



Greater Good in Education
SCIENCE-BASED PRACTICES FOR KINDER, HAPPIER SCHOOLS

LIFE IS A GIFT

"We are a part of everything that is beneath us, above us, and around us. Our past is our present, our present is our future, and our future is seven generations past and present."

—Winona LaDuke

OVERVIEW

Students watch a video about the human life cycle to gain a greater sense of perspective and shared humanity.

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- To introduce students to the complexity, diversity, and interconnectedness of life
- To provide a greater sense of perspective
- To build positive family and community relationships

TIME REQUIRED

- ≤ 30 minutes

LEVEL

- High School
- College
- Adult

MATERIALS

- Videos (choice of two): [Human life cycle](#) or [Life cycle of human](#)
- PDF of [Life Cycle Reflection Prompts](#)
- Writing and/or drawing materials

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will:

- Visually experience a video of a choreographed dance or animation representing the human life cycle
- Reflect upon thoughts, emotions, and sensations that emerge in relation to the human life cycle
- Develop an appreciation for the fragility of life and humility towards its impermanence
- Contemplate the gift of life

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 and Compassion
- Empathy
- Awe

SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-Awareness
- Social Awareness
- Relationship Skills

MINDFULNESS COMPONENTS

- Open Awareness
- Non-judgment

HOW TO DO IT

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- Take a moment to watch this [video](#) on the life cycle.
- How did the video make you feel? What thoughts about the life cycle came to mind? What did this experience bring up for you?
- Be mindful that viewing this video may elicit positive emotion or occasionally [trigger a feeling of threat](#) especially in the context of how much death many of our students have been exposed to through COVID, school shootings, and life in general.

INSTRUCTIONS

OVERVIEW

- Prime the activity by asking:
 - *Do you ever wonder about the mystery of life? Today we are going to engage in reflecting on the human life cycle.*
 - *To begin, please take a few moments to reflect on [these prompts](#). This will help provide some awareness and insights into our diverse perspectives.*
- Present students with the [Life Cycle Reflection](#) to complete.
- After students have completed the task, introduce [the video](#) by saying:
 - *Let's watch a video that depicts stages of the human life cycle.*
 - *Reflecting on the stages of life can be awe-inspiring. When we feel awe we may experience goose bumps, a chill, tingling, or tearing up.*
 - *As we watch together, notice what thoughts, emotions, and sensations emerge.*
 - *The video depicts just one of many family structures. At the same time, the stages of life are a shared human experience.*
- Engage in viewing the video together with your students.
- Following the video, ask the following questions:
 - *How would you summarize the story that this video tells?*
 - *Were there parts that were hard to understand or weren't clear?*
 - *Would you change anything in this video—either delete or add to it?*
 - *What insights did you gain from watching this video?*
 - *What thoughts or emotions came up for you while watching this video?*
- Invite students to respond to the questions by:
 - Independently reflecting through writing, drawing, or movement, or
 - Engaging in a turn-and-talk conversation with a partner

CLOSURE

- Invite students to share their reflections in a whole class discussion.

EXTENSIONS

- #1: Students interview an elder of their choice (e.g., a family member, a retiree, a community leader, etc.) using the following questions:
 - What did you learn from different stages in your life (e.g., a child, teen, young adult, middle age, etc.)?
 - What has brought you the most joy?
 - What has been most challenging?
 - What would you like to be most remembered for?
 - Are there any other words of wisdom you wish to share?

Students create a poster (photo collage, illustration, or haiku) based on the interview to display for a classroom gallery walk activity.

#2: Consider offering [this activity](#) as a way for students to reflect upon living with physical challenges towards developing empathy for and appreciation of elders in their community.

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- Consider what worked or did not work.
- What modifications would you make?
- Seek informal student feedback to learn from their experiences.

THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

In an [experimental study](#), university students from the United States (75% Caucasian) watched an awe-inducing video that included vast and scenic landscapes and panoramic views of mountains, valleys, forests, trees, and lakes. Participants then completed a survey with multiple measures including feelings of awe, small self, connectedness, and existential isolation (the feeling that no one else shares one's own subjective experience of the world). The researchers found that feelings of awe, when experienced as vastness, increase connectedness to others and decrease existential isolation, which is [linked to](#) depression, suicidal ideation, lower in-group identification, and self-esteem.

Hence, students who experience the "vastness" of a life cycle may feel more connected to others, helping to increase their well-being. This transformation of the self brought about by awe is a powerful antidote to the isolation and loneliness that is epidemic today.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

[Stress and anxiety are on the rise](#) for young people, leading to feelings of disconnection and self-focus, and to negative relationships with peers. Awe makes us feel like we're a small part of something much larger than ourselves. Taking a moment to contemplate a broader view of life can be an awe-inducing experience for many students, shifting their attention away from their small selves and towards their connection to others and to life itself. Indeed, by reducing their focus on their individual concerns and needs, awe helps improve students' well-being and their relationships with others, which, in turn, can help build positive classrooms and schools.

SOURCE

Keltner, D. (2023). [Awe: The new science of everyday wonder and how it can transform your life](#). Penguin Press.