



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

# COURAGE CHALLENGE: MAKING COURAGE CONTAGIOUS IN THE CLASSROOM

*"Courage is not the absence of fear, but rather the assessment that something else is more important than fear."*

—Franklin D. Roosevelt

## OVERVIEW

Students take on a courage challenge and share their experience with their classmates, crafting a chain of courageous acts that inspire them to be honest, zesty, persevering, and brave.

## PLANNING FOR IT

### WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- To help students try new things, persist with an academic challenge, speak up for the right thing, or feel comfortable expressing their authentic voice, at any time of the school year
- To encourage courageous, values-based decision making
- To nurture a more prosocial classroom climate at the start of the school year

### TIME REQUIRED

- 30 minutes, over multiple sessions

### LEVEL

- Upper Elementary School
- Middle School
- High School

### MATERIALS

- Journal and writing instruments
- Printout of the "Courage Challenge Template" (see attachment)
- Access to the [values in action classification of character strengths](#)

## LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will:

- Learn about some of the key character strengths undergirding courage: bravery, perseverance, zest, and honesty
- Choose a courage challenge that feels important to them—and act on it
- Reflect on the outcome of the courage challenge, while considering the emotions, values, and thinking processes associated with their courageous act
- Encourage and support others in their courage challenge in a judgement-free environment

## 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

- Bravery
- Honesty
- Zest
- Perseverance
- Courage

## SEL COMPETENCIES

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

## MINDFULNESS COMPONENTS

- Non-judgment
- Open Awareness

## HOW TO DO IT

### REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- Think of a recent time when you exhibited courage in your personal or professional life. Reflect on the following questions:

- *What did the situation entail? What was the risk involved in that situation? What were your options in that situation?*
- *What was the intention you had? What was the “noble” goal (or value) that you wanted to pursue?*
- *What did you choose to do? What made that action the more courageous option for you?*
- *How did performing that courageous act feel in your body while you were doing it? Were you feeling calm and collected, impatient, anxious, stressed, vulnerable or something else? How did your body feel after your courageous act?*
- *In what way did this courageous action benefit you, others, or the environment? In what ways did it not?*
- *What is it about the situation and your courageous choice that holds significance for you? What would you like to remember about it? Why?*

## INSTRUCTIONS

### BEFORE YOU BEGIN

- In this session, students will be taking up a courage challenge, where they may experience some vulnerability. As the teacher, consider how you may practice bringing open awareness to this experience while you witness students managing their vulnerability. You can also be on the lookout for any potential concerning responses that may make the classroom climate unsafe for others. Consider how you might respond to a student that responds in a way that triggers others’ need to seek a sense of emotional and psychological safety in the classroom.
- Questions to ask yourself:
  - What is the emotional climate in the classroom right now?
  - Are my students agitated, anxious, overwhelmed, feeling vulnerable, or something else?
  - What steps can I take to gently acknowledge their current emotional experience while inviting them to consider taking up the courage challenge?
- Consider setting classroom norms to embrace vulnerability and support each other’s courage challenge using [this](#) resource for the session.

### THE ACTIVITY (30 MIN)

- Introduce the session by telling students: *As human beings, all of us experience fear. Sometimes, we are afraid of trying new things because we might fail. Other times, we take on something challenging, but when it gets difficult, we are tempted to quit. Think about this:*
  - *Has there been a time when you felt this way? What was the risk involved?*
  - *What was the intention you had? What did you hope to do?*
  - *Was there a value or character strength that motivated you—like honesty or perseverance? Why was acting on that value risky for you?*
- Next, ask students: *How would you define “courage”? What does it mean to you?*  
 Note: Remember, it is not important that they provide or even understand the dictionary definition of courage. Encourage them to share examples as a way of understanding courage. Reinforce for them that [courage](#) is simply what allows us to act in line with our values towards a “noble” goal, in the face of a threat, danger, or risk of any kind.

- Consider sharing an example of a time that you were courageous. Think about which of the four character strengths (shared below) you embodied. Describe in detail the risk and noble goal that the situation entailed, and what undertaking the courageous act felt like. Highlight bodily sensations, emotions, connections to your values, as relevant. Describe why this courageous act is meaningful to you.
- Share with students the following: *Courage can look like many things. Today we will think about four character strengths that relate to courage:*
  - *Zest: We show zest when we are excited or energetic about a situation or activity. Zesty people find value in what they do, and rarely shy away from doing what they value. Speaking on stage for the first time even when one is feeling shy or scared, or trying something new, are examples of zest.*
  - *Perseverance: We display perseverance when we stick with things, even when they are difficult and challenging. People who persevere can overcome their thoughts of giving up, and they put in a lot of effort over time to complete their goals. Refusing to give up on a math task or on learning a new dance routine, in spite of making mistakes, is an example of perseverance.*
  - *Bravery: We display bravery when we face challenges, instead of running away from them. Brave people act on their values, even if doing so makes them unpopular. Standing up for someone being bullied and calling out the bully at your own risk, because you consider it the right thing to do, is an example of bravery.*
  - *Honesty: We display honesty when we are being true to ourselves in our values, beliefs, thoughts, speech, and actions. Honest people do not pretend to be something that they are not, especially not to themselves. Being truthful about one's preference for a certain type of music or clothes, even when others disapprove of it, is an example of honesty.*

NOTE: Consider the age and developmental stage of your students before introducing the vocabulary above. What is important is that they understand four types of character strengths that can drive courage, the risks involved, and the values that each strength enables them to courageously pursue.

- Now introduce the Courage Challenge to students: *We are taking on a "Courage Challenge" this week. Here is what we will do:*
  - **STEP 1: SEEKING INSPIRATION**  
Ask students to brainstorm (in a pair-share) examples of what each character strength under courage could look like. A prompting question for them to brainstorm could be: *Can you think of an example where someone exhibited honesty, bravery, zest, or perseverance in class or at home?* Next, encourage them to share a few examples with the whole class. (Note: Refer to the character strength definitions and examples above, as needed.)
  - **STEP 2: REFLECTING ON A CHALLENGE**  
Tell students: *We will each pick a situation where we wish we could be more honest, zesty, persevering, or brave (pick only one). Now, write in your journal:*
    - *Describe the situation. What is the risk involved? What are your options or choices?*
    - *What do you intend to do? What is the value that you want to pursue?*

NOTE: You can scaffold this question by providing students the a full list of 24 values in action: [classification of character strengths](#).

    - *Which of the four character strengths will this require?*
    - *What fears come up for you when you think about performing this action? What support would you need/want from your peers or teacher in order to act courageously?*
  - **STEP 3: DOING THE COURAGEOUS ACTION**  
Tell students that they will be carrying out their act of courage in the coming week. Encourage

them to do this by referring to the actions they've articulated in Step #2—and seeking support when required.

○ **STEP 4: REFLECTING ON THE COURAGEOUS ACTION**

Ask students to document their experience in their journals by responding to the following prompts:

- *Describe your courageous choice or action.*
- *How did it feel in your body while you were doing it? Did you feel calm and collected, impatient, anxious, stressed, vulnerable or something else? How did your body feel afterward?*
- *How did your courageous act benefit you, others, or the environment? Or how did it not?*
- *What was it about your courageous choice or action that is important to you? What would you like to remember about it? Why?*
- *What are you surer of, about yourself, now? What are you less sure of? What are you curious about?*

○ **STEP 5: COURAGE CHAIN/ COURAGE CIRCLE**

Ask students to complete a handout (or poster) that contains their documented reflections from Step #1 and Step #4. They can use this Courage Challenge Template or capture their responses on a poster of their own design. Allow them to decorate it. Each student's poster can be a part of a "Courage Chain" (or a line of posters on the wall that can be part of a gallery walk). This "Courage Chain" can be made visible to all students, serving as a reminder of the courage that they have already displayed as a class.

Alternatively, [facilitate](#) a "Courage Circle" and encourage five students every day to share their reflections from the courage challenge. Prior to having students share:

- Invite them to take a few calming breaths to encourage silent, thoughtful, and deep engagement with others' stories—and their own.
- Encourage them to clap or acknowledge every student's reflection on their courage challenge.
- Finally, ask students to notice the thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations they experience as they respond to others' stories.

○ **STEP 6: ADDITIONAL REFLECTION QUESTIONS** (optional):

- Did anything surprise you about others' reflections on the courage challenge?
- Did it leave you with a greater sense of belonging or connectedness to yourself or others involved in those situations? If yes, in what way and why?
- Did others' reflections motivate you in any way? If so, how?

(Note: Encourage students to pair-share and then take responses from the large group.)

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## EXTENSIONS

- Consider keeping the Courage Chain on the wall all semester so that students can add to the chain each time that they take a courageous action. Alternatively, consider doing the Courage Challenge every month, quarter, or semester.

## REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- Were students left with an enhanced awareness of how they prioritize their values? How do you know?
- What other steps could you take to facilitate a positive classroom climate where students feel encouraged to try new things, persist with a challenge, speak up for the right thing, or feel comfortable expressing their authentic voice?

## THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

### EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

Educators can support the development of students' [understanding of courage](#) by helping them identify the characteristics of courage and the ways that they can foster it. In fact, in their cross-cultural classification of 24 different virtues (or values), positive psychology [researchers](#) link four specific character strengths to the development of courage—zest (or vitality), bravery, honesty, and perseverance. And studies demonstrate that when we share stories or examples of courage, we can reflect on common [values](#) while potentially increasing our [empathic](#) responses to one another.

### WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Courage comes in many forms—from showing the bravery to take an academic risk to standing up for others and speaking honestly in the face of [injustice](#). In fact, studies suggest that when young people feel empowered to act courageously, they experience [decreases in their anxiety](#) and [stress](#), achieve greater academic engagement and [success](#), and contribute to creating kinder and more [altruistic](#) classrooms.