



THE GENEROSITY EXPERIMENT

"For it is in giving that we receive."

-St. Francis of Assisi

OVERVIEW

Students conduct their own experiment around being generous to others and observe how it feels in their bodies and minds.

LEVELS

- Upper Elementary
- Middle School

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- In the beginning of the year to help cultivate a kind classroom
- To intentionally help build a kind school culture
- When students are having a challenging time sharing with each other
- As a fun "self-study" exercise to grow students' self and social awareness
- When reading a book whose characters display and/or struggle with generosity

TIME REQUIRED

- < 30 minutes over two days

LEVEL

- Upper Elementary
- Middle School

MATERIALS

- Something small to share (e.g., stickers, edible treats that are safe for students to eat), enough for each student to have several of the items to either keep or give away on two separate days
- Envelopes (two for each student)
- Writing tool (pen, pencil)

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Experiment with what it feels like in our body and minds to be generous
- Discuss the experience and benefits of being generous to others

ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)
- [Making a Practice Trauma-Informed](#)
- [Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered](#)
- [Other Supports, Modifications and Accommodations for Students](#)

CHARACTER STRENGTHS

- Generosity
- Sharing
- Kindness

SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-awareness
- Social Awareness and Relationship Skills
- Ethical Decision-Making and Social Responsibility

MINDFULNESS COMPONENTS

- Open Awareness
- Non-Judgment

HOW TO DO IT

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- Generosity can take many forms, such as material, e.g., giving school supplies to students who need it. But it can also be intangibles, such as being generous with your time, e.g., spending your lunch hour helping a student or volunteering on the weekend to support a charity. We can also extend generosity by giving that little bit of extra compassion to a student or parent who perhaps you might have struggled to muster compassion for initially.
- Can you recall a recent moment when you were generous with a student, a colleague, a family member, a friend, or maybe a stranger?
- How did it feel in your body, perhaps in your heart or stomach?
- Did it shift any thoughts for you? What emotions did you feel?
- Have you noticed any of your students being generous to someone? What did they do? Did you notice a shift in emotions in the giver or receiver?

INSTRUCTIONS

DISCUSS: WHAT DOES GENEROSITY MEAN?

- *Today we are going to talk about generosity. What does it mean to be generous? What are some ways you've seen people be generous or that you've been generous? Is being generous always easy to do? When is it challenging to be generous?*
- *Have you ever noticed how it feels when we're generous and/or when we're not generous? Sometimes our bodies can give us clues about when we're doing something good or when we're doing something that maybe we shouldn't be doing.*
- *We are going to do a scientific experiment to see how it feels to be generous and how it feels to not be generous, and whether that might help us decide whether we should be generous.*
- *In this experiment, we are going to be scientific observers of ourselves. We are going to observe how we feel when we decide to be generous and how we feel when we're not generous. We are also going to observe the impact of our generosity on other people. We are not going to judge ourselves or others, we're just going to observe, like real scientists.*

THE EXPERIMENT: DAY 1

- *Explain: Everyone is going to get one envelope with some [stickers/treats] in it.*
- *Today, your challenge is to decide whether you want to be generous with these items or to keep them for yourself. It is totally your choice, there is no judgment whatever you decide—this is your experiment.*
- *Before the end of the day, write down [or draw, if working with younger students] how you feel on your envelope. Describe [or draw] in as much detail as you can how you feel—from sensations in your body, to your thoughts, and your feelings.*

THE EXPERIMENT: DAY 2

- *Explain: Today we are going to do the experiment again, but this time, I want you to do the opposite of what you did yesterday. So if you were generous yesterday, don't be generous today. If you weren't generous yesterday, be generous today.*
- *At the end of the day, write [or draw] on your envelope how the experiment felt today. Describe [or draw] any emotions you felt or any sensations in your body. We will discuss our scientific findings when we've finished the experiment.*

DISCUSS: WHAT DID GENEROSITY FEEL LIKE?

- *At the end of the second day, discuss students' experiences with the two-day experiment.*

POSSIBLE DISCUSSION PROMPTS:

- *What did it feel like to be generous? What did it feel like to not be generous? There are no right or wrong answers, just observations. [Research has found that being generous can make us feel happy.]*
- *Did anything surprise you about what you felt after being generous? What about when you chose not to share your items?
Who did you choose to be generous towards? A friend or a classmate you don't know very well? Someone else? Is it easier to be generous towards some people than others?*
- *How did the other person (or people) react when you gave them the items? What did you observe about their mood or emotions? What about their body? Did they do something with their*

body to show how they felt? [[Research](#) has found that being on the receiving end of generosity can make people happy.]

- *Do you think you might have felt differently if what you were sharing was different? Maybe a bigger item? Or something you liked more?*
- *When is it challenging to be generous? What might get in the way of us being generous? [e.g., limited resources, when we don't know the other person]*
- *What can help us be generous in those situations?*
- *How would you encourage a younger student to be generous?*

OPTIONAL EXTENSIONS:

- **Non-material generosity:** You can do this activity without any material items. Challenge your students to do acts of kindness or be generous with their time or helpfulness on one day and nothing on the next day (or vice versa, let them decide), and have them record how it felt on both days.
- **Start with a reflection:** At the beginning of the day, have students write a small reflection about a time when they were generous towards someone else and how it made them feel. Then, at the end of the day, discuss with students whether they found moments to be generous that day. You might share that researchers have found that [reflecting on previous moments of generosity](#)—like students did today—might actually encourage us to be more generous the next time. Ask students if that felt true for them today.
- **Take this activity home:** Have students try this experiment at home and report back the next day.

SOURCE

Jenna Whitehead, Ph.D., Simon Fraser University

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- Were there any barriers for students to participate? If you were to try this again, what might you modify for the next time? Are there other conversations around generosity that might need to happen first?
- Did you notice any cultural differences in students' understandings and applications of generosity?
- Do you notice whether students are acting more generously with others after engaging in this practice?

THE RESEARCH BEHIND IT

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

[Researchers](#) studied 20 toddlers under two years of age as they shared treats with puppets, and discovered the children were happier giving treats away than receiving them. Even more surprising, children showed greater happiness when giving away their own treats compared to giving away treats they found or were given specifically to share.

This suggests the positive feelings we get from being generous, even when it costs us something (sometimes called the “warm glow”), may be an innate human trait that motivates us to be prosocial from very early in life.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

[Research](#) reveals that generosity often benefits the giver as much as the receiver. For example, we experience greater happiness when we [give to others](#) than when we spend on ourselves. Even though humans can be selfish at times, this happiness we feel as a result of our generosity proves that humans [are wired](#) to care for each other.

The positive outcomes of generosity extend to schools, as well. Indeed, science has found that school-age children who [engage in kind acts](#) are more well-liked by their peers and have improved well-being. And when students are more generous, they are less likely to feel superior to others and are more likely to support [equal treatment](#) for all groups. Thus, when we help students recognize the good feelings that come from generous acts, we create a [positive feedback loop](#) throughout the school, fostering a school community where everyone willingly tends to each others’ needs.

TERMS OF USE

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