

LATE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

CHAPTER 5

Learning About and From One Another

Overview

With this chapter, the SEE Learning curriculum turns from the Personal to the Social domain, and the learning experiences here seek to help students turn their attention away from themselves and towards others. Many of the same skills that were cultivated in Chapters 1-4 for the Personal domain can be applied here also, but this time while focusing outward towards their classmates and those they encounter on a daily basis.

Children of this age are naturally curious about others and attentive to them, but they sometimes lack the skills to know how to attend to others, ask questions, or explore their similarities and differences with others in meaningful ways. This chapter focuses therefore on three key areas, each covered in a single learning experience: understanding others' emotions in context; mindful listening; and exploring ways in which human beings are the same and different. The continuous theme of these learning experiences is empathy: the ability to understand and resonate with another's situation and emotional state. Empathy, and its attendant skill of mindful listening, in turn lays the groundwork for the following chapter on self-compassion and compassion for others.

At this age, children can on occasion assume that others should always think and feel the same as they do, or if they do not, they may feel that someone else's differences are such that they are completely different, with little in common. The point of this chapter is to explore the middle ground between these two extremes, appreciating both commonalities and differences for what they are, and seeing that neither negates the other. On such a middle ground that seeks to efface neither commonalities or differences, a respectful and genuine compassion for others can emerge.

In the first learning experience, "Understanding Others' Emotions in Context," students explore the ways in which people can have different emotional responses to the same situation. Through the story of Albert and Alice, students see two characters who have very different emotional reactions to the same situation, that of seeing a dog on the playground. Understanding that people might have different emotional responses to the same event is a critical understanding, as it provides the framework for understanding the ways in which context (such as past experiences or other aspects of our identity) informs and shapes our emotional responses to situations and those around us. This is important both for understanding sameness and difference, as well as for cultivating empathy.

Learning Experience 2, "Mindful Listening," explores the impact of poor listening behaviors and introduces the concept and practice of a type of active listening called mindful listening. "Mindful listening" means to listen respectfully and empathically with full attention without interrupting the other person, without being distracted, and without focusing on oneself or one's judgments. It is a communication skill that connects with both parts of empathy: the attentive listening allows one to

better understand the situation of the other and how they are feeling (cognitive empathy), while the act of respectful listening can help to create a resonance with the other person and show that one cares (affective empathy). This kind of listening builds on and reinforces students' attentional skills because it requires focusing solely on what the other person is saying, rather than on what one wants to say in response. Mindful listening also provides an opportunity for students to be listened to, without judgement, by their classmates, thereby creating safety. Students are asked to consider the ways in which mindful listening affects the speaker and the listener, as well as how these practices might impact the classroom community.

In Learning Experience 3, "Appreciating Diversity and Shared Commonalities," students explore the ways in which we are different and alike. Students revisit the "Step In, Step Out" activity from Chapter 1 to explore meaningful differences and similarities. This activity can be made most meaningful if tailored to the specific contexts of your students, as recommended and explained further in the teaching tips of the learning experience. Students then identify things that all or most people have in common, as opposed to things that make people different, and lastly, things that make each of them unique. Identifying shared commonalities puts difference in perspective and again supports empathy while moving towards a systems-level appreciation of common humanity, which comes in later chapters.

Student Personal Practice

Developing a deeper understanding of oneself and others is an ongoing process. Through the application of skills previously introduced and worked on, such as attention and emotional awareness, students can expand their appreciation of themselves, their classmates, and other people who share our planet. Specifically, the skill of mindful listening, introduced in this chapter, can be reinforced throughout the week, especially when students have opportunities to talk with and listen to each other. This is a practice that students can apply readily in their daily life.

Teacher Personal Practice

While teaching this chapter, reflect on your own experience with mindful listening. Is this the kind of listening that you regularly engage in at work or home? If you think listening more mindfully with empathy could be beneficial, try to catch yourself in the act of less mindful listening, and see if you can adjust your behaviors. Make note of the impact on yourselves and others when you are able to listen mindfully and with empathy. If you are having difficulty listening to someone with mindfulness and empathy, see if reminding yourself of your shared common humanity helps: we all just want to be happy and avoid unhappiness.