



# DESIGNING THE CLASSROOM TO PROMOTE KINDNESS

*“Communication is merely an exchange of information, but connection is an exchange of our humanity.”*

-Sean Stephenson

## OVERVIEW

Students assess their classroom decor and set up, and provide input on changes that could be made to subtly cue kind behavior.

## LEVELS

- PreK/Lower Elementary
- Upper Elementary
- Middle School
- High School

## PLANNING FOR IT

### WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- To create a classroom environment that encourages kindness
- At the start of a school year
- To provide students with the opportunity to voice their opinions

### TIME REQUIRED

- ≤ 30 minutes

### MATERIALS

- [Picture](#) from the research [study](#) on reminders of connectedness
- Writing materials

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Identify cues of social connection within the classroom
- Voice their opinions on how the classroom could be transformed to include more reminders of social connection
- Optional: create reminders of connectedness for the classroom

## 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](#)

## SEL COMPETENCIES

- Social Awareness
- Relationship Skills

## HOW TO DO IT

### REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- Try this practice at home. Choose a room in your house. Notice where you could add objects related to connectedness. Add such objects to the space.
- Do you notice a difference in your or your loved ones' behavior?

### INSTRUCTIONS

- Begin by asking students what encourages them to be kind to other people.
- Tell students about the research on reminders of connectedness. Be sure to show them the [photo](#) from the research [study](#) that shows the four different pictures used. You can say:
  - *Scientists who study kindness have found that little reminders of how we are connected to other people, such as posters of people laughing or talking together or chairs facing each other, can encourage children and adults to be kinder to each other. In one [study](#), eighteen-month old children saw some photos that had different household objects in the front of the picture; for some of these children, in the background of the picture were two small dolls facing each other—a little reminder of connection between people. But for other children, in the background were two stacks of blocks, a doll standing by herself, or two dolls turned away from each other. After viewing the photos, all of the children had the opportunity to help an adult in need. The children who had seen the little reminder of connection were three times more likely to help the adult.*
- Explain that you would like their input for how you could add more reminders of social connection to the classroom.
- Have students engage in a scavenger hunt around the room to identify and write down any existing reminders of connectedness.
- Have students share their findings with the whole group.

- In pairs, small groups, or as a whole class, have students write down what objects they would like to see along with an explanation for why the objects they list are reminders of social connectedness. Encourage students to consider where they would place the objects they list and whether they would remove any existing items. You may even encourage students to consider the set up of the classroom, and to offer suggestions for changes that could be made to the layout.
- Optional: If time permits and it feels relevant to your curriculum, you may assign students a project in which they create an art piece for the classroom that emphasizes connection.

## SOURCE

[Harriet Over](#), Ph.D., University of York

[Louisa Pavey](#), Ph.D., Kingston University London

## REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- Do you notice any changes in student behavior after adding objects related to connectedness or changing the layout of the classroom?
- Do you notice a difference in your own responses to others?

## THE RESEARCH BEHIND IT

### EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

In [one study](#), eighteen-month old children saw a series of photos that had different household objects in the foreground; for some of these children, in the background were two small dolls facing each other—a subtle reminder of connection. But for other children, in the background were two stacks of blocks, a single doll standing alone, or two dolls turned away from each other. After viewing the photos, all of the children had the opportunity to help an adult in need. The children who had seen the subtle reminder of connection were three times more likely to help the adult.

In another [study](#), adult participants between 18-34 years of age who read words associated with human connectedness were more interested in volunteering for a charity and were more likely to donate money to a charity.

### WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Research suggests that humans have a strong propensity for kindness and generosity, and that kindness improves the health and happiness of the giver, not only of the receiver. Indeed, [kindness](#) has been found to [benefit students](#) by increasing their well-being and peer acceptance, both of which lead to greater academic achievement, a stronger sense of belonging, and better relationships with peers and teachers.

But we don't always act on our altruistic instincts.

Fortunately, studies have identified ways to elicit people's deeply rooted propensities for kindness. One of the most effective is to evoke a sense of connectedness among people. Research suggests that even subtle reminders of connection, operating below the conscious level, can lead to concrete,

measurable increases in altruistic behavior. And encouraging students to be kind to each other will have a [ripple effect](#) that can spread throughout the school, improving school relationships among all stakeholders, leading to a more positive school climate.

## TERMS OF USE

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