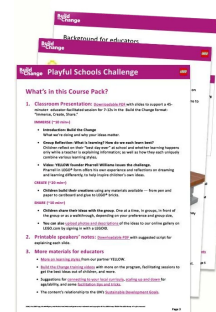
High expectations and appropriate levels of challenge increase motivation and encourage self-confidence and self-expression. Empower students by helping them follow their curiosity and propose solutions to real-world problems.



TRY THIS!

Teach students “growth mindset” and praise effort over outcome:

- Create a classroom culture where mistakes are normalized and part of the learning process.
- Verbalize to kids that you believe in them and see them as smart and capable.
- Offer choice where possible so students can feel a sense of control and motivation.
- Provide creative challenges to help students expand their abilities and vision. The LEGO Group’s [Playful Schools Challenge](#) asks students to dream big and design their perfect places to learn and play.



Provide Support: *Help me complete tasks and achieve goals.*

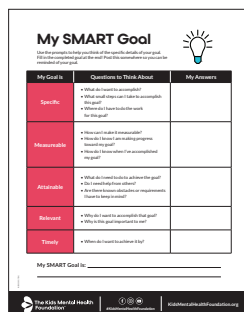
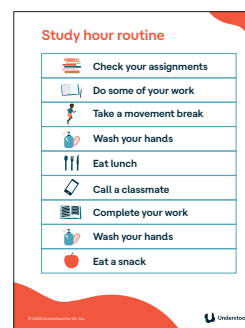
Most kids want to do their best in school and at home, but many need direct instruction about time management and goal setting.



TRY THIS!

Support caregivers in helping kids develop organizational skills for home and school.

Developing good habits around organization and time management can be fun with the right tools. [Understood.org](#) has [resources to help kids get organized](#) at home that can be shared with caregivers and students, including a visual study hour guide.



Support students in identifying and working toward goals.

Achieving goals improves mood and learning. The Kids Mental Health Foundation provides an introduction to [SMART goals](#), including a [downloadable worksheet](#) to help students create goals that are specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and timely.



Don't forget to celebrate their successes and progress!

Share Power: *Treat me with respect and give me a say.*

When students feel a sense of control over their learning outcomes, they feel respected and included. They are also more motivated to learn and make connections to their own lives and goals.



TRY THIS!

ESTABLISH CLASSROOM EXPECTATIONS

The beginning of the school year is the ideal time to discuss and establish classroom expectations. Use this simple exercise to share what you and your students produce.

1. Ask students to think about the kind of classroom and school year they would like:
 - What does it look like?
 - What does it sound like?
 - How does it make you feel?
 - What rules make sure everyone feels happy and welcome?
2. As students brainstorm answers, record their appropriate suggestions. Also ask about consequences for positive or inappropriate behavior if not addressed by school policy.
3. Refine their ideas as needed and record them on the [classroom expectations poster](#).

Classroom Expectations

Our classroom looks... 	Our classroom sounds like... 
Our classroom makes us feel... 	Our classroom has these rules... 



The Kids Mental Health Foundation

KidsMentalHealthFoundation.org



REVIEW CLASSROOM EXPECTATIONS

Check in with students and review expectations throughout the year. Continue the conversation using these Kids Mental Health Foundation conversation starters:

- If you had to make one rule for everyone in the world to follow, what would it be?
- What are some rules you have at home?
- What kinds of expectations do you have for me as your teacher?
- What is the hardest classroom rule to follow?
- What do you think would happen if our classroom had no rules? What does your morning routine look like before school? After school?
- What can we say or do to encourage classmates to meet our room's expectations?



TALKING ABOUT FRIENDSHIP

Forming relationships is a social-emotional milestone. Through healthy friendships, students develop their own identities and learn to accept and value differences.

Healthy developmental relationships reduce the likelihood of a variety of high-risk behaviors and increase:

- Academic growth and learning
- Social and emotional growth and learning
- A sense of personal responsibility

Source: [Developmental Relationships](#) | [Search Institute](#)

Despite the benefits of friendship, **one in five young people have no developmental friendship**, and 20% report having only one. Although friendship comes naturally to some children, many require explicit instruction.

As you read books that feature friendships or encounter the theme of friendship in lessons and activities, **share examples of what makes a good friend:**



- | | |
|-----------------|--|
| • Good listener | • Dependable |
| • Kind | • Trustworthy |
| • Supportive | • Fun to be around |
| • Inclusive | • Someone who shares similar interests |

It's equally important to **explain what qualities to avoid in oneself and others:**



- Lying
- Using offensive or hurtful language
- Engaging in bullying behaviors
- Making someone do things they don't want to do
- Putting down someone's interests and what they enjoy

Sources: [Encouraging Student Friendships](#) | [The Kids Mental Health Foundation & Friends in Activities, School-related Affect, and Academic Outcomes in Diverse Middle Schools](#) | [Journal of Youth and Adolescence](#)

Foundations of Friendships

DIVERSE FRIENDSHIPS

are relationships between people who differ in significant ways, such as cultural backgrounds, languages, abilities, beliefs, family structures, or personal experiences. These friendships help us learn to respect differences and recognize our shared humanity.

INCLUSIVE FRIENDSHIPS

develop in environments that are actively and intentionally designed to make everyone feel valued, accepted, and supported. Encouraging these relationships involves prioritizing mutual respect, empathy, and inclusion.

DEVELOPMENTAL FRIENDSHIPS

are relationships that contribute to personal growth and development by constructively challenging perspectives, beliefs, and behaviors. Developmental relationships are common in childhood and adolescence and encourage critical thinking, self-reflection, and emotional growth.

The Kids Mental Health Foundation recommends the following ways to promote friendships in classrooms and other learning environments:

- **Encourage icebreaker games to get to know each other.** One simple activity is to have students meet a classmate they don't know well. Provide suggested questions they can ask each other and then have them share with the class what they learned. See the [Friendship Bingo activity](#) for sample questions.
- **Designate a buddy bench.** Select a bench or specific area near the playground where new students – and others who want to make a new friend or play a different game – can find each other. Tell students that if they see someone sitting on the bench, they should welcome them to join an activity or suggest a new one. At the beginning of the school year and throughout as needed, role-play in class so students have the language to invite someone to join their game or to ask what activity a classmate would like to do.
- **Make your classroom more interactive.** Provide opportunities for students to get to know each other and build trust. Periodically, have class-wide conversations to help students learn things about each other that they otherwise wouldn't know. An informal game or discussion at the end of class may also help students build connections. A version of show and tell for older students could be asking them to bring in a photo from their lives outside of school and share why it's meaningful.
- **Talk about friendships.** Read books that feature friends and talk about what makes these friendships work. Shop the First Book Marketplace for [books featuring diverse families and friends](#) so students can see a range of healthy friendships and families, including ones in which they can see themselves.
- **Normalize conflict.** Find a few moments outside of structured teaching time to talk about how to handle conflict, particularly if you overhear students arguing. Let students know that it's possible to resolve conflict with patience, communication, and compromise. The Kids Mental Health Foundation offers [tips and best practices around conflict management](#).
- **Assign group activities.** When learning a concept or skill that could be enhanced through collaboration, break your class into small groups. Decide which students should work together instead of letting them pair up on their own. This is a great way to get students who have never interacted before to talk to each other.
- **Encourage extracurriculars.** Many students make connections in extracurricular clubs and teams. Survey students to gauge their interest in existing activities and identify ways to increase access and participation, such as highlighting a new club or helping students start a new one.

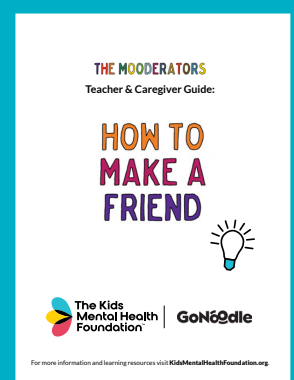


The Kids Mental Health Foundation and GoNoodle created a video and a friendship curriculum for classroom educators and other youth-serving professionals looking for fun, effective ways to foster friendships. The [friendship curriculum](#) will help you teach students to:

- Name techniques for making new friends.
- Define characteristics of a good friend.
- Explain strategies for conflict management.



Check out [page 8](#) for a Bingo activity to help kids find other students who share their interests.



CLASSROOM BINGO

Materials:

[Classroom Bingo board](#)



Before starting the game, share [How to Make a Friend](#), a fun video featuring GoNoodle's Mooderators!

Objectives:

- Give kids common interests and talking points to jump-start friendships
- Emphasize the many differences (and similarities) among classmates

CLASSROOM Bingo

HAS AN OLDER BROTHER OR SISTER	HAS A PET CAT	LIKES MATH	LOVES PLAYING GAMES	LOVES DRAWING
LOVES DANCING	HAS VISITED ANOTHER STATE	LIKES TAKING WALKS	LOVES READING	CAN DO A CARTWHEEL
FAVORITE FOOD IS PIZZA	HAS A UNIQUE PET		LOVES SWIMMING	HAS A PET DOG
LOVES CHOCOLATE	LOVES LISTENING TO MUSIC	LIKES WRITING	IS THE YOUNGEST SIBLING	LIKES SCIENCE
LOVES MOVIES	LOVES SUMMER	HAS A SUMMER BIRTHDAY	IS AN ONLY CHILD	PLAYS A SPORT

Cultural Humility & Friendships

Diverse and inclusive friendships – which naturally develop in supportive, strengths-based classrooms – benefit students academically and socially, enhancing engagement and belonging. These important developmental relationships offer a window into differing perspectives, traditions, and experiences and the opportunity to practice empathy and appreciation for differences.

Kindness is a key component of inclusive spaces and healthy relationships, but kindness alone cannot fix societal inequities or protect against implicit bias. Talk about justice, bias, discrimination, and prejudice, and how they affect your students and their communities.



TRY THIS!

Below are activities that help students develop cultural humility and reflect on other identity-related differences that can affect communication and friendships.

- **Cultural Show-and-Tell.** Every family has a culture! Most families in the US have multiple cultural backgrounds, with a variety of heirlooms, traditions, and foods. Plan an activity where students can share their traditions and backgrounds by bringing in cultural objects and sharing photos or stories. Discuss similarities and differences with an emphasis on celebrating diversity.
- **Multicultural Storytime.** Read books that feature diverse characters, authors, and settings and discuss the role of empathy and perspective-taking in finding common ground and bridging differences. See [First Book's recommendations](#) for books about diverse and inclusive friendships.
- **Global Pen Pals.** Partner with classrooms in other countries for letter or email exchanges to help students learn about other cultures through personal connections. [Epals](#) makes connecting easy for students and educators.
- **Global Stories.** [The Global Oneness Project](#) is an archive of free films, photography, essays, and lesson plans that aim to expand students' perspectives and worldviews.
- **Interactive World Map.** Create a classroom map where students can share their family origins, favorite travel destinations, or places they'd like to visit. Discuss the languages, foods, and traditions of those areas.
- **Observance Months.** Celebrate and honor diverse groups throughout the year. First Book's [School Year Calendar](#) includes themed months, religious observances, and dates with cultural or historical significance.
- **Critical Thinking.** Encourage students to analyze media and stories for cultural representation and stereotypes. See First Book's [Critical Thinking & Habits](#) series for tips and strategies.



Sources: [How Schools and Teachers Can Get Better at Cultural Competence - Education Next](#) & [How to Teach Cultural Competency | Edutopia](#)

Shop the First Book Marketplace

Inclusive and diverse friendships enrich the lives of all involved. These friendships also bridge gaps and help prevent bullying.

Books that feature friendships show up throughout literature — in mystery stories, funny stories, nonfiction, and in many picture books. To find inclusive friendships in children’s literature, be aware of the identities of children on the covers and look for books that are specifically about the interplay between cultures.

Often, the lunchroom is the setting for this kind of cross-cultural exploration. Books about team sports are sometimes just as much about coming together as a team despite differences as they are about kicking and catching balls. Here are a few favorite diverse friendships in children’s literature.

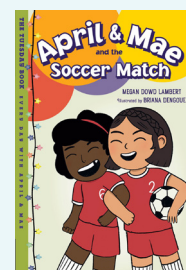
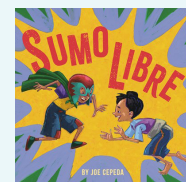
***First Day, Hooray! A Book of School Day Feelings* by June Sobel** is just one of many welcome-to-school books that feature a diverse gang of kids meeting for the first time. Great for setting expectations for kind and respectful behavior.

***Home in a Lunchbox* by Cherry Mo** sees young Jun, recently arrived from Hong Kong, feeling lonely at school. The only bright spot in her day is opening her lunchbox, lovingly packed by her mother. Her lunch serves as a starting point for making new friends.

***Sumo Libre* by Joe Cepeda** is an energetic mashup of lucha libre wrestling and sumo. After a nasty disagreement about the best form of wrestling, Max and Kenji develop a hybrid style that’s as much fun for them as it is for their spectators.

In the ***Amy Wu* series by Kat Zhang**, Amy has many opportunities to share her family’s Chinese traditions with her friends at school. Along the way, she learns that some traditions can be updated to reflect new friends and surroundings.

***Perfect Match: The Story of Althea Gibson and Angela Buxton* by Lori Dubbin** tells the true story of two tennis greats, both denied opportunities because of their identities. Their triumph as a doubles team makes for vivid storytelling.



These titles were available at the time of publication. We encourage you to check out the [Family & Friends section](#) for the most current offerings.

***Every Day with April and Mae* by Megan Dowd Lambert** is a beginning reader series featuring two friends who like different things but who work together so that they both have fun. Seven books of this charming series are available.

***The Abby in Orbit* series by Andrea J. Loney** is set in the space station where Abby and her family live. Abby’s friends are from all over the world, with varied talents and personalities. Their ordinary elementary school hijinks take on an added dimension when gravity can’t be taken for granted.



MODELING & TEACHING PROSOCIAL BEHAVIOR

Prosocial behavior includes sharing, comforting, cooperating, volunteering, showing empathy, and other behaviors that express care and community. When these behaviors are modeled and explicitly taught, there are multiple positive outcomes for educators and students.

Kids who know how to listen, share, cooperate, and follow directions are more likely to feel a sense of connectedness with others. Social skills don't guarantee a sense of belonging, but they ensure students know how to navigate differences and treat everyone with respect and compassion.

EMPATHY

Empathy, a key component of emotional intelligence, is both innate and teachable. Children as young as toddlers instinctively observe and feel others' emotions. As they grow and mature, they can develop and expand this ability by observing healthy emotional regulation in their caregivers and through explicit emotional literacy instruction.

Empathy is a superpower with many benefits:

- Higher levels of [emotional resilience](#), [self-esteem](#), and [life satisfaction](#)
- Enhanced [cognitive performance](#), [academic learning](#), and [grades](#)
- Greater [social connectedness and belonging](#)
- Stronger [interpersonal relationships](#) and [reduced prejudice](#)

Empathy can be directed both inward and outward and has affective, cognitive, and behavioral components:

- **Affective:** Being able to feel and respond to others' emotions
- **Cognitive:** Being able to understand others' perspectives and mental states
- **Behavioral:** Being able to react and respond in a sympathetic and prosocial manner

Empathy manifests in various ways depending on its focus and presentation. When directed inward, empathy can look like mindfulness, self-awareness, and self-care. When directed toward others, empathy can look like recognizing emotions in others, taking their perspective, and acting with kindness. When directed toward the greater community and world, empathy can look like being emotionally regulated and diplomatic, being intentionally inclusive, and collaborating.

Source: [Empathy Framework Brochure](#) | Empatico

Students may feel empathy without knowing how to express it. [Understood.org](https://www.understood.org) provides sentence starters to help students learn and practice the elements of empathetic conversations. Share these sentence starters as part of a discussion about the role of active listening and curiosity in relationships.

Sentence starters to speak with empathy

Empathy is a powerful tool that can help you better understand another person. Use these sentence starters to begin conversations with empathy.

1 GATHER INFORMATION

Make sure you know enough about the situation.



- Would/could you tell me a little more?
 - Can you tell me what you need right now?
 - Is there anything else you'd like to share?
 - Would you like my help in figuring this out?
-

2 CLARIFY UNDERSTANDING

Reflect back what you think you've heard.



- Let me see if I have this right....
 - I want to make sure I understand what you're telling me.
 - What I'm hearing is....
 - What I hear you saying is.... Is that right?
-

3 MODEL LISTENING

Show you're listening and paying attention to body language.



- Show you're listening and paying attention to body language.
 - It sounds to me like this might feel....
 - I can see that you are feeling [emotion].
 - I can hear how [emotion] you are feeling.
 - Your face is telling me that....
 - I can hear in your voice that....
-

4 AFFIRM FEELINGS

Acknowledge vulnerability and affirm that feelings aren't right or wrong.



- Thank you for sharing this with me.
- I understand you feel that way.
- That sounds like an [adjective] experience.
- I hear you.
- I'm not sure what to say right now, but I'm here to listen.

Source: [Understood.org](https://www.understood.org)

KINDNESS

Research shows that being kind to ourselves and others improves mental health, helps build friendships, increases well-being, reduces stress, and improves self-esteem. When practicing kindness is prioritized in learning environments, behavioral problems decrease and engagement and motivation increase.

The Kids Mental Health Foundation offers a [5 Day Kindness Challenge](#) your students can do at home or in class. You can do these throughout a week or month or pick and choose your favorites.



Day 1: Brighten Someone's Day

The best way to show kindness to someone else is by letting them know you care about them. Contact someone you care about!

Here are some ideas of what you can tell someone:

- Your favorite thing about them
- Something they have done for you that was nice
- A skill they have that you admire

Be specific and share an example or a memory that includes some details about what they've done that's meaningful to you.

Writing Prompts

- Things I enjoy about _____.
- My favorite thing about _____ is _____.
- I remember when they did _____.
- Something that makes me laugh is how they _____.
- I like how they make me feel _____ when they _____.
- I was really impressed when they _____.
- I couldn't believe it when they told me they once _____.
- I really like it when we spend time together doing _____.
- It's really fun when they _____.
- I miss their _____ when I don't get to see them for a while.



Day 2: Be Kind to Yourself

Being kind to ourselves is as important as being kind to others. Here are some ways your students can show themselves kindness today.

1. List the reasons they are awesome – the things they love about themselves or are proud of. Challenge them to make this a daily habit. It could be first thing in the morning or as a break from homework in the evening.
2. Teach students to take time to pause and notice their self-talk. Are they being too critical or mean to themselves? Would they talk this way to a friend? Suggest they write down some of those negative thoughts and come up with a positive way to reframe them.
3. It can be hard to focus on appreciating what we have. Challenge students to be mindful for at least five minutes by:
 - Thinking about three things or people they are grateful for and why
 - Noticing the sights or sounds around them
 - Taking deep breaths
 - Closing their eyes and imagining themselves in a relaxing place



Negative Self-Talk

Share some common types of negative self-talk to help students recognize if they have similar patterns...

“I’m late to school again. Why can’t I get up and get going?”

“I did so bad on that test. Math is just too hard for me.”

“I was picked last for the team in PE because no one likes me.”



Day 3: Complete at Least One Random Act of Kindness

An act of kindness can go a long way in making someone’s day. Share this list with your students and encourage them to try at least one of them:

1. Hold the door open for someone.
2. Do a chore that you normally don’t do.
3. Bring a trash bag on a walk and collect any trash that you come across.
4. Leave notes with positive phrases in your neighborhood or around your house.
5. Talk to someone in your class you don’t usually talk to.
6. Invite someone to play at recess or sit with you at lunch that you don’t hang out with very often.
7. Compliment someone in-person or on social media.
8. Send a drawing or letter to someone you care about.



Day 4: Volunteer or Help Someone!

Make time to volunteer somewhere in your community or help a friend, family member, or neighbor with a project they need help with. Students could help organize a coat drive, clean up trash around the school, or read stories to younger students.

Volunteering has been found to help with happiness and self-esteem!



Day 5: Pay It Forward

Your Challenge: Pay it Forward

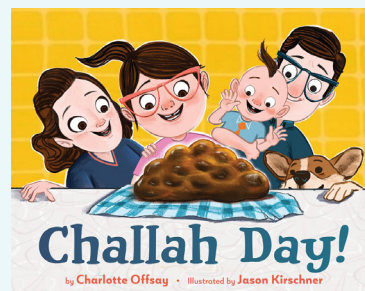
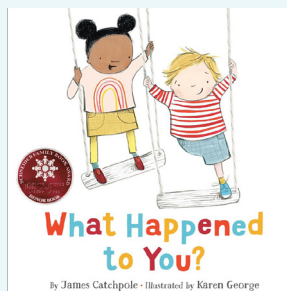
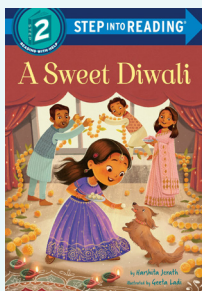
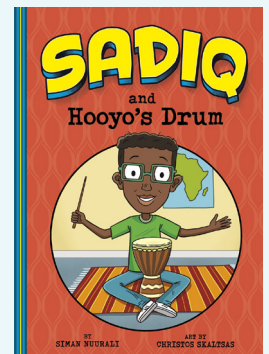
Being kind to others can set off a chain reaction of kindness. Look for opportunities to do something that may inspire others to be kind as well.

Source: [Practice Kindness](#) | The Kids Mental Health Foundation

When discussing kindness, compassion, and other positive qualities, remind students that kindness and good intentions cannot undo systemic inequities. Learn more about moving beyond kindness on [The Kids Mental Health Foundation website](#).

Shop the First Book Marketplace

Values and behaviors associated with empathy and kindness are learned through modeling and repetition. Books and stories help reinforce these qualities. Filter First Book's [Respect and Empathy](#) category by age level, book type, or language to home in on just-right books for your students. First Book's [Kindness and Compassion](#), [Gratitude](#), and [Self-Control](#) categories are great places to look for stories that address emotional regulation, kindness, and consideration.

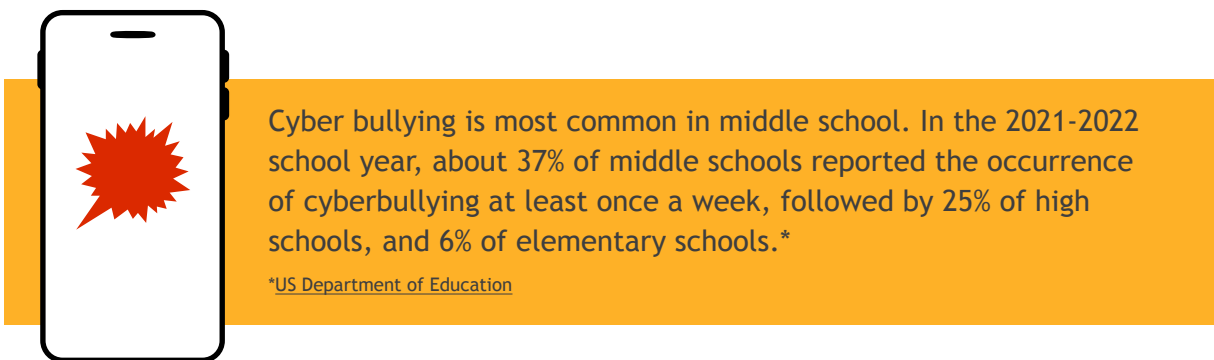


BULLYING

More than 70% of students have witnessed bullying in school*. Although the rate of bullying has decreased slightly in recent years, bullying and exclusion remain serious problems.

*Bullying Epidemic: Facts, Statistics and Prevention | Education Corner

Bullying can take several forms, including:



Recognize Signs of Bullying

Students who learn and think differently or who stand out for other reasons are more likely to be bullied. They may be reluctant to confide in an adult, and each child's response to bullying is different. Some signs of bullying include:

- Depression and anxiety, such as not wanting to go to school, becoming withdrawn, or being unusually emotional
- Physical symptoms such as stomachache, headache, fatigue, and unexplained pain
- Behavioral problems, including emotional outbursts, refusing to follow directions, and conflict with family and peers

Teach students how to recognize bullying and intervene to protect their classmates by explaining the role of upstander. An upstander is an ally who speaks and acts on behalf of someone being harassed, bullied, or discriminated against.

The Kids Mental Health Foundation recommends upstanders use the following strategies to prevent bullying:



BE KIND

It's hard for bullies to hide in environments that are overwhelmingly kind and inclusive, so encourage all students to be considerate. For example, if students notice a classmate is always left out of group activities or if someone is sitting alone at lunch, they could invite that student to join them for lunch or an activity.



STAND TOGETHER

Kids tend to be bullied when they are by themselves. Tell students that if they see someone being bullied, they should ask them to join their group or activity so they aren't alone.



TELL AN ADULT

Encourage students to accompany a student who was bullied when they tell an adult. If there are safety concerns, tell an adult right away even if the student who was targeted doesn't want to report it.



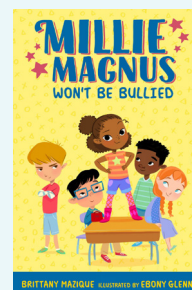
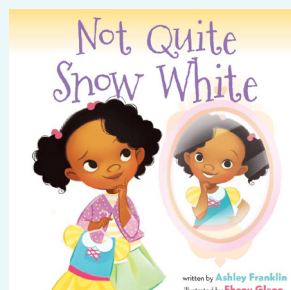
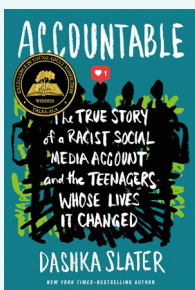
CONFRONT THE BULLY

Role-play assertiveness skills, such as speaking clearly, firmly, and directly so speaking up feels familiar. When students notice bullying or harassment, encourage them to speak up if they feel safe doing so: "Please stop. This is bullying and that's not okay."

Sources: Bullying Basics: What to Know, What to Do | The Kids Mental Health Foundation & 10 Ways to Combat Bullying | The Kids Mental Health Foundation

Shop the First Book Marketplace

Explore the [bullying section](#) on the First Book Marketplace for books that teach empathy and kindness and validate feelings and experiences.





MEETING THE NEEDS OF EVERY LEARNER

Students come to school with a range of needs, interests, strengths, and challenges. Differentiation in the classroom can be challenging, but it's the hallmark of inclusive teaching. Encourage students to advocate for themselves and explain what they need to learn and thrive.* Some students benefit from practicing transitions and new skills in a private or low-stress environment. Others may prefer advanced notice before being called on and/or the option not to answer.

Use the suggestions and strategies in the following sections to create an emotionally safe environment where students can explore their individual academic and social-emotional needs and preferences.

INCLUSIVE SPACES

When learning environments are intentionally designed to foster inclusivity and accessibility, all students are prepared and motivated to learn because they feel a sense of belonging and safety.

Below are tips for creating safe, calming spaces for socializing and learning. Most students will benefit from these small changes, and some students need these customizations for optimal learning and development.

- **Establish clear and consistent routines.** Establish routines at the beginning of the year and share schedules and procedures verbally, in writing, and, when possible, visually. Co-create plans to help students catch up after an absence and give advance notice of planned substitute teachers, changes in routine, or transitions.
- **Incorporate calming colors and decorations.** As much as possible, use neutral colors and avoid overly stimulating decorations.
- **Keep a predictable classroom layout.** Arrange furniture so students can move around the space easily; avoid frequent changes to increase familiarity and reduce anxiety.
- **Designate quiet spaces and calming corners.** Create areas where students can go to calm down or take a break if they feel overwhelmed. When possible, include soft furnishings, sensory tools, and calming activities.
- **Create collaborative spaces.** Arrange desks and tables so students can easily work alone or in groups.
- **Focus on feelings.** Check in frequently to see how students are feeling. Advocate for students who need support speaking up or making decisions and encourage students to use self-calming or anxiety-reducing techniques.

* Sometimes formal evaluations are required. The experts who provide these evaluations help students become aware of how they learn and think and give them the language to speak up for their needs and preferences.

LEARNING & PROCESSING DIFFERENCES

Students with diagnosed learning disabilities often have individualized education programs (IEPs) or 504 plans with personalized accommodations and modifications that are necessary for those students to receive fair and appropriate support. Many of these strategies benefit all learners, including those who may struggle with learning differences but have not yet been diagnosed.



Differentiate instruction and assessment.

Help all students reach their potential and demonstrate their knowledge by offering:

- Constructive feedback tailored to students' strengths and areas for growth
- Self-assessment so students understand what strategies work best for them (e.g., a heads-up that they will be called on or peer editing)
- Choice in assignments (e.g., presentations, essays, art projects)
- Scaffolding for individual learning needs (e.g., pre-teaching for background knowledge, sentence starters, and graphic organizers)



Incorporate different modalities.

Most students have several preferred learning styles that vary depending on the subject area and other factors. Support all learners by incorporating diverse modalities:

- Visual: charts, diagrams, infographics, videos, and color-coded materials
- Auditory: discussions, podcasts, read-aloud activities, and songs
- Kinesthetic: hands-on activities, experiments, role-playing, and manipulatives
- Reading/Writing: journaling, reading assignments, and writing exercises



Celebrate learning differences.

Students who learn differently often experience feelings of shame and inadequacy. To remove the stigma around learning and thinking differences, try these strategies:

- Incorporate learning style awareness activities that encourage self-reflection. Name and explain different learning styles. Do a station rotation with visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and reading/writing activities. Afterwards, have students discuss which they liked best and why.
- Highlight famous individuals with diverse learning approaches and how they succeeded.
- Use group work to facilitate peer-to-peer learning and expose students to different perspectives and learning styles.
- Offer constructive feedback tailored to the learner's strengths and areas for growth.

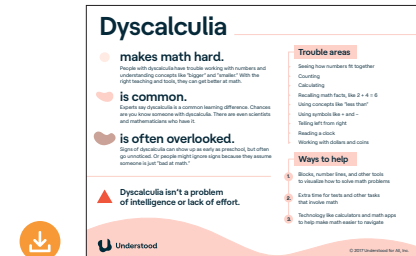
Understand & Celebrate Diverse Learning and Thinking Styles

[Understood.org](https://understood.org) is a resource hub for parents and educators seeking to understand and support the millions of students with learning and thinking differences. Their expert-informed, free resources provide clear definitions and actionable tips for parents and educators. Top resources for educators include:

Dyscalculia fact sheet

Support students with dyscalculia by:

1. Providing blocks, number lines, and other tools to visualize how to solve math problems
2. Allowing extra time for tests and other tasks that involve math
3. Using technology like calculators and math apps to help make math easier to navigate



What is dyslexia?

Support students with dyslexia by:

1. Providing highly structured literacy
2. Use multisensory learning approaches
3. Avoiding singling them out to read aloud



DIVERSE EDUCATIONAL CONTENT

In addition to creating an inclusive learning environment that acknowledges and values all learning and thinking styles, seek lessons and activities that weave empathy, diversity, and inclusivity into subject-area instruction. First Book recommends the following for K-12 classrooms and programs:

First Book | Build the Change Course Packs

Subjects: Climate change, sustainability, and the environment

Grades: 1-7

Overview: These course packs from the LEGO Group are designed to engage children around climate change, sustainability, and the environment. Inside each course pack you'll find engaging lesson plans, presentations, and printable materials available in English and Spanish.



Inclusivity & empathy: Each course pack asks students to consider our interconnectedness and how our actions affect other people, species, ecosystems, and the planet.

Suggested lesson: The [Designing Places for People Course Pack](#) challenges students to design parks, schools, museums, and train stations for a cast of imaginary characters, each with their own individual wants and needs.

Mathigon

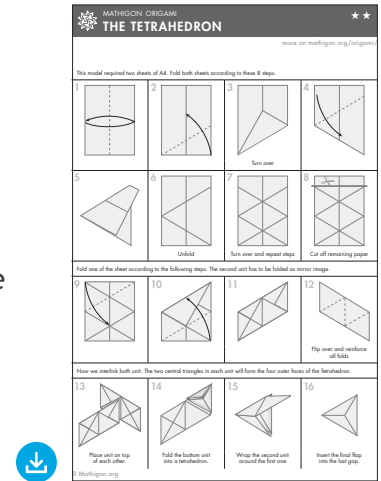
Subject: Math

Grade: 6-12

Overview: Mathigon has engaging real-world math lessons that often explore social justice topics, such as data analysis around income inequality or environmental issues.

Inclusivity & empathy: The site offers [accessibility features](#) and an interactive [timeline of mathematicians and artifacts](#) that had the greatest impact. Mathigon features the contributions of women and mathematicians of color.

Suggested lesson: This [culturally inclusive geometry lesson](#) uses the Japanese art of origami to teach about Euclid's five axioms.



Learning for Justice

Subject(s): Social studies, English, social-emotional learning & anti-bias education

Grades: K-12

Overview: Learning for Justice offers lessons that integrate social justice issues, helping students connect subject matter skills to real-world problems like income inequality, environmental justice, and community health.

Inclusivity & empathy: In addition to a wide range of topics and subjects (from STEM to civil rights and justice), the search function includes a social justice domain with these categories: identity, diversity, justice, and action.

Suggested lesson: [What is Empathy?](#) includes feeling faces that can be cut out and distributed to students as well as several scenarios to consider.

PBS Learning Media

Subjects: English, STEM, social studies & social-emotional learning

Grades: K-12

Overview: PBS Learning Media offers lesson plans and interactive activities that explore topics like climate change, health, and the environment. Many lessons emphasize empathy and ethical considerations in scientific research and innovation.



Inclusivity & empathy: PBS Learning Media includes resources that reflect diverse voices and perspectives. The platform also hosts a [Kindness, Empathy, and Resilience Hub](#) with lessons and videos.

Suggested lesson: [Developing Empathy through Retold Fairy Tales](#) asks students to watch a video that explores how a Native American saying – “walk a mile in someone else’s moccasins” – relates to the practice of empathy.

Overview: Created by the National Council of Teachers of English, ReadWriteThink offers lessons that cover topics like cultural diversity, personal narratives, and exploring different perspectives in literature. Every lesson plan on ReadWriteThink has been aligned to IRA/NCTE Standards for the English Language Arts, individual state standards, and Common Core State Standards.

Inclusivity & empathy: Lessons emphasize empathy and understanding through reading and writing activities that encourage engagement with diverse authors, texts, and genres. Activities often involve collaboration and reflection, activities that help students understand and respect different points of view.

Suggested lesson: [Inferring How and Why Characters Change](#) asks students to identify character traits and then evaluate how and why a character may have changed. Understanding characters' desires, feelings, thoughts, and beliefs is a fundamental aspect of appreciating fiction that helps students develop social-emotional skills applicable to the real world.

[Empatico](#)

Subjects: Art and music, digital literacy, environmental studies, literacy, social studies, STEM & wellness.

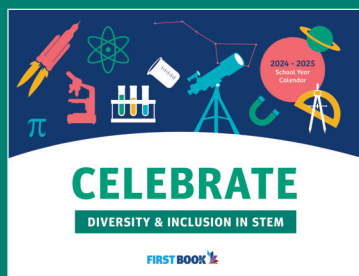
Grades: K-12

Overview: Empatico is a free online platform that provides daily practices, activities in English and Spanish, and virtual exchanges to promote empathy and cultural understanding. The Empathy Framework promotes three dimensions of students' empathy development: emotions, thoughts, and actions.



Inclusive & empathy: Through Framework-aligned activities and virtual exchanges, students practice empathy toward themselves and people in communities that are different from their own. Students engage in discussions, collaborative projects, and storytelling to broaden their perspectives.

Suggested lesson: [Empathy Truth-or-Dare!](#) includes printable “Empathy Truth-or-Dare” cards to help students learn about the three types of empathy (feeling, thinking, and acting) and build positive relationships with themselves and others.



[Download the 2024-2025 School Year Calendar!](#)

Embracing cultural diversity contributes to a learning environment where all members feel valued, respected, and connected. Use First Book's STEM-themed school calendar to celebrate the diverse scientists and inventors whose contributions have changed our world for the better. Themed months, religious observances, and dates with cultural or historical significance are also included.

Sources: [Classroom accommodations for anxiety | understood.org](#), [Classroom accommodations for ADHD | understood.org](#) & [How to Support Neurodivergent Students | Edutopia](#)

Empathy, kindness, and inclusivity are contagious, so pass it on! **Share this resource with other youth-serving professionals in your school community.** Together, we can work toward a more empathetic and inclusive future.

RESOURCES FOR CAREGIVERS

Share resources with caregivers about how they can support their children's mental health and social skills development.

The Kids Mental Health Foundation

[Mental Health Curriculums for Educators](#)

[Family Belonging Builder](#)

[Friendship Builders and Friendship Conversation Starters](#)

[Helping Kids Notice How They Are Feeling](#)

[The Mooderators: GoNoodle](#)

Understood

[6 ways to help your preschooler connect with other kids](#)

[What to do when your grade-schooler is lonely](#)

[How to help tweens and teens talk with friends about challenges](#)

[7 ways to help your kids build a strong relationship](#)

[Social anxiety and kids with learning and thinking differences](#)

[What to do when your tween or teen is lonely](#)

Informed by experts and extensive research, [First Book's Accelerator™ resources](#) save you time and offer actionable steps you can take today to support the kids and teens in your community.



Do you have feedback on any of our free resources?
[We want to hear about it!](#)



ABOUT THE KIDS MENTAL HEALTH FOUNDATION

The Kids Mental Health Foundation is the leading organization promoting mental health for children in the United States. To achieve its vision to build a world where mental health is a vital part of every child's upbringing, more than 1,000 mental health professionals and researchers at Nationwide Children's Hospital, in partnership with other trusted experts, provide real-world knowledge and expertise to power the Foundation's free educational videos, guides and curriculum. Launched in 2018 as The On Our Sleeves Movement for Children's Mental Health, the organization recently expanded its mission as The Kids Mental Health Foundation to reflect the belief that emotional and physical well-being should be treated the same. Learn more at KidsMentalHealthFoundation.org.



ABOUT FIRST BOOK

Education transforms lives. First Book is building a world where every child has access to a quality education. We work to remove barriers to education and level the playing field for kids in need. At the heart of our work are the more than 600,000 members of the First Book Network, the largest online community of individual educators, professionals and volunteers dedicated to supporting children in need across North America. This Network is the key to creating systemic change. Through our research arm, First Book Research & Insights, we conduct studies that aggregate their voices to identify barriers to equitable education and inform strategic solutions. To address their needs, we provide free and low-cost books, resources, and access to leading experts through the First Book Marketplace, which uses aggregated buying power to support this underserved community. Founded in Washington D.C. in 1992 as a nonprofit social enterprise, First Book is dedicated to eliminating barriers to learning and inspiring young minds. Learn more at firstbook.org and visit our award-winning eCommerce website at fbmarketplace.org.



SOURCES

[7 Ways to Help Your Students Make Friends | Understood.org](#)

[A Longitudinal Study of School Connectedness and Academic Outcomes Across Sixth Grade | ScienceDirect](#)

[Adolescent Connectedness and Adult Health Outcomes | Pediatrics | American Academy of Pediatrics](#)

[Encouraging Student Friendships | The Kids Mental Health Foundation](#)

[Friends Are Important: Tips for Parents | American Academy of Pediatrics](#)

[Helping Children Who Feel Like They Don't Fit In | The Kids Mental Health Foundation](#)

[New CDC Data Illuminate Youth Mental Health Threats During the COVID-19 Pandemic | CDC](#)

[Protecting Adolescents From Harm: Findings from the National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health | PubMed](#)

[School Connectedness and Valuing as Predictors of High School Completion and Postsecondary Attendance Among Latino Youth | ScienceDirect](#)

[School Connectedness for Students in Low-Income Urban High Schools | Teachers College Record](#)

[Strengthening School Connectedness to Increase Student Success | EdResearch for Action](#)

[The Intersection of Developmental Relationships, Equitable Environments, and SEL | Search Institute](#)

[The Role of School Connectedness in the Prevention of Youth Depression and Anxiety: A Systematic Review with Youth Consultation | BMC Public Health](#)

[Why Belonging Matters for Underrepresented Children | The Kids Mental Health Foundation](#)



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