Inner Explorer
Beyond The Program for Teachers
February 2015



Is It Helpful?



Dear Inner Explorer Teachers,

We hope your new year started off well and we're about to reach our second big holiday of 2015 (MLK Bday), Valentine's Day, a day of love. By celebrating Valentine's Day in schools with cards, candy and parties, we are sending certain messages to our students. Often teachers tell students, "If you bring Valentines to class, you must bring them for every student;" a wonderful lesson in inclusivity. As we think about Valentine's Day in schools, we'd like to make a suggestion of something to consider with your students. Paying attention to what we say to people, and as importantly, how we say it, may have a significant influence on nurturing or rupturing our relationships. Certainly how kids treat one another in class and on the yard impacts learning, feelings of self-worth and how they do in the world. 'Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me'. As all of us know, nothing could be further from the truth. Bullying is often done with words.

Considering all of this, you might want to encourage your students to ask themselves, "Is what I'm going to say helpful and kind?" If it's not, perhaps it's better not being said. Being mindful of how we communicate with others makes a tremendous difference in relationships.

And then, of course, there's how we treat ourselves. While not all of us talk to ourselves out loud, our internal thoughts often speak quite loudly. Sadly, many of us show little self-compassion for ourselves. We can be very hard on ourselves, expecting perfection, telling ourselves how dumb we are or berating our behavior. So, when we encounter a negative thought about ourselves, we can ask ourselves, "Is that thought helpful?" If it's not we can notice it, choose to stop thinking about it and then let it pass. Encouraging your students to notice their negative self-talk might be the best gift you could give them this Valentine's Day.

Class Conversations or Writing or Drawing Exercises

- 1. Invite your students to share a time when someone made a comment to them that was not helpful, and afterwards a time when someone made a helpful comment. Ask how they felt about each. (You can have this as a discussion or as a writing exercise).
- 2. Have your students notice their thinking for one class period or one half hour have them make a thatch mark each time they have a positive thought and do the same for the negative ones. Have a conversation reviewing whether the students are having more positive thoughts or more negative ones.

- 3. Break students into pairs and have them describe three instances when what they said wasn't helpful. Switch so both partners have time to share.
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- 4. In the same pairs, ask them to describe three instances when what they said was helpful. Switch so both partners have time to share.
- 5. At the end of the school day, think about who you spoke to and what you said. Make marks for the helpful things you said and then review the unhelpful things you said. Did you have more helpful conversations or more unhelpful ones? Just notice what is true for you.
- 6. Draw yourself having a helpful conversation. Draw yourself having an unhelpful conversation. Is there any difference in your posture and in how you see yourself?
- 7. Draw your face as you are having positive thoughts. Now draw your face when you are having negative thoughts.

Neuroscience of Negativity

Author Rick Hanson writes about the negative bias of our brain. He suggests that negativity sticks to our brain like velcro and that we must counteract that negativity by focusing on the positive. Vocalizing negativity sends stress hormones throughout the body of both the speaker and the listener whether they are children or adults. Those hormones disrupt high level functioning of the brain often resulting in poor behavior and communication. Negative thinking or rumination also releases stress hormones, and the more negative thinking in which we engage, the more turmoil we will experience. Therefore, it behooves us to teach children to notice any tendencies towards negative speech or thought by asking, "Is what I'm going to say helpful? Is that thought helpful?"

WE WANT TO HEAR & SHARE YOUR STORIES!!!

One of the most rewarding aspects of being involved with a mindful awareness program is listening to the heart-warming stories of how the program affects students and teachers. Some of the most important learning occurs from hearing others' stories. On that note, we'd like to feature your stories and photos in our Beyond the Program monthly newsletter! Please send your stories and photos to Tabitha at totoole@innerexplorer.org.

(If you send a photo, we will need a completed consent form. Click here to print the photo release form.)

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