

Beyond Differences Resource Guide

Beyond Differences is dedicated to ending **social isolation** among students in middle school. We believe that all teens should feel **included, valued and accepted** by their peers.

Our organization trains and **empowers teens to lead** the movement to create an inclusive middle school culture, and involves families, teachers and community leaders in support of their efforts.

Goals for this resource guide: This guide offers a way to give language to the conversation about social isolation, understanding the difficulty that students have in asking for help and admitting to feeling isolated. The suggested activities are designed to improve listening skills and promote inclusive dialogue and action. Students should be given the opportunity to talk about what really bugs them, and the knowledge that someone (besides their family) really is listening and cares. Students should feel they are the captains of their own ship.

Areas of focus cited by teens as issues they most want to talk about and know how to deal with:

- **Self-esteem** (liking and accepting oneself)
- **Feelings** (dealing constructively with loneliness, fear, etc.)
- **Attitudes** (developing positive views and understanding our role in controlling)
- **Friends** (building constructive relationships)
- **Family** (finding their place and voice)
- **School** (finding success)
- **Philosophy** (being true to a personal set of values)



**Beyond
differences**

Inspired by the life and memory
of Lili Rachel Smith.

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THE LANGUAGE OF SOCIAL ISOLATION

- **What It Is:**

- Involuntary exclusion/separation from peers
- Lack of a social group or community to engage or connect with
- Infrequent positive contacts

- **What It Isn't:**

- "Sometimes I just feel lonely"
- Self-imposed
- Periods of boredom

- **What Students Say:**

- "I feel like an outsider"
- "I feel invisible"
- "I just want to fit in"
- "I'm the only _____ kid at my school and it's lonely"

SIGNS OF SOCIAL ISOLATION

- **Ways Students Become Isolated:**

- Sticking up for a student being bullied
- Cyber-bullying
- Texting as a key way of interaction (Pew Research 2012)
- Being the new student
- Being "different"
- Relying on video games/Internet/technology to interact with others

- **Potential Signs of Isolation:**

- Students sitting alone or on the periphery of groups
- Appearing disengaged
- A described "loner"
- Student appearing lost or roaming
- Ignored by peers

WHAT TEACHERS CAN DO

- Create a safe, nurturing environment
- Identify school and community supports
- Model positive interactions
- Celebrate uniqueness and differences using real-world examples
- Interrupt negative talk or actions
- Practice and reinforce expectations
- Use cooperative structures in the classroom (see below)
 - Increase students' inter-social skills
 - Allow for safe risk-taking
 - Encourage student-to-student dialogue
 - Promote equity and shared accountability

SEVEN INCLUSIVE TEACHER PRACTICES

Foster the ability for students to move outside their comfort zones and advocate for others and themselves.

Penny for your thoughts: Each student gets one or two pennies. The students discuss an issue/question and can only talk if they put down one of their pennies. Once their pennies are gone, they can't talk any longer.

Do Now: What do you imagine the perfect middle school to be? What does it feel like to eat lunch alone? Have you even been given a label (called a name) by someone else, and how did that feel? What does it feel like when your best friend finds another best friend? How does it feel to hear kids talking about a party you weren't invited to?

Inside/Outside Circle: In concentric circles, students rotate to face new partner and then answer or discuss teacher questions.

Reflection: Pick questions or prompts for students to pair up and discuss with each other for five to 10 minutes. They can respond to a quote, a scenario, or an activity from the day. When they return to the group, they share with the other students what they learned or discussed.

Mix-Pair-Share: Class "mixes" until the teacher calls "pair." Students find a new partner to discuss the teacher's question.

Round Robin: In teams, kids take turns responding orally to a prompt. All students write each other's responses on their own paper.

Community Circle: A time for regular checks-in with students, both full-class and individually; promote affirmations and "I-statements" (see below).

SEVEN GUIDED TEACHER ACTIVITIES

Foster an inclusive environment, and provide students the language to prevent or interrupt bullying and isolating others.

1. ICE-BREAKERS

- **Friendship Scavenger Hunt**
 - Fun for both adults and kids
 - Each participant is armed with a piece of paper with 15-20 items (for example: find someone who shares your favorite food, or for older adults, someone who grew up in your part of the country)
 - Gives the group time to mingle and share some laughs
 - Points out similarities more than differences
- **My name is and I like to...**
 - First participant says his/her name and something he/she enjoys doing
 - Next person says what the previous person said, and adds what he/she likes to do
 - Continue around the group, promoting good listening skills while learning about other participants
- **Partner Interviews**
 - Precede activity by modeling good vs. bad listening skills
 - For a fun add-on: have kids “teach” adults how to be good listeners
- **Affirmations/anonymous pats on the back**
 - The practice of giving and receiving compliments
 - Giving time for reflection and observation
 - Critical self-examination of the importance of “real” vs. “cheesy”
 - Can be done publicly, or on paper
- **Spin A Web (Everyone Is Unique)**
 - Unique = another word for different... What do you think about when you hear the word different?
 - Leader takes a ball of yarn and starts by saying something unique or special about themselves, then grabbing one end of the ball and throwing to someone else in the circle
 - Next person says something unique about themselves and throws to the next person... and so on, until everyone is holding a part and it looks like a web
 - Ask group, “What did we make?” Discuss how through the web we are all connected
 - Can be repeated later on to reflect changes/growth/continued connections

IMPROV ACTIVITIES

- **Counting**

- Everyone stands in a circle and hits a ball into the air
- Goal: for group to be able to hit the ball in excess of 20 times without breaking any of the rules
- The rules are:
 - (1) The ball must not touch the ground,
 - (2) No one may hit the ball sequentially
 - (3) Everyone must count out loud each time the ball is hit

- **You, You, You:**

- Group stands in a circle. One person points to someone else in the circle and says, "You." That person points to someone else and says, "You."
- This continues until everyone has someone pointing at them. Then the group repeats that order. Then they do it a third time without pointing.
- Someone starts a new cycle, pointing at a person in the circle and naming a candy.
- This continues until everyone in the circle has someone pointing at them. Then the group repeats that order. Then they do it a third time without pointing.
- Then the group combines the two orders (You and Candy) and tries to go through both cycles at the same time without letting the impulse drop. If they can do this successfully, add a third round of colors.

- **Knights, Guards, Foot Soldiers**

- Group walks around in an open area.
- When they have stopped talking, touching, or sticking close to those they feel most comfortable with, the leader yells one of the following: "Knights;" "Guards;" Or "Foot Soldiers."
- Group must get into those very specific positions (see below). The last pair to do so is out of this round.
- "Knights" – one person jumps on the back of another person with one arm up in the air
- "Guards" – two people are back to back with their arms linked
- "Foot Soldiers" – one person is laying on the ground while the other places a foot gently on their leg.



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2. CREATE COMMUNITY AGREEMENTS

Hear No, Speak No, See No...

As a community, it is always important to support our members. Sharing agreements helps us to do this.

When we hear hurtful language:

We will speak up if we see someone being mean to someone else:

"We'll say _____."

When we see hurtful acts:

We'll volunteer solutions - for example: invite student to sit w/ our group at lunch, invite student to walk with our group:

"We'll do _____ (invite, include, etc.) so that _____."

When we speak:

We will use positive and supportive words to show that we care about our community:

I _____ when you _____! That's _____ (great, fabulous, awesome, etc.)!

Overall, we will always strive to show:

What if it were you? How do you want to be treated?

"We'll be _____ (kind, generous, polite, etc.)."

3. SCENARIOS

Teachers review a scenario or incident where a student is excluded (may have students role-play). This may also include a video clip from popular teen shows like "Gossip Girl" or "Glee" showing students being excluded.

Teacher breaks students into pairs or trios and asks students to talk about the questions below. The students use —"chalk talk" (which means noting down their responses on butcher paper) so that all students can walk, see, and respond. Students should be prepared to share-out their partner's responses.

Guided prompts (modeled after restorative practices):

1. What happened?
2. What were you thinking?
3. What do you think needs to happen (to make the situation right)?
4. How do you think _____ felt isolating _____?
5. If an agreement or action could be made so that the student isn't isolated again, what should it contain? (Example: I'll make a point of inviting everyone to participate; next time I pick a partner, I'll pick _____).
6. Is there anyone else that needs to help support the agreement or action (name of a teacher, other students, and parents)?

4. READING CARDS

Teacher provides a reading related to social isolation. Students are asked to read the article in teacher-assigned groups. Teacher provides numbered heads, counting off students (one to six) so that students are prepared to answer questions as teacher randomly calls on a number, one through six by group.

For each group, teacher provides reading cards face down. Students pull a card, read the question, and share their response with their team. Students may work with a partner to review the question and connect it back to the reading. The levels of questions vary based on Bloom's Taxonomy so that the teacher may assign questions to specific students, based on ability.

Once students have read and answered their questions with their small group, the teacher calls on a number to have the student share what their partner's response was to the question. The teacher is intentional about calling on all groups so that a variety of students are heard.

Reading Card Prompts:

1. What is the author's message to the reader?
2. How would you summarize the reading?
3. Is there anything that you found confusing?
4. What is the main point described?
5. How will you apply what you learned to your life?
6. What emotions did you feel? Why?
7. List facts that you recall from the reading.
8. In creating an inclusive community, what do you believe is important to its success?
9. What events led to _____ feeling isolated?
10. How does this story help us learn about being empathetic?
11. What would you tell _____ to do differently? Why?

5. APATHY, SYMPATHY, EMPATHY CONTINUUM

Share an empathy narrative. For example: at the close of the Civil War, when many in the North felt passionate hatred for Southerners and wanted to impose a punitive peace, Abraham Lincoln tried to serve the whole country "with malice towards none, with charity for all." How he avoided the vindictive spirit so common in the North may be found in his statement to a friend: "I have not suffered *by* the South," he said. "I have suffered *with* the South. Their pain has been my pain. Their loss has been my loss." This is empathy.

The word empathy comes from a translation of the word used by German psychologists, *einfuhlung*, which literally means "feeling into." So the empathetic person sees through the eyes of others, crawls into another's skin and sees without judgment, and hears the story from the perspective of the story teller.

- For adults, a quick self-reflection on how they might respond to certain situations and where their response would fall on the continuum, also serves as a reminder of how much no one really wants sympathy
- For kids, this is a critical part of the "feeling vocabulary" that they need, and it is the job of adults to model what we expect

6. SELF-ESTEEM ACTIVITIES

- **I.A.L.A.C. (I Am Loving and Capable)**

- Based on the age-old story of a kid having one bad day and how the "small" particulars and bits of the day can wreak havoc – tearing, splinting, and occasionally building on how they feel about themselves
- One student reads a real story about one of those days, with a big piece of paper with IALAC written on it
- A partner rips and tears the paper, and tries to piece back the "self" – but the damage is still done, even if you say sorry to it
- Lesson to think before you speak/act

- **Self Talk**

A hand-out breaking down the three options we can take after experiencing bitter exchange or rejection. We consider choices and the result of those choices on ourselves.

Incident: _____

Things a person might say that would indicate disappointment but not lower self-esteem:

Things a person might say that would case him/her to lower self-esteem:

Helpful things a person might say to her/himself: _____

7. LUNCH TIME TALK

- Sitting and mingling with students
- Lunch time tutoring/classroom events
- Having homework or extra-credit activities for lunch
- Sponsoring a Beyond Differences Club or "No One Eats Alone" program at your school