



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

COURAGEOUS AND COMPASSIONATE CITIZENS

"Courage is like a muscle. We strengthen it by use."

—Ruth Gordon

OVERVIEW

Students brainstorm a current moral or civic issue facing society and explore how to use courage to address it.

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- Anytime during the year
- During social studies classes or advisory periods, when discussing social injustice or moral issues
- To cultivate compassionate global citizenship and/or classroom community
- To launch a service-learning project

TIME REQUIRED

- One class session

LEVEL

- Upper Elementary
- Middle School
- High School

MATERIALS

- Writing materials
- Poster board or a white board

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will:

- Explore a civic or moral issue facing society
- Collectively investigate the barriers to courageous action
- Brainstorm how to respond courageously to an identified social issue

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

- Courage
- Humanity
- Justice
- Purpose
- Kindness and Compassion

SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-awareness
- Social awareness
- Relationship skills
- Responsible decision-making

MINDFULNESS COMPONENTS

- Nonjudgement

HOW TO DO IT

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- Have you ever experienced the desire to do something, stand up for something, or act on your compassion, but something has stopped you?
- Compassionate and prosocial acts take courage; courageous action is not always large and obvious. It includes small acts of personal or moral courage—motivated action to benefit another despite a risk to the self.
- Take a moment to reflect on your own barriers to courageous action. What facilitates courage for you? What makes courage easier?

INSTRUCTIONS

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

- This practice will invite students to come up with moral or civic issues facing society. Consider preparing some examples ahead of time (e.g., LGBTQAI+ rights, racial injustice, climate change, or insecure housing). You can also get more specific within these topics (e.g., campaigning for gender-inclusive bathrooms, wage inequities for BIPOC, supporting underhoused individuals to vote). With younger students or to tackle more local issues, consider issues in your community, your school, or your classroom (e.g., restorative justice approaches to bullying, reducing stigma around youth mental health, or starting a compost program at your school).
- Remember that discussions of moral and civic issues might be triggering for members of your classroom who identify with the topic at hand. Allow space for students to share their perspectives. Take note of any shifts in the tone of the discussion and try to center the voices of students who may be experiencing an injustice. Consider reviewing this [practice](#) to create compassionate classroom norms prior to this activity.

OVERVIEW

Tell students:

- *Today we are going to explore "courage." What do you think courage is? Can you think of any examples of courage? [Allow some time for brainstorming and examples from students.] What does courage feel like?*
- *There are different kinds of courage. There are large acts of courage—like saving someone from a burning building (or reference any examples they gave)—but there are also smaller everyday acts of personal and moral courage that are just as important like standing up to a bully with compassion (or reference their examples).*
- *Courage is the choice to face something challenging, painful, or even dangerous, often because it will benefit you or someone else. The challenge or dangers can be social (like being teased), mental (like facing a difficult or emotional task), or physical (challenging or dangerous to your body, like climbing a mountain or protecting someone during a disaster or conflict).*
- *Today we are going to explore what it means to be courageous and what makes courage hard sometimes.*

Optional Adjustments for Younger Students

- This practice can be modified for younger elementary students by choosing more local or simple concerns relevant to them. Or by making the moral/civic issue more tangible around something like bullying or how we treat students in our classroom. For example, the issue might be "a group of students is leaving out a student during playtime." It can be helpful to use the word "bravery" in addition to "courage" for very young students (e.g., what gets in the way of us being brave or what helps us be brave?).
- To introduce the topic of courage to younger students, try reading a picture book about courage first, such as "[I am Courage](#)" or "[Brave Ninja](#)."

STEP 1: BRAINSTORM MORAL OR CIVIC ISSUES

Tell students:

- *First, we are going to brainstorm some issues in our society that might require courage to stand up for or solve. What change would you like to see in our school/community/country/world? For example, addressing climate change or human rights for LGBTQIA+ communities. (You can provide other examples particularly relevant to your classroom or area of the world.)*
- Students can list their ideas on paper or poster boards in small groups, on one large poster board or white board as a class, or each student can anonymously write down issues on slips of paper and hand them in to you.
- As a class, decide which issue to focus on for the day. When you decide, write the topic at the top of your whiteboard or a poster board. Then create two columns under the topic, by drawing one line down the middle. Label the subtitles “Barriers” on the left and “Courage” on the right.

STEP 2: COURAGEOUS EXAMPLES DISCUSSION

Tell students:

- *Can you share if you have ever been courageous about this issue. Have you ever acted with courage to stand up for it before? How did it feel to be courageous?*
- *Remember, courage can be hard. Even sharing out loud can take courage for some people, so this is a judgment-free zone. It is okay if you haven't acted courageously before. Have you ever witnessed anyone else being courageous about this issue?*

STEP 3: BARRIERS TO COURAGE

Tell students:

- *Now we are going to talk about what gets in the way of us acting courageously. What makes it difficult to stand up for [the issue at hand]?*
- *Have you ever had the chance to be courageous but chose not to? Why didn't you? How did it feel not to act courageously in this situation?*
- Record students' responses (or have them record) in the left-hand column of your whiteboard or poster board.
- Discussion:
 - *If these are the barriers to courage, is there anything we can do to remove those barriers? (Allow for some group or think-pair-share discussion.)*

STEP 4: WHAT DOES COURAGE LOOK LIKE?

Tell students:

- *Now that we have talked about examples of courage and barriers to enacting courage, let's think together about what courage can LOOK like in this situation. What does it look like to be courageous in the face of [the issue]? Remember courage can be small and subtle, it doesn't have to be large, obvious acts of bravery.*

- Write (or let students write) their responses in the right-hand column.

STEP 5: FIRST STEPS

Tell students:

- *Now we know a little bit more about what courage can look like. Can we decide on ONE courageous act we can all commit to as a class to support [the issue]? What is something small we can all do that takes a little courage but can make some peoples' lives better?*

DISCUSSION AFTER THE PRACTICE

Tell students:

- Let's take a moment to reflect on this exercise. Have you ever talked about courage before? How did it feel to talk about courage?

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- Were there any barriers for students to participate? If you were to try this again, what might you modify or try differently next time?
- Did you notice any students struggling to find the courage to speak up during this exercise?
- Do you notice students acting more courageously after this exercise? If so, how?

THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

Research tells us that models of courage can motivate us to act with moral courage ourselves, creating a positive spiral of courageous action. For example, in [two studies](#) of over 360 American adults, researchers found that when people viewed superhero images they reported greater helping intentions and behaviors afterwards, compared to participants who weren't shown heroic images.

In another [study](#), 62 fourth- and fifth-graders from Michigan participated in a program that taught students about courage and heroism while asking them to see themselves as heroes. They reported greater courage immediately after the program—and even one month later.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Sharing stories of courage, discussing barriers to courageous action, seeing oneself as courageous, and collectively working towards courageous problem solving can [all contribute](#) to greater prosocial action.

It takes courage to stand up to injustices, like [bullying](#) or [racial discrimination](#). Strengthening students' courage muscles can lead to more prosocial classrooms, while potentially enhancing students' [well-being](#), their ability to [cope with stressors](#), and even their academic engagement and [success](#).