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

DEAR ABBY: AN SEL KERNELS PRACTICE FOR SIXTH GRADE

"Life is a matter of choices, and every choice you make makes you."

–John C. Maxwell

OVERVIEW

Students imagine difficult situations and talk about strategies for making responsible, ethical, and healthy choices.

LEVELS

- Middle School

PLANNING FOR IT

WHY DO THIS?

- If students imagine and talk about decision-making when faced with different kinds of dilemmas, then they will have strategies and ideas for what to do, so they are equipped to handle real-life situations.

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- Integrated into your class schedule as part of a routine
- During a designated SEL block of 10-15 minutes per day for Kernels practice or as time allows
- When a dilemma arises in the classroom, in a book the class is reading, or as part of something being studied

TIME REQUIRED

- ≤ 15 minutes

MATERIALS

- Dear Abby Library

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Imagine a difficult scenario and brainstorm how to respond
- Discuss the potential outcomes of different solutions to the problem
- Reflect on what makes certain solutions better than others

ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- Making Practices Culturally Responsive
- Adapting Practices for Students with Special Needs
- Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered

SEL COMPETENCIES

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

HOW TO DO IT

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- Think about a difficult situation that you are currently facing, or that you have heard or read about.
    - What are the possible ways that you, or the people in the situation, could respond? What would be the consequences, both positive and negative, of each solution?
    - What do you think would be the best course of action to take? Why?
    - What social-emotional skills did you draw on in coming to your decision?

Note: *Click here to download and print a card version of this practice that can be added to the other SEL Kernels practices to make an easy-to-use hand-held collection. See the Brain Games pack for additional activities.*

THE BIG IDEA

- We all have different ideas about how to solve problems, and that's okay—there are many effective ways to solve a problem. We're going to imagine situations, brainstorm what the options are, and identify what we like or don't like about them. Talking about these choices will help us make decisions in the future when problems arise.

INSTRUCTIONS

- Choose a dilemma from the Dear Abby Library.
- Choose one of these activities: Small Group Discussion, Role-Play, Agreement Continuum, or create your own. (See "Activity Options" below for more information.)

- Say **The Big Idea** (above) and read the dilemma to the class.
- Follow these prompts to have a discussion:
    - Describe the dilemma and why it's a dilemma. Ask, "What makes this tricky?"
    - Brainstorm some options and their outcomes.
    - Ask, "What do you like and not like about these options? Why?"
    - Finish with a discussion of good solutions that have been brought up. Talk about why some options might be better for some than others.

MUST DO

- Ensure everyone has a chance to participate.
- Keep questions and conversations open-ended; there does not need to be a right answer.

CAN ADAPT

- Use stories from books, a dilemma that arises in the classroom, or other academic materials.

ACTIVITY OPTIONS

- Sixth grade is a time to continue to explore multiple perspectives about what it means to make a "good" decision, and be a "good" citizen/friend/community member, etc. Use current and historical events as relevant examples of dilemmas.
- **Small Group Discussion:** Ask groups of 3 – 4 students to discuss the dilemma and potential solutions in a group. Feel free to assign roles to them, such as the discussion leader (who makes sure everyone participates and that the group stays on track); the questioner (who asks questions to help the group think of the different ways to approach the dilemma); the recorder (who writes down potential solutions); and the speaker (who shares the group's solution with the class during the whole group discussion). As time allows, ask groups to share their solutions with the class.
- **Role-Play:** Ask students to pair up and role play what the different dilemmas and solutions might look like. As time allows, have a few pairs perform for the class.
- **Agreement Continuum:** Present the scenario, and ask students to generate three or four solutions. Then, create different spaces in the room (e.g., each corner of the room) for each solution. Ask the children to gather with peers who feel the same way in the designated space and discuss their solution.

AFTER THE ACTIVITY, DEBRIEF

- *Have you been in a similar situation before? What did you do? How did you feel about the choice you made?*
- *What's the difference between imagining choices for a character and facing a dilemma in real life?*
- *What are the different factors you considered when thinking about solutions?*
- *What other information might you need to better understand the dilemma and the solutions that are possible?*
- *How do you think other characters in the scenario see the situation? Would they see it the same way or differently? Why?*

TIPS FOR SUCCESS

- Use pictures or role play to support emergent bilingual learners. Allow students who speak the same language to brainstorm together before sharing with the class.
- Consider whether the scenario you choose might be uncomfortable or difficult for any of the students. Talk with the student in advance or choose a different scenario.

SOURCE

This practice is part of the SEL Kernels project developed by the EASEL Lab at Harvard University.

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- Were students engaged in the scenario and the discussion around it?
- Were the students able to come up with and reflect on different possible solutions to the dilemma? Was the dilemma at the right level for them, i.e., not so obvious that little discussion was needed or too difficult for them to think about?
- Do you notice students pausing to consider options when making decisions in real life?

THE RESEARCH BEHIND IT

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

Research shows that implementing character education programs in schools yields a number of positive results, including higher academic achievement, fewer suspensions as well as dropouts, and fewer risk behaviors of students.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Character is considered to encompass understanding, caring about, and acting upon core ethical values such as respect, justice, citizenship, and responsibility for self and others. It also frequently includes the values and habits required to be a good worker and perform to one's highest potential, such as perseverance, diligence, and self-control.

More than simply holding prosocial ethical and performance values, displaying strong character requires taking the initiative to act upon those values and having the perseverance to follow through on them when faced with ethical, interpersonal, and personal challenges. In many ways, character can be understood as a complex construct that marshals underlying cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal skills to produce and guide ethical thoughts and behaviors.

TERMS OF USE

Please email us at ggsceducation@berkeley.edu with any questions about our programs and resources for educators.

With gratitude,
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