



MAKING KINDER CLASSROOMS AND SCHOOLS

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

-Sean Stephenson

OVERVIEW

Staff evaluate school spaces and alter as necessary to subtly cue kind behavior, particularly in students.

LEVELS

- Adult

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- To create an environment that encourages kindness
- At the start of a school year
- When deciding how to arrange a classroom or school space

TIME REQUIRED

- ≤ 1 hour

MATERIALS

- N/A

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Teachers or school staff will:

- Evaluate the spaces they have control over to identify how many cues of social connection are present
- Make changes to school spaces to increase a sense of social connection

ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)
- [Adapting Practices for Students with Special Needs](#)
- [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

- Individually or as a school staff, take a moment to look around your office, the school cafeteria, or your classroom. What kinds of objects, words, and images surround you?
- Count how many of these objects, words, and images are related to social connectedness. This could include pictures of people interacting, words like “community,” “together,” or “friendship,” or even two stuffed animals facing one another on a shelf.
- Notice whether there are any empty walls or shelves where you could add new objects related to connectedness, or places where you could replace existing objects.
- Next time you're out shopping, looking through your belongings, or developing an art project for your students, see if you can find objects that evoke connection, even in a subtle way, and use them to fill these empty places or to replace existing objects.
- Finally, consider how the furniture in the room/space is arranged. Are chairs facing toward or away from each other? Are there common spaces that are conducive to social interaction? Rearranging the layout can also help to promote feelings of connectedness.

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?
- Are staff members kinder to one another?
- Do you notice a difference in your own responses to others?
- How might you make this a group exercise in which others help recreate the environment?

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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With gratitude,
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