

Conflict Resolution in Schools

Guide for Educators in South Africa

Booklet 5

EMPATHY and COMPASSION

Topics in this booklet:

- Compassion and empathy in Conflict Resolution
- Two class exercises



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Joseph. You are a wonderful boy, and I'm so glad to have you with me. I have an idea for you. Instead of feeling bad about the buck – and the elephant – why don't you do something to help the animals? That way you can make a difference, instead of just feeling bad – that doesn't help anybody, especially not yourself."

So the very next day, they went to Vuyo to ask him what they could do to help. He took them along to a voluntary organisation called the 'Friends of the Elephant' who were working to stop poaching and to help orphaned elephants. They had a lovely sanctuary by the park, where they cared for orphan elephants and released them back into the park

when they were old enough to care for themselves. Joseph and his Mum were very happy with their work, and hatched all sorts of plans to help them when back home.

And they carried out their plans too! And from time-to-time they went back to visit the 'Friends of the Elephant', taking along some money they had raised and checking up on the new orphaned elephants in their care. The plight of the animals had found its way into their hearts and became a real passion for them. Joseph loved the animals and was determined that he would become a ranger, like Vuyo, when he was older. So his caring had given his life a whole new meaning.

Notes



National Park, staying in a chalet situated right inside the park.

Each day they went out to see new and wonderful things. Joseph was in heaven, being in the midst of nature and seeing so many fantastic animals. He made friends with their guide, Vuyo, who showed him all about the animals and birds in the park. He began to learn how to tell which animals had been that way by their footprints and their droppings. He saw different birds, and began to learn their names. Gradually, he stopped dreaming about the buck he had shot. And the pain in his heart each morning, when he missed his dad the most, began to ease a little.

Then, one day he witnessed something awful. They drove through the park, and saw a herd of elephants rampaging. The bulls were trumpeting as they charged past. Vuyo looked worried and said: "I think something may have happened to upset them. Let's go and see what it was."

So, they went in the direction from which the elephants had fled. The bush was thick, and so they travelled around to a clump of trees behind a clearing. And there in the clearing they witnessed a young elephant calf that had been killed by poachers. Above her, the calf's mother was grieving and trying to push her to stand up again. They stayed out of view and watched the grieving mother for some time before leaving her to her grief.

When they arrived back at the lodge, Vuyo explained that elephants often tried to make their dead calves stand up again, and even came back days later to feel their bones, and roll them around with their trunks. They all felt so sorry for the elephant.

Later that night, when they sat on the sofa, Joseph spoke to his Mum about the elephant: "Mom, I have been thinking about that elephant. She just didn't want to believe that her baby had died, did she? She was just as sad as we were when Dad died? She tried to make her stand up again, although she must have known her baby was really dead?"

Joseph's Mum replied: "Yes, it seemed as though she just didn't want to believe it, didn't it? I do think she was feeling the same things that we felt when your dear Dad died."

Then Joseph suddenly felt a warmth and he knew. He knew that the animals felt the same sort of pain and grief as he did. He felt the life around him in the park, with all of its wonders, and all of its sadness. And he knew it was all one. And he knew that his wonderful Mom had been crying for him, as well as for his Dad. And he had to tell her: "Mom, I'm so sorry I was only thinking about my own sadness. And you were sad too – both for Dad and for me. And I was so cruel. And when I shot the buck, I was not thinking about the buck, or its family. I do feel so bad."

Joseph's Mum hugged him tight and told him: "I love you

Empathy and Compassion

Background

Empathy is defined as the ability to recognise, perceive and feel the emotion of another. It is the ability to 'put oneself in another's shoes', a sort of emotional resonance.

As empathy involves understanding the emotions of others, it can relate to physical emotions or to the beliefs, desires and thoughts that underlie them.

The basic capacity to recognise emotions is innate (built into human 'wiring'), but it appears to be stronger in some people than in others (for example, females tend to have higher levels of empathy than males). It is thought to relate to people's capacity for imitation and relates signals such as bodily movements and facial expressions to feelings. People are also able to make the connection between tone of voice and other vocal expressions and emotions. It is an immediate 'gut reaction', so by looking at facial expressions, bodily movements and listening to tone of voice, we are able to get a sense of how others feel.

Empathy can be sensed either internally or externally. The person feeling empathy may themselves feel a sense of the emotional atmosphere affecting another (so the emotion is shared) or they may not experience this feeling themselves, but recognise it and locate it in the other person.

More developed empathy requires more than recognising the emotional state of another. The ability to deliberately imagine yourself being another person, or being in their situation, is a more sophisticated process, which needs practice, training, investigation and imagination.

The background of a person may distort their feelings about the emotions of others (see *Background on Perception* in Booklet 3). Empathy is a skill that is gradually developed throughout life and which improves with the level and depth of contact we have with the person with whom we are empathising. The more we learn about the other person, the more we are able to reach outside our own emotional state and empathise with theirs. We must stay open to revising any knowledge we gain of the emotions of another in the light of further information.

Compassion is a sense of shared suffering and is often combined with a deep desire to alleviate or reduce the suffering. Thus compassion is essentially empathy, but with a more active motivation to assist.

"Compassion is the keen awareness of the interdependence of all things."

Thomas Merton.

"Compassion is the ultimate and most meaningful embodiment of emotional maturity. It is through compassion that a person achieves the highest peak and deepest reach in his or her search for self-fulfilment."

Arthur Jersild



Contrasting Empathy With Other States

A brief explanation of the difference between empathy and other states is given below.

Empathy:

'I feel your sadness.'

Sympathy:

'I'm sorry for your sadness, I wish to help.'

Emotional Contagion:

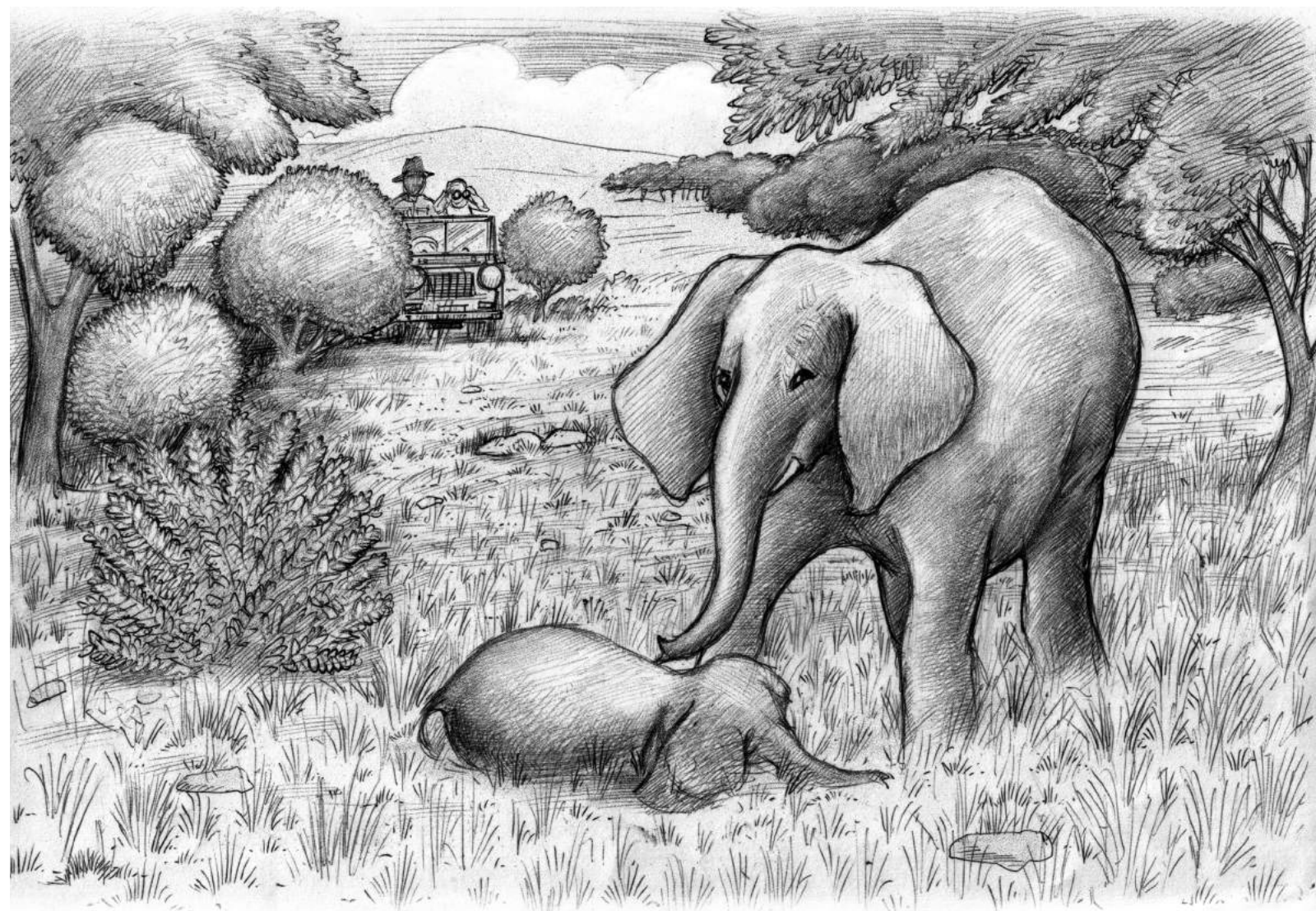
'I feel sad.' (Catching the emotions of another)

Apathy:

'I don't care how you feel.'

Telepathy:

'I can read your sadness without you expressing it to me in any normal way.'



Humane Education and the Building of Empathy and Compassion

“Moral imagination is the capacity to empathise with others, i.e., not just to feel for oneself, but to feel with and for others. This is something that education ought to cultivate and that citizens ought to bring to politics.”

McCullough 1992

Humane Education is the teaching of justice, respect and compassion for all life. It facilitates the development in learners of a more solid moral structure. It attempts to increase empathy towards animals and experience has shown that these empathetic skills also transfer to interactions with humans, resulting in pro-social behaviour. Humane Education is character education, and it succeeds by not only engaging with the content of good character but also concentrating on the process of cultivating good character. It is thus the process of Humane Education which builds good character.

When the question ‘What are the characteristics of a capable, successful learner?’ is asked, different answers are found in different parts of the world. However, one view that is gaining increasing currency among educators is the notion that successful learners are knowledgeable, self-determined, strategic, and empathetic (Jones 1990).

This means that, in addition to having:

1. Knowledge, including critical and creative faculties;
2. Motivation to learn and confidence about themselves as learners, and
3. Tools and strategies for acquiring, evaluating and applying knowledge,

successful learners also have:

4. Insight into the motives, feelings, and behaviour of others and the ability to communicate this understanding - in a word, ‘empathy’.



Empathy is the driving force behind good character. There is no substitute for concern for others as a basis for morality. Empathy and compassion give rise to the ‘Golden Rule’ in action: ‘Do as you would be done by’.

The Humane Education Trust has a full programme of Humane Education lessons and activities.

Compassion and Empathy in Conflict Resolution

When seeking to communicate with another, it is helpful to demonstrate empathy. This opens up the channel of communication, providing a connection or link.

Two methods of building empathy are possible:

1. Simulate ‘pretend’ versions of the beliefs, desires, character traits and context of the other in order to see what emotional feelings this leads to;
2. Simulate the emotional feeling and then look around for a suitable reason for this to fit.

Either way, this empathetic engagement helps the understanding and anticipation of the behaviour of the other party.

This empathetic engagement, plus active listening, helps to focus on the other person and what they are feeling. This helps to build a relationship through an emotional understanding of the other person.

When it is not possible for mediators to encourage the two parties involved in the dispute to use empathy (or empathy-building techniques), it will remain a useful tool for teachers, conflict resolution mediators and advisors or monitors.

Compassion Parable

Joseph’s life hadn’t been the same since his beloved Dad had died. He felt his loss so deeply. There was never a day that went past when he didn’t wake up in the morning with a heavy feeling in his heart.

His dad had been his hero, and they went everywhere together – fishing, hiking, beach-combing... His dad loved playing soccer and ball games and they were always taking off to the park with a ball and some friends. He had been so fit and strong.

His Mum tried her best to comfort him, but somehow her gentle ways - and her tears - just made everything worse. He often ended up by shouting at her, and rushing to his room. She became more depressed and dejected. He became more cross and angry at the world.

His friends had tried to cheer him up, often coming round to play and taking him on outings. One day Joseph’s best friend, Martin, had even persuaded his father to take the two of them with him on a hunting expedition. How they enjoyed it! Being there with the men in the bush, stalking the game. Joseph felt such a thrill. The men were all joking and laughing and teasing the boys. It had felt good to Joseph to be amongst men who were like his father.

When they came across a large group of springbok, he proved himself to be ‘one of the men’, shooting his first buck. The noise and the atmosphere grabbed him, making him part of the group. So, when the men leapt from the bakkie and knelt to shoot their prey, Joseph joined them. He held his breath when he pulled the trigger of his borrowed rifle. He pulled so gently that he thought it would never fire. Then, when it did go off, it took him completely by surprise! Then he heard the thud as the buck hit the earth...

Later, Joseph remembered looking around, and seeing the men cheering and laughing, and running off in the direction of their prey. The rest of the herd of springbok were tearing away as fast as their legs would carry them, leaping as they fled. He didn’t want to look at the buck he had killed in the eye, making the men laugh and pat his head. But they carried the bucks they had killed home in the bakkie, next to Joseph and Martin. They had placed a plastic cover over them, so Joseph didn’t have to look them in the eye. But he could see soft, light brown hair poking out underneath the cover. He was vividly aware of the dead bodies piled alongside them, and couldn’t draw his attention away from their outline however hard he tried. The journey seemed to last forever, and when it was over he was pleased to leave the men and the accusing bodies.

The incident stuck in his mind, especially when he was alone at night in his room. Then, he thought about the buck



he had killed. And he thought about his Dad who had died. He wondered whether they were in the same place. And, if so, whether his Dad knew that he had killed the buck...

He brooded on the family of the buck, and what they must be feeling too. Wondering whether they felt the loss, as he felt his own...

In the end, he spoke to his mother. She was understanding and gave him a big hug as she explained: ‘Joseph, please don’t torment yourself in this way. You are a good boy. I am so pleased that you are not one of these violent boys who love to kill wild animals. It is natural to regret the life of a beautiful animal. We often do things that we regret in life, but it solves nothing to dwell on them. We just have to learn from what we have done, and to try to be better in the future.’

Joseph hugged his Mum and replied: ‘I know you are right, Mum. But I cannot forget it. It haunts me at night. And when I think of it, I think of Dad. Maybe that was my fault too?’

Joseph’s Mum sighed: ‘Sweetheart that was not your fault. Your dad was ill, and there was nothing either of us could have done to stop him from dying. I am sorry you have had such a tough time recently, and that I have been too sad to help you. I think we need a break, to take some time away.’

And so it came about that Joseph and his Mum went on a wonderful holiday of a lifetime. They went off to the Kruger

Compassion Parable

Objectives

To reinforce the understanding of empathy and compassion and the value of making amends for wrong deeds.

Age/level

Ages 9 and above

Duration

A lesson or part lesson

Materials

Parable (see below)

Procedure

Read the parable below.

(You can ask the class to take part, giving different learners different parts to read).

Discuss the story and, in particular, try to make the learners think about the feelings of Joseph and his Mum. Some suggestions are included under 'Issues to Explore'.

Issues to Explore

The parable shows how the death of Joseph's dad makes him sensitive, as well as sad. At first, he tries to block these feelings, for example, by being angry with his Mom when she shows emotion (bringing to the surface his own emotions). But shooting the springbok makes him feel guilty and causes him to reflect upon death. His empathy and compassion are aroused, making him more sensitive. His empathy and compassion increases when he sees the elephant trying to rouse its dead calf. He relates her maternal feelings to those of his own mother after his dad's death. This makes him feel guilty for having treated her badly. In the end his compassion leads him to take action for the animals and this in turn makes him feel better.

Some ideas for questions and avenues to explore in class discussion are given below.

- Why did Joseph's mom make him feel bad after his dad's death?
Because she showed emotion and made him feel his own painful emotions.
- How do you think Joseph's mom felt at this time?
She would have been sad for herself, and missing her husband, but also very sorry for Joseph and worried about him.
- Why did Joseph get carried away on the hunting trip, and kill a springbok?

He missed his dad, and was enjoying the company of the men of the same age as his dad. He wanted to be a part of the group, to cover up his loneliness without his father.

- Why did he feel so bad about killing the buck?
Because he thought of its death in the same way as he thought of his dad's and in particular of the pain and distress of its family. It brought him face-to-face with death when he was trying to forget the recent pain in his own family.
- How did seeing the elephant and its dead calf affect Joseph?
When he realised that the elephant didn't want to believe that her calf was dead, it made him realise that he was also trying to push the reality of his dad's death out of his mind. This made him begin to come to terms with this. It also made him think about his mother's feelings about his father's death, whereas before he had just thought of his own. The elephant's concern for its calf made him think about his mom's own love and concern for him.

You can also ask the learners questions along the following lines:

- Have you seen any animals display emotions, like the elephant?
- Which animals look after their families, like humans do?
- Do you feel sorry for animals when they are hurt or killed?
- When do you really feel sorry for another person?
- Does this make you want to do something to help?

For older learners, you could discuss empathy and compassion:

Empathy is the ability to recognise and feel the emotion of another. It is the ability to 'put oneself into the shoes of another'.

Compassion is a similar sharing of suffering, but also includes a deep desire to stop the suffering or to help.

In the parable, Joseph feels better when he has taken action to help. Both empathy and compassion are feeling another's pain, but compassion leads to action.

See also the background information on empathy and compassion.

Learner Worksheet

Not applicable, but the parable could be made into a hand-out.

This is not only useful in school: empathy and listening skills can lead to good relationships, emotional intimacy and happy marriages.

The Literature on Empathy

The paper on 'Developing Empathy in Children and Youth' at the following website address:

<http://www.nwrel.org/scpd/sirs/7/cull13.html>

This web page documents a comprehensive international, multi-racial study on the development of empathy in people.

Researchers identified positive relationships between the use of certain parental child-rearing practices and the development of empathetic feelings, understanding and social behaviour in children.

In brief, these included:

- Responsive, non-punitive and non-authoritarian behaviour from mothers before children begin attending school;
- Reasoning with children (even with quite small ones) about the effects of their behaviour on others and the importance of sharing and being kind;
- Parental modelling of empathetic, caring behaviour;
- When children hurt others, giving explanations as to why their behaviour is harmful and suggestions on how to make amends;
- Parents encouraging school-age children to discuss their feelings and problems.

Conversely, the following childrearing practices were found to negatively impact on the development of empathy:

- Threats and/or physical punishments to try and improve behaviour;
- Inconsistent care and inconsistent reactions to the emotional needs of children;
- Parental withdrawal;
- Home backgrounds where their father physically abused their mother;
- The provision of extrinsic rewards and bribes to improve behaviour.

It is not always possible for educators to influence the home environments of their learners, but the same principles can be applied in a school setting as well.

Implementation of school-controllable factors related to the development of empathy can help to lay the groundwork for the growth of other positive traits, including skill in reasoning and communication.

References

- Title:** Truth and Ethics in School Reform
Author: T. E. McCollough
Publisher: Washington, DC: Council for Educational Development and Research, 1992
- Title:** "The New Definition of Learning: The First Step to School Reform"
Author: B. F. Jones
Publisher: ????????
- Title:** Restructuring To Promote Learning in America's Schools: A Guidebook
Author: I. L. Elmhurst
Publisher: North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 1990

Further Resources

Websites

Wikipedia Encyclopaedia

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Empathy>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Compassion>

Developing Empathy in Children and Youth:

<http://www.nwrel.org/scpd/sirs/7/cull13.html>

Psychological Hug:

<http://www.psychological-hug.com>

Publications

- Title:** Managing Conflict - With Confidence (Primary and Secondary), Australia
Author: Clare Heaton & Maureen Lynch
Publisher: Pearson Longman, Heaton C & Lynch M, 2003
ISBN 01-74091-059-1

Caring Class

Objectives

To help to instil in learners a culture of caring, and thereby develop empathy and compassion.

Age/level

Ages 6 and above. The format can be changed for older learners.

Duration

Ongoing – small amounts of time each week.

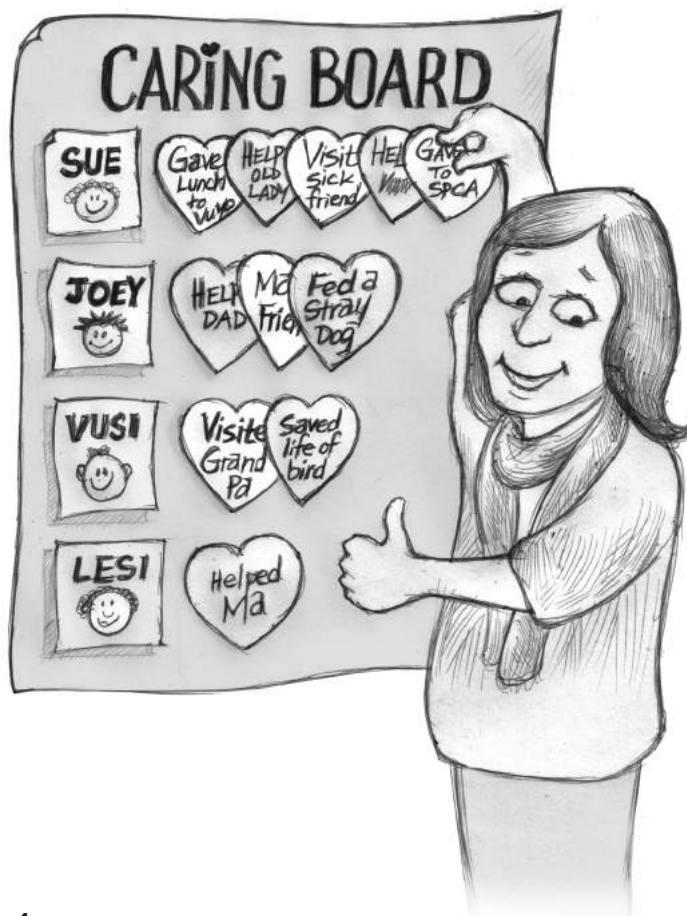
Materials

Caring Bulletin Board

Procedure

Caring Classmates

Ask learners to become 'tell-tales', but this time they should tell the class of any acts of caring that they see their classmates doing. Each act should be written on a small piece of paper, headed by the name of the learner, with a short description of the act of caring underneath. Cartoons, small drawings, colourful writing and short poems can be added to the messages to give them impact. Post the cards on the caring bulletin board for one week. At the end of the week, add up the number of caring acts for each learner. The learner who has been awarded the



most will have their name, and the number of caring deeds done, posted at the top of the caring bulletin board, alongside the heading: 'Last Week's Caring Classmate'.

At the end of the week, the messages should be removed and each given out to the learner they relate to. Then, the process can begin again for the following week.

Caring Class Project

Help the class to select one caring class project. This could be helping a local animal shelter, adopting and visiting an old age home, hospice or hospital, or any project that demonstrates and develops empathy, compassion and caring.

Work with the class to decide how to develop their project. Then, help them to follow it through.

Place a description of the project, drawings and photographs, and weekly updates, on the caring bulletin board. Keep a special section of the caring bulletin board for this purpose.

Caring Assignments

Each week chose a caring assignment for the class. Involve them in the choice and discuss any difficulties with the assignment beforehand. At the end of the week, ask the learners for feedback on their assignment.

Place the week's caring assignment on the caring bulletin board. At the end of the week, select a new caring assignment. Put details of any learners special achievements under the 'caring assignments' corner of the bulletin board.

See below for 'Issues to Explore' for more detail.

Issues to Explore

See the background information on Empathy and Compassion.

Caring Classmates

During this exercise, try to develop learners' empathy. Ask them how they thought the other person felt. When an act of caring involves a real plight, talk to the class about this. For example, if it involved an elderly person, ask them how they would feel if this had been one of their grandparents. Or if it involved a baby or child, how they would feel if it were their own younger brother, sister, niece or nephew? Bring in broader societal issues wherever possible (examples: xenophobia, animal cruelty, disabled persons etc.)

"Just as a previous generation had to rid our histories of bias against women and people of colour – and expose the wrongs that were being done to them – the generation coming of age today will have to create histories that acknowledge the worth of non-human animals and expose the wrongs that have been done to them since the advent of civilization."

Norm Phelps, The Longest Struggle: Animal Advocacy from Pythagoras to PETA. Published by Lantern Books

Gently expose any less than compassionate reasons for helping, e.g. 'When you helped, did you genuinely feel compassion for the person?' and 'How did that feel?' Ask them to own up if they simply did the act(s) of caring to earn class points! Stress that this is not the point of the exercise and the act does not count unless it involves a genuine sense of empathy and compassion!

Caring Class Project

Whatever project the class decides to choose, research the issues involved, and discuss these with the class before deciding on the action to develop the project. Talk to the people involved, or watch and consider the animals involved. Discuss their needs and how they feel. Try to choose acts of caring that will help to remove or reduce their suffering. Where humans are involved, care should also be taken to respect them and leave their dignity intact.

If the project involves helping an animal shelter, then the shelter manager will be able to suggest ways in which the class could help (for example, by walking dogs, playing with the animals, cleaning their cages, raising funds, etc.).

Similarly, if the project involves helping an old age home, hospice, or hospital, the manager or matron will be able to advise of ways in which the class could help. Elderly or sick people may welcome visits by young people to read or sing to them. They may also appreciate poems and drawings from the class. There will be many ways in which your class can bring some joy and light into the lives of suffering people and animals.

Caring Assignments

Think of different assignments, and ask the learners to think of some too. Anything that shows caring is acceptable. These can be quite simple assignments. Here are some ideas for a start:

- Do something nice for someone you think dislikes you;
- Help an elderly person you know to do their shopping, or to carry their shopping to the car;
- Offer to read to an elderly person;
- Help your mother with the washing up;
- Make breakfast for the family;
- Go and buy a newspaper for your father;
- Give a local stray animal some food or a biscuit and stroke them;
- Let your brother or sister use your favourite toy;
- Find a toy or piece of clothing that you can give to a poor person;
- Clean the car or the yard;
- Instead of killing insects in the house, carry them safely outdoors and release them;



- Collect breadcrumbs to feed to the birds.

General

Ask the learners how people reacted to their acts of caring:

- How did you feel when they were pleased or grateful?
- Why were some people suspicious or hostile?
- How might you overcome any suspicion or hostility?

Talk with them about the effects of their good deeds.

Ask the learners if anybody has done anything naughty, or that they regret, during the week. If so, discuss with them how they feel, and explore ways in which they could make up for it.

During a caring class session, ask the learners if any of them had anything happen to them during the week that upset them. If so, discuss this and ask other learners to help with possible solutions, or ways of making the learner feel better. The idea is to build a supportive atmosphere in the class, one of trust and understanding.

Learner Worksheet

Not applicable