



## ENCOURAGING MORAL CHARACTER THROUGH LANGUAGE

*“There's no room for hate and violence in this world. We must learn to be more kind, compassionate, empathetic, and sympathetic to humanity.”*

-Germany Kent

### OVERVIEW

Teachers review their lesson plans and classroom decor to identify opportunities for strategic use of language that encourages moral character.

### LEVELS

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

### PLANNING FOR IT

#### WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- To create a positive classroom climate at the start of the year
- To encourage moral character through generosity, honesty, and other character strengths
- To cultivate stronger peer relationships

#### TIME REQUIRED

- ≤ 30 minutes

#### MATERIALS

- N/A

#### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Teachers will:

- Review their lesson plans to identify opportunities for strategic use of language that encourages moral character
- Examine the classroom environment for similar opportunities

#### ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)
- [Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered](#)

#### CHARACTER STRENGTHS

- The ones teachers decide to emphasize

#### SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-Awareness
- Relationship skills

#### MINDFULNESS COMPONENTS

- Focused attention

#### HOW TO DO IT

#### REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

Consider the following statements: “Please help by donating a dollar” vs. “Please be a helper by donating a dollar.” How does each statement make you feel? Does one motivate you more than the other?

#### INSTRUCTIONS

Research shows that the use of nouns versus verbs is more effective at encouraging students to embrace a character strength. For example, if you want to see students engage in more helping behavior you might ask students to practice being helpers instead of asking them to practice helping. Consider applying this knowledge in your classroom by doing the following:

- Look over your lesson plans and identify areas where you can use the noun form of a word rather than the verb (e.g., forger vs. forgive, leader vs. lead, giver vs. give).
- Evaluate the messages displayed in your classroom and consider whether any could be changed as well (e.g., be a courageous hero vs. act with courage; be a helper vs. help each other) or whether new messages could be added.

#### SOURCE

[Christopher J. Bryan, Ph.D.](#), The University of Chicago Booth School of Business

#### REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- Do students seem to see themselves and each other in different ways (in accordance with the terms)? Is this reflected in their behavior? Do they use the terms more frequently?
- Are there other ways you might use this practice to support students' identity development (e.g., referring to students as mathematicians or scientists or historians or critical thinkers)?

## THE RESEARCH BEHIND IT

### EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

In one [study](#), students played a game where they could cheat to earn some cash. Researchers randomly assigned participants to two conditions, presenting each group with the same instructions. However, the language used differed regarding cheating—either emphasizing the actor's identity (e.g., "Please don't be a cheater") or the action (e.g., "Please don't cheat"). Participants in the action condition (e.g., "cheating") claimed more money than those in the actor condition (e.g., "cheater"), who showed no evidence of having cheated.

In another [study](#), researchers introduced children to the idea of "being a helper" (noun condition) or "helping" (verb condition). When children had the opportunity to help an adult, those in the noun condition engaged in more helping behavior when compared to children in the verb condition.

### WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Moral identity, which refers to the importance that people place on moral behavior as a key part of their identity, has been linked to greater [well-being](#), [meaning in life](#), cooperativeness, and a sense of being part of something larger than oneself. If we honor students' moral identities in the classroom, we can [help create](#) more effective and welcoming learning environments, encouraging qualities like honesty and humility as well as helping behaviors. This allows students to focus more on authentic [learning](#) rather than simply looking smart—and on supporting instead of competing with one another.

## TERMS OF USE

Thank you for downloading this resource! Please feel free to share it with friends, teachers, colleagues, and anyone else who might benefit from it.

Greater Good in Education is a free online resource produced by UC Berkeley's Greater Good Science Center. Visit our website at [ggie.berkeley.edu](http://ggie.berkeley.edu) to choose from more than 300 practices that can be incorporated into all aspects of a school community, from academic instruction to staff meetings to engagement with parents.

Please email us at [ggsceducation@berkeley.edu](mailto:ggsceducation@berkeley.edu) with any questions about our programs and resources for educators.

With gratitude,  
Greater Good in Education