

Inner Explorer  
Beyond The Program for Teachers  
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# the compass

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**Presence vs Presents**



## Dear Inner Explorer Teachers,

We hope you all had a lovely holiday break and that you were able to relax and enjoy time outside of the classroom. As we enter this new year, we would like to encourage you to practice *presence* in your life and motivate your students to do the same. You may be familiar with the expression, *there is no gift like the present*, and one could certainly change it slightly – *there is no gift like presence*.

Think about your life and when you feel most happy in relationship. Who are you closest to? Why are you closest to him or her or them? The answer may be found in *presence*, the people we love are those to whom we feel the deepest connection; people that truly listen to us; they aren't on their phones when they are talking to us or multi-tasking our relationship. In short, they are present for us. (It is said we only remember 25% of what is told to us, often that's because we aren't really listening! We may be planning what we want to say next, or even worse, planning something else entirely while someone is telling us something important to them!)

Now think about a gift you received some time in the last year. Notice how that gift makes you still feel. Follow-up that thought about a gift with a conversation or activity you had or did with someone that was very meaningful to you. Can you remember the words that were spoken? Can you still feel the warmth or excitement of that conversation or activity? Can you remember how that person made you feel? Which of these, the gift or the experience feels more important to you?

Yesterday we asked 16 teachers if they'd rather have a present (gift) from each of their students or a class full of kids who were present and learning and not causing distraction. Every single teacher said they would prefer presence from their students over presents.

Finally, when we are very busy, we may become not present for those important people in our lives. While

we are glad they are there, we may not pay them much mind. How about in this new year, we give our peeps more of our presence? If you live with others, how about really being there for them, looking them in the eye, really listening to what they have to say and sharing some of your day with them.

## Class Conversations or Writing or Drawing Exercises

1. Ask your students to describe something someone gave them for no reason, for a birthday or as a holiday gift. (Be careful not to specifically mention Christmas, Chanukah or Kwanza as some may not have received anything.) They can do this in words or by drawing a picture. Give them several minutes to do this. Then ask them to describe a conversation or an activity they experienced that made them feel really good. Ask them to compare the two. (You might want to provide an example by sharing something in your life so the kids understand what you are asking them). As a class you can have a conversation about this as a way to help them foster presence in their lives.

2. Have the kids do skits, one showing a lack of presence in a conversation and one showing real presence. Perhaps you could demonstrate with a student. After a few skits in front of the class, split your kids up into pairs and ask them to do the same.

3. Make a list as a class of what characteristics are required to be present; ie. looking at the other person, not doing something else while listening, asking questions, nodding, acknowledging what the other is saying, NOT talking about yourself or your trip or your experience when someone is telling you about theirs.

4. Encourage the kids to be present with someone in the school they may take for granted; ie. cafeteria staff, janitorial staff, front office staff. Brainstorm ideas about what types of interactions they might have. ie. with cafeteria staff, saying...I am so grateful for you, thanks for being here every day to give us lunch or wow, your hair looks nice, or that food looks great today...

5. Encourage the kids to foster presence with someone in their household. Please note that grandparents, aunts, uncles, parents may be really busy and seem to not have time for this. You can ask the students to ask their families for a two minute conversation every day.

6. There is a West African greeting, 'Sawa bona,' which translates to 'I see you. The traditional response is 'I am here'. Get kids in pairs and have them greet each other in this way and respond with I am here. Encourage them to really look in each other's eyes while they engage in this activity. Have a group discussion to talk about what this felt like for them.

## Neuroscience of presence

When we are present for someone, for an activity, or a lesson, we often feel calm and at ease. When we are present, we are aware that we are aware, and that knowing, that *presence*, creates the optimal level of physical, emotional and cognitive activation. Our awareness connects neurons from the prefrontal cortex, limbic system (amygdala and hippocampus) and the brain stem. This connection stimulates the parasympathetic or rest and digest part of our nervous system, making us feel good. The more present we are, the better we will feel, the more we will accomplish and happier we will be with others and the happier they will be with us!

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