



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

## FINDING AWE IN COLLECTIVE ACTS OF KINDNESS

*"There is a deep interconnectedness of all life on earth, from the tiniest organisms, to the largest ecosystems, and absolutely between each person."*

—Bryant McGill

### OVERVIEW

Students watch an awe-inspiring video of animals moving together in unison, reflect on their experience of collective effervescence, and plan and carry out a collective act of kindness.

### PLANNING FOR IT

#### WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- Anytime during the year to inspire awe and students' sense of belonging
- To promote students' prosocial behavior
- To promote kindness among students and throughout the school

#### TIME REQUIRED

- Multiple sessions

#### LEVEL

- Upper Elementary
- Middle School
- High School

#### MATERIALS

- A video showing animals moving together in unison, such as these on [birds](#), [horses](#), or [sardines](#)
- Equipment for watching an internet-based video
- Writing or drawing materials

## LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will:

- Acknowledge the connection between different species and how this relates to their sense of belonging to human beings, and to the larger society
- Expand their social awareness by reflecting on their connection to others
- Plan and carry out an act of kindness as a group and reflect on their experience

## 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

- Awe
- Kindness
- Compassion

## SEL COMPETENCIES

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

## MINDFULNESS COMPONENTS

- Focused Attention
- Open Awareness

## HOW TO DO IT

### REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- Take a moment to think of a time in which you worked with others towards a collective act of kindness.
- Reflect on how this act of kindness made you feel. Did it inspire feelings of [awe](#), wonder, or amazement?
- How do you think this practice is relevant to your current group of students?
- Does this practice privilege your values over theirs in any way? If so, what adjustments can you make to make this practice a positive experience for students?

## INSTRUCTIONS

### INTRODUCTION

Studies suggest that humans are wired to move in unison with others—what some scientists call “collective effervescence.” For instance, [researchers](#) have found that 4-month-olds have a tendency to mirror adult facial gestures, and older children have a tendency to mirror the postures and gestures of teachers, parents, athletes, and musical artists. We feel awe in the extraordinary sensations of connecting to others in this way. Dancing with others, singing in a choir, or even just walking in sync with someone makes us aware of a “special something” that unites us in that movement. Moving in unison can also help people work together more effectively and increase people’s sense of [compassion](#) and [cooperation](#).

### INTRODUCE AND WATCH VIDEO

- Choose one of the short videos on groups of [birds](#), [horses](#), or [sardines](#) moving in unison. Feel free to select another video of your choice that shows animals moving together.
- Tell students that you will all watch a short video on a group of animals moving in unison. Invite them to notice how watching animals move in this way makes them feel.

### SHARE REFLECTIONS AFTER THE VIDEO

- After watching the video, invite students to reflect either through journaling or drawing what they noticed in the group movement of the animals and how watching it made them feel. What emotions did it evoke?
- After a few minutes, invite students in pairs, small groups, or as a whole class to share something from their reflection. Be sure to validate all responses.

### INTRODUCE “COLLECTIVE EFFERVESCENCE”

- Share with students:
  - *[Researchers](#) have discovered that moving together in unison, or what they call “collective effervescence,” can be a powerful source of [awe](#)—the feeling we get in the presence of something vast that challenges our understanding of the world at that moment. We may feel chills or goosebumps when experiencing awe. Awe can help us feel more connected to one another and the world, and can inspire us to be curious and creative.*
- Ask them to think of a time when they experienced or saw collective effervescence with family or peers in school, for example in dance, sports, or in a band performance.
- Ask about how these experiences made them feel.

### CONNECT “COLLECTIVE EFFERVESCENCE” TO KINDNESS

- Next, ask students if they have seen or experienced collective effervescence with a group of people working towards a common goal that improves the school or the community. For example, a school-wide clean-up, a food drive, or helping another student in need.
- Ask students: *How does it feel to be part of something like this? Has anyone ever tried it?*

- Ask them if they felt any awe, wonder, or amazement during this experience, assuring that it is ok if they didn't.
- Next, explain that the feeling of awe can sometimes motivate us to work as a group towards a common cause.

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## PLAN AN ACT OF KINDNESS

- Finally, in small groups or as a whole class, plan an act of kindness to carry out in the coming week.
- Agree on a date the following week to share and reflect on their experience after doing this exercise.
- If doing the act of kindness in small groups, groups can keep their plan a secret and present it to the class the following week. Make sure that every student has the capacity to participate in their group's plan. For example, if the plan requires resources that all students don't have access to, encourage groups to come up with a plan that doesn't require any additional materials or goods. Or for students whose outside commitments such as sibling care limits their time, encourage students to create a plan that can be done during the school day.
- If students need help thinking of an idea, share this [video](#) which shows how a group of students performed secret acts of kindness for the whole school, including teachers.

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## CLOSURE (AFTER THE ACTS OF KINDNESS HAVE BEEN COMPLETED)

- If groups kept their "kindness plan" a secret, have them present to the class what they did.
- Have students reflect individually, in pairs, small groups, or as a whole class on the experience. Consider the following questions:
  - How did it feel to carry out your kindness act with a group? Would it have felt differently if you did it by yourself?
  - What was challenging about carrying out your kindness act with a group? What worked well? Why do you think something was challenging or went well?
  - Did your relationships with your peers change in any way as a result of this exercise? If so, in what way?
  - What would you do differently next time? What would you do the same?
  - What advice would you give another group of students who might want to do something similar?

## REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- Do you notice a change in students' behavior after this practice? Are they demonstrating more kindness towards each other?
- Do your students show a greater willingness to collaborate with each other? Are they better able to work in groups?

## THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

### EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

Watching animals has been found to elicit feelings of [awe](#) and connectedness. In a [study](#) of more than 400 adult visitors to the Dalton Highway in northern Alaska, half of the special experiences that participants described involved being near animals, watching natural behavior, or seeing young animals, which in turn induced feelings of awe. In addition, a [study](#) that gathered narrative stories of five women and one man revealed how their encounters with whales and dolphins invoked peak experiences that involved feelings of connectedness and harmony.

Finally, a [study](#) of a diverse group of more than 2,000 college students and adults based in the United States, found that the experience of awe led to a diminished sense of self and personal concerns, as well as increased prosocial behavior. Researchers in the study highlighted that this can in turn help people feel a sense of belonging to a wider community, as well as enhance caring for others beyond themselves.

### WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Awe helps build kinder classrooms and schools. In a world mostly guided by materialism and individual concerns, students are bombarded with values that put “me” first and “others” second. Awe has the power to shift these values, making students [less entitled](#) and more oriented towards helping others.

Indeed, by fostering a sense of connection between students, awe creates classrooms of belonging and inclusivity. Even a brief moment of awe encourages children to [share more](#) and act altruistically towards others. Awe also fosters students’ collective concern towards our larger society by inspiring them to tackle big issues like [climate change](#), and by encouraging them to find [common ground](#) with people with whom they disagree.

### SOURCE

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