



A Curriculum for Educating the Heart and Mind

EARLY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

CHAPTER 1

# *Creating a Compassionate Classroom*

## Overview

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At its core, SEE Learning is about students learning how best to take care of themselves and each other, specifically with regard to what can be termed their emotional and social health. Therefore, all of SEE Learning can be seen as rooted in compassion: compassion for oneself (self-compassion) and compassion for others. It is not enough, however, to tell students to be compassionate to others and to themselves; what is necessary is showing a range of methods and providing a set of tools. As students come to understand the value of these tools and methods, they will begin to employ them for themselves. At that point, they become their own and each others' teachers.

For this reason, Chapter 1, "Creating a Compassionate Classroom," introduces the foundational concepts of kindness and compassion. "Kindness" is the term employed for younger students, whereas "compassion" is employed for older students. Although there may be subtle differences between these terms, for the purpose of SEE Learning, the important thing is to introduce these concepts and explore them with your students so that they eventually develop their own rich understanding of the concepts and what they look like in practice. All the subsequent chapters of SEE Learning then build upon this foundation by exploring self-compassion in the personal domain with regard to the body, the mind, and emotions (chapters 2 to 4); compassion for others (chapters 5 and 6); and compassion in a systemic context (chapter 7). In some ways, therefore, this first chapter begins to introduce the "what" of SEE Learning and the remaining chapters fill out the "how."

Learning Experience 1, "Exploring Kindness," introduces the concept of kindness, explores what it means, and investigates why we need it. It also explores the relationship between kindness and happiness by using two activities: a step in/step out activity and a drawing of a moment of kindness. It is important for students to explore the connection between kindness and happiness. If students begin to recognize that our universal wish to be treated with kindness by others (rather than with cruelty) is rooted in our wish for well-being and happiness, then they can recognize that this tends to hold true for others also. Therefore if we want to be treated with kindness, it only makes sense for us to treat others with kindness also. This is the principle of reciprocity.

Learning Experience 2, "Class Agreements," provides an opportunity for students to create a list of class agreements that they will strive to abide by in order to create a safe and kind classroom for all. The creation of agreements by students helps them explore kindness in a direct way that shows the clear implications of our need for kindness within the context of a shared space with others.

Learning Experience 3, "Practicing Kindness," returns to the classroom agreements, with an intention to make the classroom agreements more concrete in the minds of your students. First the students engage in an insight activity whereby they translate the class agreements into practical examples that can be acted out. Then they act out those examples in front of each other and reflect

on what they experienced. This process of embodied understanding should continue as the school year goes on and will make it easier to refer to the class agreements concretely throughout the year.

Learning Experience 4, “Kindness as an Inner Quality,” aims to deepen students’ understanding of kindness through a few stories that are then discussed. We easily associate kindness with external activities, like giving someone food or money, saying sweet words to someone, or helping someone up when they fall. But if the intention behind those actions and words is to take advantage of the other person, then we do not see that as real or genuine kindness; nor do we see it as genuine help. The aim of SEE Learning is not to tell students what to do externally or to get them to behave “appropriately;” rather, it aims at helping students develop genuine internal motivation to seek the best in themselves and the best for others. Therefore, it is important that students gradually learn the importance of inner qualities and not just external behaviors. For this reason, it is important that students gradually learn that kindness goes deeper than just external actions but also refers to a state of mind and heart: one’s intention to bring help and happiness to another person. Based on this understanding, students then develop their own definition of kindness, which they can later add to and amend as their understanding develops in sophistication.

The chapter concludes with Learning Experience 5, “Recognizing Kindness and Exploring Interdependence,” which involves a further exploration of kindness, this time incorporating the idea of interdependence, which overlaps with the concept of gratitude, which will be explored in greater detail later in the curriculum. The idea here is that although we are surrounded by acts of kindness every day, we often do not recognize these acts of kindness or we take them for granted. By looking deeper at everyday activities and seeing the various ways kindness is involved, students can practice appreciating kindness as a skill that grows over time. Eventually they will be able to see more acts of kindness around them and they will get better at recognizing and appreciating their own acts of kindness. Practicing the skill of recognizing kindness in its various forms can lead to a deeper appreciation for how essential kindness is to our everyday life, our happiness, and even our very survival. In this learning experience, students will also be introduced to the concept of interdependence and how their own accomplishments and objects around them are made possible through the kind acts of others, setting the stage for a deeper exploration of interdependence and gratitude later in the curriculum.

It happens that some students find it difficult to recognize kindness in themselves and others. Acts that appear to us as kind, such as someone holding the door open for another person (or even the act of teaching!), may not appear as kind acts to some of your students. Be patient and allow your students to explore these concepts gradually. Hearing other students express what they see as kind can be helpful, as can having some students share kind acts that they noticed that were done by

fellow students. It may take time, but it is likely that over time you will see perspectives slowly shift towards a greater ability to recognize kindness in its many forms.

### **The Components of a SEE Learning Experience**

You will notice that each learning experience begins with a check-in, and that these check-ins change and develop over time. The check-ins provide a way of transitioning in to the SEE Learning experience and signaling a shift in the day, but they are also a way to strengthen skills through repeated practice. You are welcome and encouraged to use the check-ins at other times, even when you do not have enough time to do a full learning experience.

Some learning experiences involve discussions or presentations that give students a basic knowledge of a term or idea. This is for the purpose of received knowledge. The learning experiences also include insight activities, which are designed to be short activities that can move received knowledge into the realm of critical insights, personal “a-ha” moments when a student realizes something for themselves. Whenever possible, received knowledge is incorporated into the insight activities (rather than as a separate presentation) so that students can learn by doing.

In addition, learning experiences include reflective practices. These are for moving from critical insight into embodied understanding; they are for deepening the experience. In some cases there is not a sharp distinction between insight activities and reflective practices, because a reflective practice can lead to insights, and an insight activity can be repeated and deepened to encourage further reflection and internalization. Both insight and activities are sometimes marked with an asterisk. This symbol indicates that you are encouraged to do that particular activity more than once if you feel it would be helpful.

Finally, each lesson ends with a debrief, which is an opportunity for students to reflect on the learning experience as a whole and share their thoughts, feelings, and questions.

### **Time and Pacing**

Most learning experiences are designed to be a minimum of 20-40 minutes. It is recommended that you take longer than this if time allows and if your students are capable of it, spending more time on the activities and reflective practices especially. If you have less than 30 minutes, you can choose to only do one of the activities or a part of the activity, and finish the learning experience in the following session. However, remember that check-ins and insight activities are important to include regardless of time.

### **Setting Up a Peace Corner**

You may wish to set up a peace corner, where students can go when they are upset or need some time to themselves. This will also serve as a good place to post artifacts created by your students,

including charts and artwork that they create, and posters or other materials that are supportive of SEE Learning. Some classrooms have pillows, a stuffed animal, special pictures, a poster of the resilient zone (explained in Chapter 2), snow globes and hourglasses, music, story books, and other such resources. Explain to your class that the peace corner is a place where they can show kindness and compassion to themselves and practice some of the things they are learning in SEE Learning. Over time, just going to the peace corner may prove helpful for your students when they need to settle themselves or return to a place of well-being in their bodies, as they come to associate the peace corner with safety and well-being.

### **Student Personal Practice**

Eventually your students will be learning personal practices that they can use. SEE Learning recognizes that each student will connect with a different set of practices. SEE Learning also scales up into practices gradually, recognizing that if not approached skilfully, some practices may actually make students feel worse rather than better. Chapter One sets the stage for personal practice by establishing a safe and caring environment. Chapter Two then introduces practices that calm and regulate the nervous system. Chapter Three then introduces practices involving the cultivation of attention (and what are commonly called “mindfulness” practices). Chapter Four then introduces practices involving emotions. It is advised that you follow this sequence as best as you are able, as that way your students will be well prepared for each additional type of practice and will be able to return to the simpler forms of practice in case they become upset or dysregulated.

### **Teacher Personal Practice**

It is highly recommended that you begin some of the practices in Chapters 2 and 3 before you start teaching them to your students, if you do not already have familiarity with them. Even a slight bit of personal practice (such as a few minutes each day) will make your teaching more effective when you reach those sections. Starting early will allow you to get in as much practice as you are able before working on the practices with your students.

### **Further Reading and Resources**

If you have not yet completed reading the SEE Learning Framework, contained within the *SEE Learning Companion*, you are encouraged to read that up to and through the Personal Domain.

Also recommended is Daniel Goleman and Peter Senge’s short book *The Triple Focus*, and Linda Lantieri and Daniel Goleman’s book *Building Emotional Intelligence: Practices to Cultivate Inner Resilience in Children*.