

No Place for Hate[®] Activity Library

The Power of Words: Understanding and Challenging Biased Language

Lesson Plan and Overview

Lesson Plan: [Words that Can Hurt, Help and Heal](#)

As we go about our days, biased language is all around us—on the street, in our classrooms, on social media, in workplaces, on walls and buildings, in the media and among celebrities and politicians. Words have power. Words have the power to cause hurt, pain and harm to young people and others. Words that address that bias, words that are heartfelt, helpful and healing, can make a difference in helping young people feel included, respected and safe. It is important to address biased words and language with students so these words don't lead to more bias, discrimination and hate.

Note to Educator: Because this activity helps students explore biased language including slurs, it is important to consider the level of trust and maturity among your students to discuss this sensitive topic. Before proceeding, assess your students' ability to participate in a productive way. If you haven't had discussions about identity and bias before, consider addressing some of those foundational topics and skills before leading this activity. Review your school or classroom guidelines if you have already created them. If not, take 15–20 minutes to establish classroom guidelines or use ADL's [Establishing a Safe Learning Environment](#). Throughout the activity, remind your students that the goal of discussing biased language is to understand its impact and explore ways to address biased language like slurs and others. During the activity, do not put students in the position of having to explain their identity or the biased language directed at their identity group. It is critically important that you emphasize to students that they should never use or say out loud any of the biased words, including slurs, during the activity as it can cause harm to students. When explaining this to students, you can use language to this effect: "We will not use slurs or other biased language in the classroom. It causes harm, especially to those targeted by it, and can cause a great deal of harm to hear it out loud or see it in writing, even when that's not the intention. For example, we will never use the actual N-word or the F-word in this classroom and only use 'N-word' or 'F-word' or 'racist slur,' or 'heterosexist slur' when referring to it."

Grade Level

Grades 6–8

Learning Objectives

- Students will reflect on the power of words.
- Students will explore the impact of biased and hateful words by reading student essays on the topic.
- Students will consider how to act as an ally when they see or face biased language.

Materials Needed

- [Stories from *What Does Hate Look Like?*](#) (one copy for each student)
 - Post-it® notes (3-5 per student)
 - [6 Ways to Act as an Ally](#) (to project or distribute a copy, for optional activity)
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Words You Might Use

Ally: Someone who helps or stands up for someone who is being bullied or the target of bias.

Bias: An inclination or preference either for or against an individual or group that interferes with impartial judgment. Bias can be *conscious* (explicit or overt and intentional) or *unconscious* (implicit or unintentional and based on assumptions and “norms”), but both are potentially harmful regardless of intent.

Identity: The qualities, beliefs, etc. that make a particular person or group different from others.

Slur: An insulting remark or comment about someone, usually based on an aspect of their identity like race, gender, religion, etc.

Stereotype: The false idea that all members of a group are the same and think and behave in the same way.

Core Activity

First, begin the activity by asking students to think to themselves: *When you hear a compliment or someone says something nice to you, how do you feel? When someone says they like something about you or says thank you or expresses something they appreciate about you, what thoughts and feelings come up for you?* (Note: If students want to share their thoughts or feelings aloud, allow a few to do so.). Then ask students to think to themselves: *When someone tells you that you messed up or you’re not good at something, how do you feel? When you hear a negative word like a put-down, slur or an offensive comment about your identity, what thoughts and feelings come up for you?* (Note: Again, if students want to share their thoughts or feelings aloud, invite a few to do so.) Ask students:

- How do words make us feel?
- What did you notice about the positive words? What did you notice about the negative words?
- What impact do words have on us?
- Do words have power? Please explain

Make the point that words have power to make us feel hurt or harmed and they also have the power to make us feel good, heartened (cheered up/ encouraged) or helped. Have students turn and talk with someone sitting nearby and invite them to share a time that they experienced or witnessed someone using words in a powerful way—that were used to hurt or help.

[Optional: As an additional option for the beginning of the activity, watch and discuss the short video, [The Lie](#). Explain that that the video shows fourth grade students talking about the negative words and ideas they have heard about themselves or other people based on their religion, race, ethnicity or gender and then they also talk about what they believe is true about their identity group. The video shows the students sharing words from poems they wrote in class. Discuss the video by asking: *What happens in the video? How did you feel while watching the students talk about their identity? If a video like "The Lie" were made in our school, how would it be similar or different? What is the message of the video?*]

Next, define the words bias, slur and stereotype. Ask students: *What are biased or offensive words, terms or language? What do they do?* Elicit/ explain that biased words put down, insult, offend, stereotype, exclude or try to marginalize a person based on them being part of a specific identity group. Distribute a copy of the [Stories from What Does Hate Look Like](#) to all students. Explain to students that these are quotes by real young people about their experiences with biased language (in the book, *What Does Hate Look Like?*) Have students read the essays or read them aloud together, with students taking turns.

[Note: As you are reading aloud or if students are reading on their own, point out words they may not know and when you come across something like "n****r," read it that way and do not say the slur aloud. Explain that these are slurs and you won't say the words aloud because they cause hurt and harm. Read it silently or read aloud together, with students taking turns.]

After reading, invite students to pick one of the quotes that they find important, impactful, meaningful, relatable or memorable. Then divide students into groups of three and have each student share the quote they chose and their responses to the following questions. Provide 8-10 minutes for this.

- Why did you choose the quote?
- What is the quote about?
- How did you feel while reading it?
- What do you think is the impact of these words on the young person who wrote this?
- How was it harmful or hurtful?
- What words or actions might help or heal?

Reconvene the class and ask a few students to share the quote they chose and to explain why they felt it was important, meaningful, relatable or memorable. Remind students to only share their own and not that of others in their triad. Engage students in whole class discussion by asking:

- How did you feel reading all of these quotes?
- What did you learn about biased words and language?
- What is your biggest takeaway?

Finally, engage students in a discussion about how to act as an ally when they hear biased or offensive language. Elicit/explain a definition of ally as “Someone who helps or stands up for someone who is being bullied or the target of bias.” Provide a brief example such as if you hear someone saying something offensive, pull the targeted person aside or text them and say, “Hey, I’m sorry they said that. Not cool.” Distribute 3-5 post-it notes to each student. Ask students: *If you’ve ever seen, witnessed or experienced hurtful or harmful words, did anyone say anything to help? What do you wish you or someone would have said?* Invite students to write their ideas about what someone could say to help, hearten or heal in response to a hurtful or harmful language—how to act as an ally. Collect all the post-it notes and post them on a wall or the board, giving students an opportunity to go to that space and read them all silently, or you can read them aloud. Then look for a way to involve the whole school in displaying the post-its about what someone could say to interrupt biased and harmful language.

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.

- Read aloud and discuss one or more picture books that convey important themes about the power of words. Discuss how the power of words was conveyed in the book. Then have students create their own picture books about the power of words. These books can be written for younger children, including siblings, cousins, friends’ siblings, elementary school children in the same district, etc. Some components of writing a picture book to consider: target audience, title, theme of the book, plot/story, characters, setting, words and language and illustrations. If time and interest permits, after completing the picture books, connect with a nearby elementary school or library and have students read their books aloud to younger children.

[Picture book suggestions include: *Areli is a Dreamer* by Areli Morales; *Big* by Vashti Harrison; *Each Kindness* by Jacqueline Woodson; *I Talk Like a River* by Jordan Scott; *Stacey’s Extraordinary Words* by Stacey Abrams; *The Smallest Girl in the Smallest Grade* by Justin Roberts; *Say Something!* by Peter Reynolds.]

- Have students use their post-it notes ideas and elaborate on them by creating a short PSA (Public Service Announcement) about the power of words. Explain to students that PSAs are short messages (usually 60 seconds or less and typically audio or video) that are shared with the public in order to raise awareness or impact public opinion about a social issue. Show students some sample PSAs as examples and engage them in a discussion about what was effective and why. Explain that in creating their own PSAs, they should first decide what the message will be (focusing on the power of words), who their audience is, write the script, create the storyboard, determine what people, props and visuals they need, practice and then create it. As a culmination, these PSAs can be shared with others in school and/or online.

- Project or distribute a copy of [6 Ways to Act as an Ally](#). Go over all the ways one can act as an ally in bias or bullying situations, eliciting examples from students. Then have them reflect on how each of the ways to act as an ally relates to bias and hateful language and how they can act as an ally when they see, hear or face biased language. Then find ways for them to amplify these ideas by making posters, videos, social media posts, etc.

Home Connection (Optional)

Share ADL's Table Talk [Slurs and Biased Language](#) with families.

How Activity Meets NPFH Requirements

Students will reflect on the impact of people's words, words that can cause hurt and harm and also words that can help, hearten and heal. Biased and offensive language is especially harmful because it targets members of identity groups. Exploring ways to address and act as an ally. when experiencing or witnessing biased or hateful words, contributes to a safer and more inclusive and equitable school community and climate.

Reading Activity: Stories from *What Does Hate Looks Like?*

1. "It happened in Grade 8 French class. The teacher left the room and three boys stood up and did the Hitler salute to our teacher. One yelled 'Heil Hitler' when she came back into the room. The teacher was so shocked and tears welled up in her eyes. She is an older lady who is Jewish. Someone told us later that her parents survived the Holocaust. I really liked her, she was a great teacher, and it made me angry and sad that these boys did this and made her feel this way. No one deserves that."
2. "So, I was hanging out with my friends at the mall one day. We were just chilling and having fun. Then a bunch of white girls come by and start getting in our business. We told them to leave us alone. Then one of the girls shouts, 'Shut up N*****.' I started to cry but held my tears so she couldn't see that she hurt me, but it hurt so much and I kinda didn't even know why. I don't know why she was that angry, but no one should ever be called that word, ever. I never understood the power of hate behind that word until that moment. I will never forget the first time I was called the N-word sadly knowing it would not be the last."
3. "It started in third grade. I was and still am a victim of skin shaming. I was friends with this group of girls. There was one girl who hated me. She always made fun of me because my skin was darker than hers. I started to hate the color of my skin and kept saying to myself every day that I hate my skin color. I felt like I was less desirable and less lovable because my skin is darker. I know it's not true, but the pain and embarrassment of hearing her hateful words haunt me to this day."
4. "I remember very vividly the first time I was called a homophobic name. I was in my apartment watching YouTube when I heard a knock on the door. Since I was home alone, I went to the door to open it. There was no one there. I closed the door, but before it fully closed a little yellow sticky fell to the ground. On the sticky were the words 'die' and an anti-gay slur written in black marker. I stopped and stared for a moment and didn't know what to do. There was no one in the hallway. I looked up and down several times as tears stung my eyes. Then I heard snickering as the elevator doors closed, and I shut my door and sat on the floor. I sat there for a very long time. The pain was unbearable. I thought people in my building were my friends. I walked to school with them every day. They knew I was gay, and no one had ever made fun of me before. I was devastated. I didn't know how to react. Whoever did that never realized how much those words hurt me. That day changed me forever because a little part of me will never feel good enough again."
5. "I was waiting outside the mosque with my family to go to Friday prayer. A man pulled up in his car, yelling and calling us all terrorists. We ran inside because, just the week before, a mosque had been bombed, and people had died. We heard him yelling for a while. My mom held me close and cried. The fear was overpowering. My mom was so traumatized, she didn't speak the rest of the day. I still get anxious when we walk to the mosque. I will never understand why people want me to die because of my religion. My mom has never been the same since that day. She just always seems a little sadder than she was before."
6. "One day, I was walking down a main city street and this man looked at me and said, 'Go back to China.' I walked toward the nearby park, and he kept following me. I started to run, and he yelled, 'Don't eat my dog!' and kept following me. I ran through the park to a nearby store and tried to lose him, but I couldn't. My feet started to feel heavy, and my heart was pounding so fast. I was afraid. He was a big man and very intimidating. I finally found a lady to walk next to on the street and pretended I was related to her just so he would leave me alone. She saw the fear on my face and the tears in my eyes and asked if I wanted to call my mom. I called her and could barely speak. When I finally got the story out through sobs, my mom was on her way to pick me up. It was so stressful; I still cry when I think about it."

7. "I always enjoyed going to the community center. I have muscular dystrophy (MD) and my legs don't work as well as others. I can use crutches sometimes, but mostly I am in a wheelchair. At the community center, they are all really nice to me. But one day, there was a new person supervising in the gym. The community center gym is on the second floor, so I had to walk up the stairs using my crutches and have someone carry my wheelchair for me. Usually it's no problem, but that day was a big problem. When I got to the gym, the kids were picking teams for basketball. I love basketball. This is the reason I go to the community center—so I can play. The supervisor told me that I was in the wrong place. He told me to go away. He said that 'crippled' kids should not be in the gym because we could get hurt and he could get in trouble. I was so upset. I couldn't get the words out because my anger was building up inside me. I wanted to scream. Calling me crippled was so painful. It hurt me so much because I can't change the fact that I have MD. I couldn't even move to leave the gym. One of the boys I know came over to me. I pushed him away because I was so mad. I have never been so humiliated and angry in my whole life. I finally wheeled to the middle of the gym and told the supervisor to go to hell. I picked up a basketball, scored a shot from the three-point line, and wheeled away. I have never gone back because I never want to experience that pain again."
8. At the end of Grade 7, we all had autograph books to sign instead of yearbooks. I gave mine to my classmates to sign just like everyone else. Danny G. wrote, "The Year of the Cow." It was so hurtful and humiliating that I didn't want to give the book to anyone else. But Elaine G. grabbed it from my hand, read Danny's comment, and started laughing. I wanted to disappear, to be swallowed up by the ground, or to become invisible. She wrote the same thing. Danny was a mean bully, but I thought Elaine was my friend. I don't think they will ever know how much their words and laughter hurt. As a Jewish woman who struggled with weight, I have experienced my share of hate and microaggressions.
9. There was a girl in my class that no one seemed to like. I don't know why they didn't like her. I'm guessing it was because she just moved...and didn't speak English as well as the rest of our class. I just went along with it because that's what everyone else was doing. Over time, I noticed she was always last to be picked or never in a group at all during group work. She seemed so sad.

6 WAYS TO BE AN ALLY

Here are some simple things you can do to be an ally to targets of name-calling and bullying. And remember—always think about your safety first when deciding the best way to respond.

1. Support targets, whether you know them or not.

Show compassion and encouragement to those who are the targets of bullying behavior by asking if they're okay, going with them to get help and letting them know you are there for them. Ask what else you can do and make sure they know they're not alone.

2. Don't participate.

This is a really easy way to be an ally because it doesn't require you to actually do anything, just to not do certain things—like laugh, stare or cheer for the bad behavior. By refusing to join in when name-calling and bullying occur, you are sending a message that the behavior is not funny and you are not okay with treating people that way. The next step is to speak up and try to put a stop to the hurtful behavior.

3. Tell aggressors to stop.

If it feels safe, tell the person behaving disrespectfully to cut it out. You can let them know you don't approve on the spot or later during a private moment. Whenever you do it, letting aggressors know how hurtful it is to be bullied may cause them to think twice before picking on someone again.

4. Inform a trusted adult.

Sometimes you may need extra help to stop the bullying. It's important to tell an adult who you trust so that this person can be an ally to you as well as the target. Telling an adult when you see someone engaged in bullying is never "tattling" or "snitching." So don't think twice—reach out to a parent, teacher, guidance counselor, coach or someone else who will get involved.

5. Get to know people instead of judging them.

Appreciate people for who they are and don't judge them based on their appearance. You may even find that they're not so different from you after all.

6. Be an ally online.

Bullying happens online, too, and through the use of cell phones. Looking at mean web pages and forwarding hurtful messages is just like laughing at someone or spreading rumors in person. It is just as hurtful, even if you can't see the other person's face. All the rules above are just as important to follow when texting and on social media. So online and offline—do your part to be an ally to others.