



Greater Good in Education

SCIENCE-BASED PRACTICES FOR KINDER, HAPPIER SCHOOLS

SAY “WE” TO NURTURE COLLABORATION IN STUDENTS

"Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much."

—Helen Keller

OVERVIEW

Use language that encourages a sense of connection and collaboration to encourage cooperation among students.

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- To encourage students to collaborate
- To cultivate a more positive class environment
- When assigning group projects
- Any time of the year
- To foster a sense of connection with your students

TIME REQUIRED

- ≤15 minutes

LEVEL

- PreK/Lower Elementary

MATERIALS

- N/A

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Teachers will:

- Use “we” language instead of “you” language

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
- Consideration
- Cooperation

SEL COMPETENCIES

- Social Awareness
- Relationship skills

MINDFULNESS COMPONENTS

- Open Awareness

How to Do It

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

Try using “we” language instead of “you” language in your personal relationships. The next time you invite a coworker to lunch, consider asking, “where should we go?”, instead of “where do you want to go?” How does this make you feel? Do you feel more connected to your colleague? More willing to collaborate with them?

INSTRUCTIONS

From a very young age, children start learning how to collaborate and what it means to make commitments to others. Even as early as toddlerhood, children have expectations of their peers to stick around and cooperate when they’re engaged in a collaborative game or activity.

It turns out that the way we talk to children can influence their feelings around collaboration and about each other.

When you invite multiple students to participate in an activity—even when they’ve just met one another—replace “you” language with “we” language. For example, rather than saying something like “What game do **you** want to play?” or “**You** are going to help decorate for **your** play tonight,” try saying something like this: “**We** are going to help decorate for **our** play tonight” or “It’s time for us to play a fun game! What do **we** think **we** should play?”

This subtle shift in language can help students feel more committed to each other when they're doing activities together, setting a good foundation for collaboration and cooperation.

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- Have you noticed a difference in your students' collaborative behavior?
- Are there other ways that small shifts in language could foster a greater sense of connection and collaboration?

THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

Preschoolers between three and four years old were randomly assigned to one of two collaborative play activities with an Eeyore puppet: One activity involved Eeyore talking to the child using first-person plural pronouns (e.g., "Some friends are going to have a party later. They want help decorating for the party. So, **we** are going to help decorate. **We** can help decorate by decorating this colorful paper..."). In the other activity, Eeyore used second-person singular pronouns (e.g., "you" and "your") rather than "we" and "our."

The [study](#) found that children who heard "we" language felt a greater sense of commitment to their puppet partner compared to those who heard "you" language. Although results for levels of sharing did not reach statistical significance, they trended in the predicted direction, such that children shared more when they heard "we" language.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Collaboration can be hard for students (and adults). Working together to get something done involves navigating different perspectives and priorities. Students can be reluctant to engage in cooperative activities because they want to avoid disagreements and arguments with others.

Using "we" language can help your students have positive collaborative experiences, which heightens their awareness of their own capacity to work and play with others. They can learn how to resolve conflicts and work [cooperatively](#) rather than competitively, which can help them make progress toward both their shared and personal goals.

Positive cooperative interactions can also help students view each other as a committed partner or teammate upon whom they can rely. While the strength of friendships depends on many factors, [cooperation](#) is an important part of being able to make and keep friends during childhood.

SOURCE

Vasil, J., & Tomasello, M. (2022). [Effects of “we”-framing on young children’s commitment, sharing, and helping](#). *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*, 214, 105278.

Johnson, D. W., & Johnson, R. (2005). [New developments in social interdependence theory](#). *Psychology Monographs*, 131, 285–358.

Roseth, C. J., Johnson, D. W., & Johnson, R. T. (2008). [Promoting early adolescents' achievement and peer relationships: The effects of cooperative, competitive, and individualistic goal structures](#). *Psychological Bulletin*, 134(2), 223–246.