



# Greater Good in Education

SCIENCE-BASED PRACTICES FOR KINDER, HAPPIER SCHOOLS

## INSPIRING STUDENTS TO HELP

*"You have not lived today until you have done something for someone who can never repay you."*

—John Bunyan

### OVERVIEW

Use language that resonates with students' experiences of helping to spark their motivation to keep helping even after setbacks.

### PLANNING FOR IT

#### WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- To encourage students to continue practicing kindness even when they experience setbacks
- To cultivate a more positive class environment
- Any time of the year

#### TIME REQUIRED

- ≤15 minutes

#### LEVEL

- PreK/Lower Elementary

#### MATERIALS

- N/A

#### LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Teachers will:

- Examine the classroom environment for opportunities to use language that encourages moral character

Students will:

- Be encouraged to view helping as something that they choose even when difficult

#### ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)

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

#### CHARACTER STRENGTHS

- Kindness
- Courage
- Consideration

#### SEL COMPETENCIES

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

#### MINDFULNESS COMPONENTS

- Open Awareness
- Non-Judgment

### HOW TO DO IT

#### REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

Reflect on a time when you tried to help and failed at it.

- What was the experience like?
- How did it make you feel and why?
- What encouraged you to keep trying to help others?

#### INSTRUCTIONS

Children begin to voluntarily help others [early on in life](#)—even before they can say their first words. The way you talk to your students can kindle their capacity to be helpful.

- The [typical advice](#) is to invite children “to be a helper.” But you might choose to use different language depending on your students’ past experiences and how big of a challenge they face.
- Students who have faced prior failures or setbacks when trying to help might be reluctant to try again if they’re not sure they’ll succeed. In these circumstances, you can inspire them to persist by talking to them about choosing “to help” rather than “to be a helper.”
- For example, rather than saying, “Some students choose **to be a helper**” or “You could **be a helper** when someone needs to pick things up,” try saying something like this: “You could **help** when someone has a job to do” or “You could choose **to help** when someone needs help.”

#### REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- Have you noticed a difference in your students' helping behavior?
- Are there other ways that small shifts in language could be more or less encouraging for students? (This might be with regards to engaging in helping behavior or in other areas.)

## THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

### EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

In a study, a diverse group of [children](#) between four and five years old were randomly assigned to hear researchers talk to them about helpfulness using “to help” language or “to be a helper” language. Next, the researchers surreptitiously rigged the children’s experiences with helping so that they failed in their attempts (for example, when children tried to put away a box of toys, the contents fell out because the bottom was loose). Then, the children had three more opportunities for helping without being explicitly asked, some of which were designed to be a little hard. While children in the “to help” group persisted in helping regardless of how difficult the scenarios were, children in the “to be a helper” group helped less when faced with more difficult scenarios.

### WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Students can experience failure and mistakes when helping in their daily lives, like when they try to help pick up the art supplies the class just used and accidentally drop the color pencils on the floor, or when they try to help explain the content of the class to another student and end up causing a distraction in class. They can be sensitive when they fall short of their intentions and can interpret their shortcomings as suggesting that they don’t have what it takes “to be a helper.” They can identify as a “bad helper” or even a “non-helper” and be averse to trying again.

Inviting them simply “to help” might help them overcome these misgivings and persist at kind, helpful behavior.

By trying to help others, your students can build up their positive interactions and strengthen their social connections. School-age children who [engage in kind acts](#) are more well-liked by their peers and have improved well-being. The [benefits](#) of kindness are even seen as early as toddlerhood—young children are happier when giving to others than when receiving.

### SOURCE

Aknin, L.B., Hamlin, J.K., Dunn, E.W. (2012). [Giving Leads to Happiness in Young Children](#). PLoS ONE, 7(6): e39211.

Foster-Hanson, E., Cimpian, A., Leshin, R. A., & Rhodes, M. (2020). [Asking children to “be helpers” can backfire after setbacks](#). Child Development, 91(1), 236-248.

Layous K., Nelson, S.K., Oberle, E., Schonert-Reichl, K.A., Lyubomirsky, S. (2012). [Kindness Counts: Prompting Prosocial Behavior in Preadolescents Boosts Peer Acceptance and Well-Being](#). PLoS ONE, 7(12): e51380.

Warneken, F., Tomasello, M. (2006). [Altruistic Helping in Human Infants and Young Chimpanzees](#). Science, 311(5765), 1301-1303.