

No Place for Hate[®] Activity Library

Intent, Impact and Bias

Lesson Plan and Overview

This activity is based on the lesson plan: [Intent vs. Impact: Why Does it Matter?](#)

When it comes to identity and bias, the intent of our words and the impact those words have on others does not always match. This can cause students to feel unsafe, excluded or disrespected. Therefore, it is important to reflect on the disconnect between intent and impact and make more intentional and informed decisions in communicating. This can be challenging because we don't always know how our words and actions may impact others. Because offensive words can cause harm, it is important to consider and prioritize the impact of those words. Reflection and practice can make a difference.

Grade Level

Grades 7-12

Learning Objectives

- Students will understand the difference between intent and impact.
- Students will reflect on situations where there is a disconnect between intent and impact.
- Students will be able to come up with ways to prioritize impact over intent when it comes to bias.

Materials Needed

- T-chart on board/smart board
- [When it Comes to Bias, We Must Consider Impact in Addition to Intent](#)
- [Scenarios](#)

Words You Might Use

Ally: Someone who speaks out on behalf of or takes actions that are supportive of someone who is targeted by bias or bullying, either themselves or someone else.

Bias: An inclination or preference, either for or against an individual or group, that interferes with impartial judgment.

Impact: How words or actions are experienced, felt or understood by either the person they are directed to, or others.

Intent: What we mean by our words or actions.

Core Activity

First, read aloud the following scenarios, one at a time, or read all three and then go back and read one at a time and use the process below to explore them with students.

- *A middle school student doodles swastikas in his notebook and shows it to a Jewish classmate sitting nearby; later he tells his teacher he didn't know it was a hate symbol.*
- *At a debate club meeting, a student makes a sexist "joke," but when another student says they found it offensive, the student responds by saying "Calm down. I was only kidding."*
- *On the school bus, students are listening to a song by a popular singer; the song has an ableist slur in it. When those lyrics come on, the students go out of their ways to vocalize the slur in the lyrics loudly and enthusiastically. When they are confronted about using the slur, they say they were just "singing along" and they weren't "using a slur on purpose."*

After reading each scenario aloud, ask students: *What is happening here?* Draw a T-chart (see below) on the board/smart board and after students respond to the "what's happening here" question ask: *What was the person's intent?* Define intent as "what we mean by our words or actions." Then ask: *What was the impact on the other person?* Define impact as "how these words or actions are experienced, felt or understood by either the person they are directed to, or others." Then ask: *Does the intent match the impact?*

Intent	Impact

Elicit/explain to students that sometimes someone's intent does not match their impact. In other words, there is a difference or disconnect between what someone means to say and how their words impact or are heard and felt by others. Ask: *What are some reasons there may be a disconnect between intent and impact, especially when it comes to identity and bias?* Here are some reasons students might come up with:

- We may not be able to anticipate the harm we cause others because we might not know that certain words, "jokes" and language are offensive, slurs or biased.

- We may not know or understand the history, experiences and perspectives of the people we are interacting with. Not having this background information can cause us to harm them without us meaning to.
- We tend to see things from our own points of view and might not be able to see or understand what we say from another person's (the recipient) point of view so for us it might not be offensive or biased, but for them it is.

Next, read aloud [When it Comes to Bias, We Must Consider Impact in Addition to Intent](#) or have students take turns and read aloud together. After reading, have students turn and talk with someone sitting nearby, inviting them to share their initial thoughts and feelings about the article with each other and answering one or more the questions:

- What is the main message of the essay?
- How did it make you feel?
- Have you ever experienced a situation where the intent and impact didn't match? What was that like?

Then have each pair join with another pair and have the small group of four talk together about the article, answering one or more of these questions:

- Is it easy or difficult to focus on impact? How so?
- What strategies might you use to prioritize impact over intent, based on the article?
- What other ideas do you have?
- Why is it important to prioritize impact over intent?

Reconvene the group and ask if anyone would like to share any of their small group responses with the larger group/class.

Finally, divide students into six small groups, assigning one of the "intent vs. Impact" [Scenarios](#) to each group. Ask each group to assign a recorder (to take notes) and a reporter (to share their thoughts with larger group).

(Note to Educator: *You don't need to use all the scenarios. If any are too "close to home" and could cause upset or harm, do not use that scenario.*)

Have students read and discuss the assigned scenario in their small groups, answering some or all of the following questions as a group and reminding the recorder to take notes on their discussion.

- What is happening in this scenario?
- What is the disconnect between intent and impact?
- How is the person (or people) negatively impacted, hurt or harmed?

- What could the people who caused the harm say or do differently?
- What can they do to repair the harm?
- What can you learn from this scenario in order to not negatively impact, hurt or harm others?
- Why is it sometimes difficult to prioritize impact over intent?
- Why is it important to focus on the impact of your words or actions?
- What are your ideas or advice to others for how to prioritize impact over intent?

Reconvene the group/class and have the reporter from each of the small groups report back on what the scenario is and to share some of their group discussion reflections.

If time permits, reconvene the group and revisit the last few questions. Invite students to create a poster (paper or digital) with words and/or pictures that shares either (1) one idea about why it's important to prioritize impact over intent or (2) one strategy they and others can use to prioritize impact over intent. Display the posters around school on bulletin boards and hallways and/or create a video compilation of the posters and share the video with the school community.

Optional Follow-Up/ Going Further

Note: These additional activities can be done as follow-ups to the core activity and they can also serve as an additional NPFH activity if the core activity is completed first.

- If you didn't do the poster creation activity in the Core Activity (last paragraph), engage students with it as a follow-up activity.
- Remind students about how it can be difficult sometimes (especially in the moment) to prioritize impact over intent and how practice may be helpful. Have students work in pairs or triads to come up with possible responses for what you can say or do in the moment to prioritize impact over intent. One example is to have an inner dialogue with yourself, asking yourself, "I wonder what impact this 'joke' may have on others." They can then use the answer to that question to consider making a different decision. After students come up with ideas, engage them in practicing how to come up with responses or alternatives in the moment and then share some of those ideas or role plays with the larger group.
- Have students write a self-reflection essay or make a video reflection about a time where their intent and impact didn't match or when someone said or did something to them that was harmful even though the person did not intend to cause harm. Invite students to reflect in writing or in their video on some or all of the following questions: *What happened? What was the disconnect between intent and impact? Why do you think there was a disconnect? What could you or the other person have done differently? What could you or the other person have done to repair the harm? What did you learn from this experience? What is your advice to others about prioritizing impact over intent?*

Home Connection (Optional)

Share ADL's Table Talk [Slurs and Biased Language](#) or [What is Everyday Bias?](#) with families.

How Activity Meets NPFH Requirements

Students will learn what is the difference between intent and impact. Especially when it comes to bias, this is important in trying to prevent bias or causing harm to another person. Students will reflect on situations that involve bias and explore how to prioritize impact over intent. These discussions and explorations will help students avoid biased language and actions and help students feel more respected and included.

When it Comes to Bias, We Must Consider Impact in Addition to Intent

A middle school student doodles swastikas in his notebook and shows it to a classmate sitting nearby; later he tells his teacher he didn't know it was a hate symbol.

A staff member at a team meeting makes a sexist "joke," but when a colleague responds that they find it offensive, the person retorts with, "I was only kidding."

A group of white teenagers sing along to a song, loudly vocalizing the N-word in the lyrics; when the incident is reported, the students respond that they "were just singing along" and they weren't "using a slur on purpose."

In each of these examples, there is a disconnect between intent and impact. Those using biased or offensive language excuse their behavior by pointing to being unaware, their ignorance or a lack of "bad" intentions, instead of acknowledging the harmful impact of their offensive words and actions on the people around them.

What is Intent and Impact?

Intent is **what we mean** by our words or actions. Impact is how those words or actions are **experienced, felt or understood** by either the person they are directed to, or others.

When it comes to biased language or actions, we often prioritize intent over impact. This means that when harm is caused, we tend to emphasize what we meant by our words or actions—rather than how our words made another person feel or the consequences of our behavior. We might also excuse, or brush under the rug, the offensive words or actions if we perceive them as unintentional. In discussing a biased incident, we might redirect the focus to a person's intentions (i.e., "I didn't mean it like that"), rather than focusing on the feelings of the person who has been harmed. In this way, we center intention rather than the impact on others.

Prioritizing intent happens every day in all aspects of our lives—in the classroom, at work, in public spaces, online and at home.

Regardless of intent or whether actions and words were purposeful, the targeted or affected person is still harmed. That's why it is critical to prioritize impact and acknowledge the harm that was caused.

Using the example of the sexist "joke" at the staff meeting, the staff member who told the joke may not have realized it was sexist. Perhaps they wanted to make everyone laugh, or build camaraderie or intimacy. Or maybe the person is a new team member and humor is their usual way to connect with others. But their sexist "joke" caused harm to other members of the team, particularly those who are experiencing sexism in other aspects of the job. The joke made them feel even more excluded and marginalized than they already feel. Instead of saying "I was only kidding," the person who made the comment should have focused on the harm they caused.

Whether intentional or not, offensive and biased words—even jokes—cause harm. That harm or impact can take many forms. It can feel like a direct attack on the identity of a targeted person—on a core part of who they are. It can cause a person to feel they don't belong, that their feelings aren't important, or that they aren't respected or valued. It can cause the targeted person to stop participating in an activity or group. They might even leave a job or start skipping school. The harm can result in making the targeted person feel uncomfortable, scared or threatened because they fear that comments

could be precursors to more consequential acts of bias (e.g., discrimination, violence). The harmful and offensive words and actions can also target others who identify in that same way, or other marginalized identity groups who feel their group could be next.

Lizzo and Intent and Impact

An example from a few years ago involving singer Lizzo is illustrative. When Lizzo released a song with an ableist slur in it, disability activists brought the hurtful nature of the word to Lizzo's attention. She did not know it was a slur and her lack of knowledge of and sensitivity to ableist language caused her to use it unknowingly and as a result, cause harm.

It's not always easy to prioritize impact over intent. Like Lizzo, we may not be able to anticipate the harm we cause others because we lack the knowledge or understanding of offensive words and language, be they subtle or overt. We may not know or understand the history, experiences and perspectives of the people with whom we are communicating. Not having this background information can cause us to harm them unintentionally. As a society and as individuals, we tend to see things from our own points of view and often lack the ability to see and understand things from others' point of view. That is what we need to change.

Privilege can also be a factor. It is a privilege to not have to be concerned about or consider the impact of our words, especially on marginalized identity groups. For the identity groups for which we hold privilege, we may not see, understand or feel the harm of those in the marginalized group because it doesn't affect us or our group.

How Can We Prevent Harm or Bias?

How do we prevent ourselves from causing harm to begin with? What can we do to avoid negatively impacting another person by our words and actions when we don't mean to?

First, do a gut check. If you feel unsure or uncomfortable about something you plan to say, or if you think your words could be misunderstood or harmful, take time to reconsider what you are about to say or do. Take a pause to self-reflect and ask yourself a few questions that center on the potential impact of your words and actions. It's best to err on the side of caution, especially when you are communicating in public spaces like schools, workplaces and communities that need to be welcoming and inclusive.

Here are some questions to ask yourself:

- Who is the person/community to whom I'm directing these comments? What identity group(s) do they belong to? In what ways could their experience and perspective differ from my own?
- If I have caused harm in the past, what have I learned from that?
- Could these words be misunderstood or cause harm? How so?
- Would I use this language with someone else or a different community?
- Could someone perceive my words or actions as biased, insensitive or offensive? Could my words make this environment less welcoming to some people, even if they are not here now?
- What words could I use instead?
- If I am trying to convey familiarity and closeness by using a joke or other language, what is another way to convey that feeling that won't cause harm?

Even if you actively work to prevent harm, your words or actions may still negatively impact another person, even if it's not on purpose.

When Lizzo was given the feedback about her offensive lyric, she listened, reflected on her actions and then re-released the song without the slur in the lyrics. She explained, “I’ve had many hurtful words used against me so I understand the power words can have (whether intentionally or in my case, unintentionally).” Lizzo acknowledged—whether intentional or not—she caused harm and then took steps to repair that harm. She prioritized the impact of her words, rather than her intentions.

If you realize the harm in the moment (because the person said something or by observing their body language or facial expression) or learn later you’ve caused harm, here are some strategies for responding.

1. Resist the urge to say things like, “I didn’t mean it like that,” “That was a miscommunication,” “I was just joking,” or “You’re reading too much into it.”
2. If the person shares with you why it was harmful, listen with the goal to understand and empathize, not defend or explain yourself.
3. Center the person who was harmed—their feelings, experiences, and perspective—not yourself or your intentions.
4. Apologize and acknowledge the impact that your words or actions had on the person.
5. Learn from your mistake and do better. Depending on your relationship with the targeted person, seek to learn more without putting the responsibility on them to educate you.
6. Take responsibility for your own learning about harmful language by reflecting on those and other harmful words by reading, watching and listening.

Our words are powerful and consequential. Our words can inflict harm. However, our words can also be used to take accountability and make amends when we’ve caused harm. The more we focus on the impact of our words, the more likely our schools, online spaces, workplaces and communities will be safe, respectful and inclusive for all.

Scenarios

Scenario #1

A group of young people are hanging out after school at one of the friends' houses. They're listening to music and a song comes on that uses the N-word several times. Everyone is singing along. Among the group are two Black young people and the rest of them are white. As the N-word comes onto the song, the white kids say it out loud and are kind of giggling when they say it. The two Black young people feel uncomfortable but don't know what to say.

Scenario #2

In Math class, a teacher was demonstrating how to calculate angles. To show how to do it, he straightened his arm out, then lowered it and then raised it up again. He realized in that moment that it looked like he was making a Nazi salute. Feeling awkward and uncomfortable, he said "Heil Hitler" which he thought was a way of easing the tension and making a joke of the whole thing. A few students laughed, but most of the class looked down and didn't know how to react.

Scenario #3

Everyone uses emojis all the time—with texting, on social media, gaming, DMing, etc. For the hand, finger and people emojis, there are options for different skin complexions. Most people use the complexion that matches their race or skin complexion, but you often see one or two people that always use the darkest skin complexion even though they are light-skinned or white. People of color are often annoyed or even offended by this but don't say anything about it.

Scenario #4

In the cafeteria, a group of friends sits together at lunch. One student says to her friends, "I just don't get why Alex changed their name and pronouns. It's so confusing. I've known them as a guy for years, so why can't they just stay as they were?" Other students chime in that they don't get it either and don't know which pronouns to use. Alex hears about the conversation and now feels uncomfortable and hurt and isn't sure what to do.

Scenario #5

Before class one day, a student sees his classmate, an Asian student, come into the classroom. He casually walks over to her and says they haven't talked much and asks where she is from. She says she's from Chicago and he says, "No, no, I mean, where are you really from?" She starts to feel uncomfortable and says again that she's from Chicago, was born and raised there. He asks again, and she just shrugs. He finally says he wants to know where her family is from, her background or heritage. These questions make her feel like her identity isn't being accepted as fully American.

Scenario #6

It's "Multicultural Day" at school and there are events, wall displays and activities that are intended to be focused on different racial and ethnic groups from around the world, and to help everyone feel included and welcomed. There are different words used in some of the programming and displays like "Indian," "Oriental," and "Minority." This special day is supposed to help people feel included but the outdated language makes some feel the opposite.