



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

## LISTENING WITH COMPASSION

*"We think we listen, but very rarely do we listen with real understanding, true empathy. Yet listening, of this very special kind, is one of the most potent forces for change that I know."*

—Carl Rogers

### OVERVIEW

Students practice five listening skills and reflect on their experience.

### PLANNING FOR IT

#### WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- At the beginning of the year, to foster strong peer relationships
- When students aren't feeling seen or heard by each other
- To cultivate cross-group friendships

#### TIME REQUIRED

- ≤ 1 hour over two class periods

#### LEVEL

- Middle School
- High School

#### MATERIALS

- Paper & pen for each student
- Chart paper and markers or whiteboard

#### LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will:

- Develop key listening skills
- Help their peers to open up, share about themselves, and feel more understood

- Build classroom community and peer connection

## 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

- Compassion
- Empathy
- Curiosity

## SEL COMPETENCIES

- Social Awareness
- Relationship Skills

## MINDFULNESS COMPONENTS

- Focused attention
- Non-judgment

## HOW TO DO IT

### REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- Take a moment to think of a time when someone who appeared different from you deeply listened to you—they gave you their full attention, expressed only kindness, and no judgment. How did it make you feel? Was a connection fostered?
- Next, think of a time when you deeply listened to someone who appeared different from you—perhaps a student, colleague, friend, or family member. Why did you choose to listen to this person? What helped you to hear them without judgment? How did you respond? How did the experience make you feel? Were you able to cultivate a connection with this person?
- Reflect on how your background might impact the way you listen and feel heard. How might this differ from your students' backgrounds? What adjustments do you need to make to the practice to ensure that it is responsive to students' beliefs and experiences of listening and being listened to?

## INSTRUCTIONS

### OVERVIEW

The true goal of bridging differences isn't to convince the other person of your viewpoint or even necessarily to build consensus. Instead, the heart of bridging work lies in trying to understand someone else's perspective, even if it's not your own. While you might not share their views, you don't dismiss them; you dig deeper to try to appreciate where those views came from.

Yet, often we'll listen to someone without really hearing them. In the process, we miss opportunities to connect with that person—and even risk making them feel neglected, disrespected, and resentful. That can complicate any attempt to bridge differences with them. This practice helps students express active interest in what the other person has to say and make them feel heard—a way to foster empathy and connection.

### OPTIONAL PRE-WORK

- As a way to make the practice more relevant and concrete for students, invite them to ask family members and/or friends what it looks and feels like to be deeply listened to. For example, what body language communicates listening? What kind of responses indicate that you've been heard. Then, have students share in class what they learned and compare it to the five skills taught below.

### ACTIVITY (PART ONE)

- Begin by saying: *One of the most powerful things we can do to help bridge differences between ourselves and others is to listen deeply to each other. Take a moment to jot down a few thoughts about what it feels like to be listened to—and not listened to.*
- After a few minutes, invite students in pairs, small groups, or as a whole class to share what they wrote.
- Next, ask for a volunteer to role-play listening with compassion with you. Choose a prompt such as "If you could change one thing about the world or school, what would it be and why?" Make sure you demonstrate the skills below: Affirmation, being curious, holding challenging emotions, and using engaged body language.
- Once the student has finished their response, ask the class what specific skills they noticed and how they knew you were listening actively. Next, ask the student volunteer if they felt heard and what made them feel heard.
- Write the following terms on the board and go over definitions and examples:
- *Affirmation. Be curious. Express empathy. Use engaged body language. Avoid judgment or giving advice.*
- Ask students to brainstorm what each term might mean when it comes to *listening*.
- Encourage students to reflect on what these terms look like in their family and culture. Make a note that communication and listening can look different in many different cultures and settings, but it is important to make others feel heard and to listen to understand.
- Take suggestions for definitions verbally from students, then explain each skill, highlighting the following definitions and examples:
  - *Affirmation:* How are you affirming the feelings or opinions of the speaker? Compassionate listening starts when you can remember that any person is worth listening to because that can open the door to connection and mutual growth.

- Good examples: “that makes sense” or “yes, I hear you.”
    - Bad examples: “you shouldn’t have felt that way” or “I think you’re wrong.”
  - *Be curious*: Are you asking questions to encourage the other person to elaborate on his thoughts or feelings? Curiosity shows that you’re interested in what the person has to say and that you care.
    - Good examples: “when you say \_\_\_\_\_, do you mean \_\_\_\_\_?”, keep your phone out of sight, avoid thinking about your response when the other person is talking
    - Bad examples: look at your phone, look away, think about something else or yourself, interrupt the speaker with stories about yourself
  - *Express empathy*. If the speaker expresses frustration, are you considering why they feel that way? Think less about how *you* would feel or think in their situation, and more about them.
    - Good examples: “I can sense that you’re feeling frustrated,” or “I can understand how that situation could cause frustration”; after they’re done speaking, paraphrase (e.g., “So what I heard was...”), or asking thoughtful clarifying questions (e.g., “what did you mean when you said...?”)
    - Bad examples: Ask the same question over and over, bring up your own story right away after they’re done speaking, misrepresent what they said, tell them that what they felt was wrong
  - *Use engaged body language*. How are you physically positioned in relation to the speaker? Use body language and gestures to convey true listening.
    - Good examples: eye contact, nodding, facing the other person, and maintaining an open and relaxed body posture (be sure to check on cultural appropriateness for each of these items, e.g., not all cultures practice direct eye contact).
    - Bad examples: facial expressions that might communicate disapproval or disgust (e.g., eye rolling), slouched, turned away from the speaker, arms cross at all times
  - *Avoid judgment or giving advice*. Are you trying to understand the other person’s perspective and accept it for what it is, even if you disagree with it? Problem-solving is likely to be more effective after both conversation partners understand one another’s perspective and feel heard.
    - Good examples: say “mm-hmm” at appropriate times, repeat key words mentally for reinforcement, avoid distractions (e.g., side conversations, phone ringing)
    - Bad examples: interrupt with counter-arguments, mentally prepare a rebuttal while the other person is speaking
- Let students know that they will be practicing these skills with each other next time.

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## ACTIVITY (PART TWO)

- Introduce the activity by saying, “*Today we are taking a deep dive into the listening skills we reviewed and considered last time. We are going to practice our listening skills with our peers. I want to acknowledge that this might feel a little awkward or silly at first—that is okay and totally normal—but I will push you to consider why this work matters and the impact listening can have on others and ourselves.*”
- Next, place students in pairs. For this activity, do not let students self-select their pairs; instead have them partner with someone they don’t know well. Note: Consider whether you, the educator, need to create pairs ahead of time based on students’ level of comfort in communication.
- Once students are in pairs, provide them with the prompt.

- Choose something fun such as “What do you like to do for fun?” or “If you could have dinner with anyone, who would it be?” or “If you could go anywhere in the world, where would you go?”
- Tell students that the first speaker has 1.5-2 minutes to talk, with no contributions from their partner except practicing the listening skills they learned.
  - For the listening partners, remind them to practice the five listening skills to the best of their ability, and “think and feel and listen for the nuances in their partner’s responses.”
- Once the time is up, the listening partner has 1.5-2 minutes to engage in brief conversation.
  - Don’t tell them “to express empathy,” but do remind them that the listener can reflect on what’s been said by paraphrasing (e.g., “So what I heard was...”), asking thoughtful clarifying questions (e.g., “What did you mean when you said...?”), and acknowledging others’ feelings. Concrete examples are often most helpful.
- Next, it is the listener’s turn to speak for 1.5-2 minutes without interruption, followed by conversation with their partner. Be sure to encourage students to use the five listening skills.
- Throughout the activity, keep track of time for the class, and instruct students when it is time to move on. Circulate the room to hear student discussions.
- After both partners have had a chance to talk and listen, bring the group together to debrief. Ask students to respond verbally in pairs or small groups, or to write in their journals. Choose a couple of prompts from the questions below:
  - What did you learn about your partner/ What did you learn about yourself?
  - How does it feel to be listened to fully?
  - How does it feel to listen at your best?
  - Why do you think listening is important for empathy? How can we show we care about someone “just” by listening?
  - What do you think gets in the way of good listening in your life? How could you change that?
  - How might listening in this way help to foster a connection with people who appear different from you?
  - How might deep listening look different based on your family’s background for example how your family communicates or expects others to behave?
- Close with an honest and low-pressure discussion with students, allowing them to reflect on their first attempt to use the five listening skills.
- Encourage students to test the five skills in their lives both in and out of the classroom. From time to time, check in with students about their compassionate listening experiences. Do these listening skills

## REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- Do you notice whether students are listening more closely to each other? How do you know? If so, is it shifting their relationships in a positive way? Is the classroom culture changing as a result? Are they engaging in more cross-group friendships?

## THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

### EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

In one [study](#), a group of mostly young, white, female college students had brief conversations (about their biggest disappointment with their university) with someone trained to engage in Active Listening, someone who gave

them advice, or someone who gave simple acknowledgments of their point of view. People who received Active Listening reported feeling more understood at the end of the conversation.

Another [study](#) paired Mexican immigrants with white Americans, while another paired Israelis with Palestinians. In both studies, each member of the pair was asked to share their perspectives on the difficulties of life in their society, and to take the perspective of the other person when they were sharing their views.

This dialogue significantly improved participants' attitudes toward the other group. They felt greater empathy for their suffering, trusted their intentions more, and felt more warmly toward the group as a whole. However, for members of the pair with less social power (Mexican immigrants and Palestinians), attitudes toward the other group improved more after they shared their perspective than after they took the other person's perspective.

## WHY DOES IT MATTER?

We're more likely to want to bridge our differences with someone when we feel heard and understood by them—and we're more effective at connecting with someone when we really listen to where they're coming from.

Tuning into what a peer is saying and conveying that you are paying attention to them helps to foster strong peer relationships. Indeed, children who believe that their peers will [communicate positively](#) with them are more likely to expect friendship, to be included, and to feel comfortable with their peers, regardless of gender.

Experiencing positive peer relationships also contributes to higher [academic achievement](#), better [health](#) and well-being (across [cultures](#)), and emotional and behavioral [engagement](#) with school. And students with a strong peer network are more [resilient](#), even when they face difficulties at home.

## SOURCE

[Making Caring Common Project](#), Harvard Graduate School of Education

Greater Good Science Center [Bridging Differences Playbook](#), University of California, Berkeley