



## IDENTIFYING ACTS OF COURAGE

*"Courage is the most important of all the virtues because without courage you can't practice any other virtue consistently. You can practice any virtue erratically, but nothing consistently without courage."*

—Maya Angelou

### OVERVIEW

Students come up with ideas about what courage is, learn a scholarly definition of courage, reflect on courageous acts they have witnessed, and consider why they think courage is important.

### PLANNING FOR IT

#### WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- To inspire greater courage in students
- To support student well-being
- To help set the foundation for values-based action
- Any time of the year

#### TIME REQUIRED

- ≤30 minutes

#### LEVEL

- Upper Elementary
- Middle School
- High School

#### MATERIALS

- Courage [video](#)
- Paper
- Pen/pencil

## LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will:

- Define courage
- Reflect on others' courageous behavior
- Consider why courage is important

## 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

## SEL COMPETENCIES

- Social Awareness
- Ethical Decision-Making and Social Responsibility

## MINDFULNESS COMPONENTS

- Focused Attention
- Open Awareness

## HOW TO DO IT

### REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- Take a moment to reflect on a time when you witnessed (in-person or remotely) courageous behavior. Consider the following questions:
  - What were the risks the person faced?
  - What might have been the person's intentions?
  - What was the larger goal (or value) behind the action?
  - How does thinking about this courageous behavior make you feel?

## INSTRUCTIONS

### OVERVIEW

- Start by asking students to take a moment to consider what it means to be courageous by reflecting on the question: What is courage?
- Have some students share their responses aloud. (You can write responses on the board).
- Next, play this [video](#) and ask students to pay close attention to the responses given. Have students compare the responses from the video with their own.
  - *What were the major themes or ideas expressed?*
  - *Did students in the video mention anything that we did not?*
  - *Was there overlap?*
- After discussing the questions above and summarizing what has been said, provide additional guidance on students' definition of courage. You might say, *"These are all really great definitions of courage. Researchers have studied definitions of courage, and they have proposed that courage generally consists of three things: a risk, an intention, and a "noble" goal (or value) that may benefit others."*
  - You might also share that many researchers and philosophers consider courage to be extremely important in allowing us to live our lives in ways that reflect our values. [See the quote framing this practice.]
- Next, have students think and write about a courageous action that they have either witnessed themselves or have learned about through books, films, songs, or other means. Students should try to identify the three components of courage in their descriptions. You can even provide them with an example:
  - Risk: Mark volunteers to travel to a disaster-stricken area to help with relief efforts. He knows that the area is unstable, with the possibility of earthquake aftershocks and other dangers.
  - Intention: Yet Mark intends to go to provide aid and support to the people affected by the disaster. He wants to help them get through this difficult time and rebuild their lives.
  - Goal that may benefit others: Mark's goal is to make a positive impact on the lives of the disaster survivors. By volunteering his time and skills, he hopes to contribute to the relief efforts, provide essential resources, and offer emotional support to those in need. This might be driven by several of his values (like humanity, compassion, and social responsibility) and his belief that all people deserve support, especially when experiencing hardship.
- Remind students that while they might not know the exact risks, intentions, or noble goals (i.e., values) that drive others' courageous acts, for the purpose of this assignment, consider a few possibilities for each of the three components.
- After students have written their descriptions, have them share their responses in pairs.
- Finish by having a few students share their descriptions of courageous individuals out loud.

### CLOSURE

- Ask students to consider how these stories make them feel and why they think courage is important. Ask for a few volunteers to share their thoughts with the class.

## REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- Did you notice any patterns or key themes reflected in your students' responses (e.g., in their ideas about what they thought courage was—or in the kinds of stories they shared about courage)? If so, how might you use these insights to help inspire more courageous behavior among your students (e.g., are there books that you could have students read that are related to the kinds of courageous acts that they have highlighted, or were there missing representations of courage that you could continue to highlight for your students)?
- Did you notice students engaging in more courageous actions after going through this exercise?

## THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

### EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

While no research to date has directly tested whether children's observance of others' courageous behavior can influence them to behave courageously, scholars have included this path in models for how [courage](#) might be fostered in young children (Goud, 2005).

In line with this thinking, in one [study](#), children between the ages of 4 and 6 listened to one of three stories: a story about anthropomorphic animals sharing, a story about humans sharing, or a control story about seeds. Children who were read the human story were more generous afterward when compared to the children in the other two groups, suggesting that children are more likely to internalize messages about how to behave when the messenger is someone that students can identify with.

### WHY DOES IT MATTER?

As teachers, it is important that we help foster the development of courage in our students because courage is a [fundamental life skill](#) that goes beyond the classroom. Courage empowers students to confront challenges, take risks, and embrace opportunities for growth. By nurturing courage, we not only help prepare our students to [excel academically](#), but also equip them with the resilience and determination they will need to navigate the complexities of the world outside of school. Research has found that courage is related to the use of effective [coping](#) strategies when faced with difficulties.

Furthermore, by supporting students' courageous behavior in the classroom, we may also encourage [speaking up against injustices](#) in our society. Overall, courage is related to [well-being](#) across the lifespan, so identifying and discussing acts of courage with children and teens is a worthwhile endeavor.

## SOURCE

Three components of course drawn from: Lopez, S. J., O'Byrne, K. K., & Petersen, S. (2003). Profiling courage. In S. J. Lopez & C. R. Snyder (Eds.), *Positive psychological assessment: A handbook of models and measures* (pp. 185–197). American Psychological Association.