

Building Empathy

As students prepare for A Week of Service Learning, the teacher can lead them through a variety of exercises in order to help them develop empathy for the people they will be serving. Empathy is defined by Merriam-Webster as “the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another of either the past or present, without having the feelings, thoughts, and experience fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner.” Empathy exercises allow the students to see proposed service from the perspective of the recipient, rather than the provider. The goal of an empathy exercise is to “put oneself in someone else’s shoes.” As these empathy exercises are introduced and conducted, lead the students in a discussion about their thoughts and feelings. Help facilitate the students’ ability to transform their thoughts and feelings into a recipient’s thoughts and feelings about the service. Empathy exercises also promote a better understanding of diversity and mutual respect among all participants in service-learning projects, which is one of the eight K-12 Standards of Service-Learning Practice (Diversity). Empathy exercises are the most useful when students are engaged in direct service rather than indirect service or advocacy. However, if students prefer indirect service learning and advocacy engagement, benefits can still be gained from similar activities designed to elicit awareness of diverse perspectives and points of view.

The following are examples of exercises that may help increase student empathy for various recipients of service-learning projects.

Elderly

- Spread a thin coat of petroleum jelly on a pair of glasses, and have students try to thread a needle. This simulates how an individual with cataracts or glaucoma might view the world. (An alternative activity would be to make plastic wrap blind-folds by using a length of plastic wrap large enough to tie around the students’ eyes. Fold the plastic wrap in half horizontally, and then in half again. Have students write a check for their utility bill.) Lead students to discuss the dangers for an elderly individual to drive, prepare meals, or read important papers when cataracts or glaucoma are present.
- Have students wear earmuffs and try to follow three step directions spoken at a normal tone. Discuss how hearing impairment can affect our ability to listen and follow directions. (An alternative way to simulate impaired hearing is to give each student one cotton ball. Instruct students to pull the cotton ball in half and place half a cotton ball in each ear). Teach the day’s lesson, and have students discuss their frustrations. Lead students to discuss the dangers for an elderly individual with a hearing impairment when receiving doctor’s instructions or medication instructions from the pharmacist.
- Put marbles in the fingers of gloves and then try to button a shirt while wearing the gloves. Lead students to discuss how an individual with arthritis might have the same difficulty and how that individual might feel when their independence is threatened by the lack of mobility and self-help skills.
- Have a student volunteer hold a purse, umbrella, and sack of groceries while trying to open a heavy door. Lead students to discuss the difficulty with balance and control when an individual must hold an additional item, such as a cane or walker. Have students point out safety issues for an elderly individual if they are living alone and trying to open outside doors while balancing bundles or packages.

- Rename each student in the classroom, and then have student volunteers try to repeat the new names for everyone in the class. Lead students to discuss the frustrations an individual with dementia or Alzheimer's disease might have when trying to remember important things or family members.
- Read and discuss stories about the elderly. Some suggested readings are *Somebody Loves You Mr. Hatch* by Eileen Spinelli; *Mrs. Katz and Tush* by Patricia Polacco; *Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge* by Mem Fox; *Little Mama Forgets* by Robin Cruise; *The Old Woman Who Named Things* by Cynthia Rylant; and *The Hello, Goodbye Window* by Norton Juster.

Hunger and Homelessness

- Instruct students to carry all of their school possessions (books, paper, writing utensils, folders, etc.) in a brown paper sack for an entire school day. Inform students that they cannot use their locker or leave their sacks in any room or it might be stolen by another individual. Lead students to discuss any frustrations or embarrassment from having possessions in a brown paper sack and the fear of someone taking or stealing the possessions. The activity can be enhanced by actually hiding a student's sack in your room if the sack were left unattended.
- Have students visit or work in a local food bank, food pantry, or soup kitchen for one day. Lead students to discuss their thoughts and feelings about the experience. Have students outline the mixed emotions individuals might experience when using the food bank or pantry to feed children in the home.
- On a cold day, turn off the heat in the classroom and set up several box fans blowing cold air. As students begin to complain about the cold, have them select one of the blankets provided in order to keep them warm as they work. Lead students to discuss how cold weather may affect the homeless and her/his frustrations and fears about being in the cold. Have a student volunteer chart how long each student "weathered" the cold before asking for assistance.
- Have students read and discuss stories about hunger and homelessness. Suggested readings: *The Can-Do Thanksgiving* by Marion Hess Pomeranc; *Fly Away Home* by Eve Bunting; *Potato: A Tale from the Great Depression* by Kate Lied; and *The Teddy Bear* by David McPhail. Lead students to discuss frustrations and fears exhibited by the characters.
- Show students selected clips from the movie *The Pursuit of Happiness* with Will Smith. Lead students to discuss the frustrations, fears, and worries of the father and the son during their homeless time. Have students describe the emotional roller coaster the father experienced.

Bullying

- Have students create a visual depicting the types of bullying they may have experienced or in which they may have participated. Lead students to discuss the emotions and feelings expressed and how those emotions and feelings are similar whether the individual is the bully or the one being bullied.
- Have students listen to music related to bullying, such as *Don't Laugh at Me* by Mark Wills. Lead students to discuss the various types of bullying described and how the bullying manifests from children through adults. A video of Mark Wills singing *Don't Laugh at Me* can be found on the Web site YouTube <www.youtube.com/watch?v=FVjbo8dW9c8>.
- Have students work as a team to create a *Bully Watch* group. Instruct students to record during a week's time the types of bullying observed and the number of instances for each



type of bullying. Instruct students to role play some of the instances of bullying and discuss their feelings. Then have students role play the same scenario but switching roles so that the individual being bullied in the original role play now becomes the bully. Have students compare the emotions and feelings of the two roles.

- Have students read and discuss stories about bullying and social injustice. Some suggested readings are *Mr. Peabody's Apples* by Madonna; *If A Bus Could Talk: The Story of Rosa Parks* by Faith Ringgold; *Don't Laugh at Me* by Steve Seskin and Allen Shamblin; *Hey, Little Ant* by Phillip and Hannah Hoose; *Nobody Knew What to Do: A Story About Bullying* by Becky Ray McCain; and *The Sissy Duckling* by Harvey Fierstein.

Literacy

- Distribute the teaching aid **Literacy Activity**. Instruct students to work in pairs to complete the activity. Lead students to discuss their frustrations at not being able to read the unfamiliar words and answer the questions on the activity. A **Literacy Activity Key** is provided.
- Read the recommended dosage and restrictions from a children's medicine bottle or box. Have students create a picture label of the medication for parents who are unable to read the written dosage and restrictions. Instruct students to share labels. Lead students to discuss the fears a parent, who is unable to read the medication label, might have when there is a sick child in the home.
- Locate one or several typewriters in the school storeroom or from other sources. Have students prepare an essay about the benefits of being able to read using only the typewriter and an eraser. Inform students that the essay must be grammatically perfect with no errors. Lead students to discuss the difficulties of using unfamiliar technology and the frustration and embarrassment that may occur as a result of inadequate technology skills. Point out to students that an older individual could possibly word process on a typewriter as fast or faster than a young, technologically advanced individual could word process on a computer.
- Have students read and discuss stories about individuals struggling with literacy. Some suggested readings are *Doing Time Online* by Jan Siebold (Can also be used for an elderly empathy reading); *Once Upon a Time* by Niki Daly; *Read for Me, Mama* by Vashanti Rahaman; and *Thank you, Mr. Falker* by Patricia Polacco.