



# ENCOURAGING PROSOCIAL ACTIONS IN STUDENTS

*"Do things for people not because of who they are or what they do in return, but because of who you are."*

*—Harold S. Kushner*

## OVERVIEW

Students watch videos on prosocial (kind, helpful) action, complete self-reflection activities, and plan and record their prosocial acts over ten consecutive days. They finish with a reflection on the impact of their actions.

## PLANNING FOR IT

### WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- Anytime during the year
- To cultivate a positive classroom and/or school community
- To help students see the value and benefits of kindness
- As a science experiment in a psychology or sociology class
- As part of a class or advisory period that focuses on student wellness and personal development

### TIME REQUIRED

*Note: The entire project takes 11 days*

- Part 1: Introduction - 30 minutes
- Part 2: Reflection activities -- Homework or 45-60 minutes
- Part 3: Prosocial Planning -- 10-15 minutes
- Part 4: Closing Reflection -- Homework or 45-60 minutes

### LEVEL

- Middle School
- High School

- College

## MATERIALS

Part 1: Introduction:

- TV or projector/screen and internet access to show two videos
- Video #1: [Prosocial Project Introduction](#)
- Video #2: [NCAA Softball Player Carried by Opponents After Injury](#)

Part 2: Reflection activities:

- [Identity Warm-up Handout](#) (1 per student)
- [Value Identification Handout](#) (1 per student)
- [Best Possible Self Handout](#) (1 per student)

Part 3: Prosocial Planning

- [Prosocial Planning Handout](#) (1 per student)
- [Prosocial Behavior Log Handout](#) (1 per student)

Part 4: Final Reflection

- [Final Reflection Handout](#) (1 per student)

## LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will:

- Understand the definition of prosocial behavior
- Reflect on what's important to them, their values, and the kind of person they want to be in five years
- Practice making kind acts intentional
- Reflect on the impact of kindness on themselves and others

## ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)
- [Adapting Practices for Students with Special Needs](#)
- [Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered](#)

## SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-Awareness
- Social Awareness
- Relationship Skills
- Responsible Decision-Making

## HOW TO DO IT

### REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- If you have the time, complete the three handouts on your identity, values, and best possible self. Did anything surprise you?
- Before beginning the school day, jot down one or two acts of kindness you would like to do for others.
- At the end of the day, reflect on the impact those acts of kindness had on you and those who received your kindness. Did those acts reflect your values and the kind of person you want to be? How might you plan to incorporate more kind actions into your daily life?

### INSTRUCTIONS

#### PART 1: INTRODUCTION

- Ask students:
  - *Do you think it's possible to make a difference in other people's lives? Why or why not?*
  - *How do you think an act of kindness might affect the person receiving the kindness?*
  - *Is it hard to be kind or to do kind acts for others? Why or why not?*
- Next, ask students what they think "prosocial behavior" means.
  - After taking several responses, tell them that it's the term that scientists use for "voluntary actions aimed at advancing the welfare of other people." In other words, it's when a person offers some form of help or kindness to someone else because they care about their well-being.
- Ask students:
  - *What are some examples of prosocial behavior that you've seen or done yourself?*
  - *What does it feel like to be on the receiving end of kindness?*
  - *What does it feel like to be the one offering kindness?*
  - *Is it possible to increase the kindness we offer to others? In other words, is the amount of kindness a person shows fixed, or can it change? Why or why not?*
- Explain to students that over the next ten days, they will test whether it's possible to increase our kind behavior using a method from an actual research study.
- Show students Video #1: [Prosocial Project Introduction](#).
  - After watching the video, ask them if anything surprised them about the benefits of prosocial behavior for the person who acts prosocially. Why or why not?
- Before showing students Video #2: [NCAA Softball Player Carried by Opponents After Injury](#), ask them to notice if they have any kind of physical or emotional reaction to what they see. Then show the video.
  - After watching the video, ask students to share any physical or emotional reaction they felt.
  - If anyone felt warm and uplifted watching the video, you might mention that this is what scientists call "elevation." The experience of elevation can often increase our desire to act prosocially.

#### PART 2: REFLECTION ACTIVITIES

*Note: These can be done in class or as homework to allow students ample time for reflection.*

- Explain to students that they are going to be completing three reflections on what's important to them, their values, and the kind of person they want to be.
  - Assure them that there are no right or wrong answers, and that they should answer the questions as honestly as possible.
  - Let them know that they won't be sharing their responses with other students or with you. If assigning these handouts as homework, you might tell students that you just need to check that they completed them.
- Give students the three handouts:
  - [Identity Warm-up Handout](#)
  - [Value Identification Handout](#)
  - [Best Possible Self Handout](#)
- If completing these handouts in class, you might ask students to discuss afterwards as a class:
  - *How did it feel to complete these exercises?*
  - *Did anything surprise you?*
  - *Was anything clarified about who you are or want to be?*

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### PART 3: PROSOCIAL PLANNING

*Note: The Part 2 activities are designed to inspire students to want to behave prosocially and to be thinking about meaningful content, e.g., their core values, their most important relationships, which would then direct their plans for helping others. **Therefore, it would be ideal to complete Part 3 as soon as possible after Part 2.***

- Give each student a [Prosocial Planning Handout](#) and a [Prosocial Behavior Log Handout](#).
- Review the items on the Prosocial Planning Handout. Ask students if they can think of things to add.
- Explain to students that for the next ten days, they are going to make a plan each day for how they can be helpful to others. Then, at the end of each day, they are to use the Prosocial Behavior Log to record what they actually did, their reaction to their actions, and the impact of their actions on others.
- Let students know that to get the most out of this exercise, it's very important that they do this each day rather than try to remember what they did if they forget to fill in the log--our memories aren't always accurate.

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### PART 4: FINAL REFLECTION

*Note: This can be done as homework.*

- After students track their behaviors for ten days, give each of them a [Final Reflection Handout](#). Ask them to complete it in class or as homework. They will need to refer to their answers on the Identity Warm-up Handout, Value Identification Handout, and Best Possible Self Handout in order to complete this reflection.

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### CLOSURE

- When students have finished their final reflection, lead a discussion with the whole class:
  - *What is your overall response to this exercise?*
  - *Returning to the questions from Part 1, have any of your answers changed?*
    - *Do you think it's possible to make a difference in other people's lives? Why or why not?*

- *Do you think being kind to others makes an impact on the person receiving the kindness? Why or why not?*
- *Is it hard to be kind or to do kind acts for others? Why or why not?*
- *Did you notice a difference in yourself after intentionally doing kind acts for ten days? If so, what kinds of differences, e.g., physical, mental, emotional, relational, etc.?*
- *Are you encouraged to continue to be kind to others? Why or why not?*
- *Do you think this exercise is effective in cultivating people's capacity for kindness? Why or why not? Is there anything you would change?*

## EXTENSION

- Most of the benefits of helping others result from ongoing efforts rather than any single act of kindness. Encourage students to continue their prosocial acts by creating a reminder in the classroom or by checking in with them once in awhile to discuss their helping behaviors. For example, you could occasionally ask students if they observed any acts of kindness lately and what they noticed about them.

## REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

Do you notice students being kinder to others after this exercise? Has the quality of the classroom or school climate changed as a result of this exercise?

## THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

### EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

A [study](#) of 116 high school and college students, mainly Hispanic (52%) and female (77%), found that those who engaged in the intervention described here reported higher levels of prosocial behavior, empathy, and prosocial identity (i.e., seeing oneself as a caring, helpful person) when compared to a control group. They were more likely to behave prosocially one month after the intervention, as well, and reported that prosocial actions had become a habit for them.

The intervention also changed beliefs about prosocial behavior. Students reported that they realized they were capable of making a difference, that their actions actually made an impact on people's lives, and that it was not difficult to extend kindness.

Finally, those who participated in the 10-day experience reported more positive emotions and increased self-worth, both of which may encourage future prosocial behavior.

### WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Studies show that kindness can [benefit students](#) by increasing their well-being and peer acceptance, both of which lead to greater academic achievement, a stronger sense of belonging, and better relationships with peers and teachers.

In addition, encouraging students to be kind to each other has a [ripple effect](#) that can spread throughout the school, improving school relationships among all stakeholders, leading to a more positive school climate.

And forming a habit of kindness early in life will benefit students in the long-run. Studies suggest that people who engage in prosocial behavior enjoy greater [physical](#) and [emotional well-being](#), have a stronger [sense of meaning](#) in their lives, and are [more satisfied with life](#) overall.

## SOURCE

Baumsteiger, R. (2019). What the world needs now: An intervention for promoting prosocial behavior. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 41(4), 215-229.