Inclusive School Practices Toolkit

The Art of Inclusion: Teaching Students to be Includers

This tool has been developed as part of the *Inclusive School Communities Project*, funded by the National Disability Insurance Agency. The project is led by JFA Purple Orange.

## Introduction

Belonging is a strong need of all humans. It is through connection with others that we thrive and flourish. Being isolated or excluded really hurts and we all feel it inside, irrespective of whether the exclusion is intentional or accidental. For some students, it can be harder to build Social Capital and find valued membership in their school community (see tool titled ‘Context of a Good Life – Personhood and Citizenhood’ for more on this topic). Schools need to be proactive in creating a community of ‘includers’ and a culture of inclusion in which all students feel a sense of belonging.

This tool looks at some suggestions for schools to teach students to be includers; the idea is that it becomes a more natural thing around the school and creates an inclusive culture. It’s not enough to teach students what not to do; school also must teach them what to do to promote kindness, compassion, and inclusion among their peers. This tool is useful for school staff wanting to help young people understand what inclusion is and how to do it in their everyday actions.

## Ideas

*For some kids, finding playmates is as simple as standing near a group and saying, “Can I play?” For many kids, however, joining groups at play isn’t so easy. Sliding in and out of groups is a fairly advanced social skill, and young young people don’t necessarily know how to get involved in a group that’s already formed.[[1]](#footnote-1)*

Some young people may have more difficulty than their peers developing social and emotional skills and may struggle to connect with others. Additionally, certain students might be excluded from daily moments of fellowship and connection with peers in these types of ways:

* *Passively excluded –* where other students might not think to involve the student
* *Actively excluded –* where other students might intentionally exclude the student
* *Actively persecuted –* where other students might bully the student through unkind words or actions that adversely impact on the student emotionally and/or physically.

For example, primary-school aged students often feel comfortable following a routine and tend to sit at the same table or play with the same peers at break times, but this can mean that other students are unintentionally left out. This is an example of passive exclusion and is more commonly experienced by students who find it harder to connect with others and develop friendships. Passive or unintentional exclusion can lead to young people feeling left out or excluded even when there was no malicious intent from others.

Children tend to be self-oriented, insular and can be unaware to the unspoken needs of others including their peers.[[2]](#footnote-2) Adults, including school staff, play an important role in showing students how to perceive and respond to other’s needs. “It’s normal for kids to get caught up in their usual groups.”[[3]](#footnote-3) However by showing the benefits of including others, adults can teach young people to look out for others who feel lonely and show how to act in intentional ways to help others be included.

## Actions

The following ideas are drawn from various blogs written by and/or for parents on the topic of teaching children to include others and to be kind and compassionate; this material is also relevant to schools wanting to build inclusive school communities. These purposeful activities can show young people how to take the lead to be includers.

Talk about Unintentional Exclusion and Encourage Empathy

As adults, we may ignore or down play a child’s behavior because it was not intended to be mean or hurtful but young people need our help to learn about acceptable behaviors and when we point out exclusionary behaviour in a non-judgmental and encouraging way they have an opportunity to learn. Talking with young people about what it means to exclude and how to include others helps build empathy and compassion and can prevent unintentional exclusion.[[4]](#footnote-4) Teaching students and staff to be aware of their own actions will help reduce any unintentional exclusion on their part. The questions we ask and the conversations we stimulate with young people teach them what to pay attention to and can “shift their focus from “all about me” to others” and help them “to draw connections between being excluded and possible negative emotions and between being included and possible positive emotions”[[5]](#footnote-5).

One way to support young people to think about how they would feel in certain situations is by using the approach: **If this… then that**. For example, an educator could talk with their students about the following scenarios:

* **If** a student is always the last person to be selected in the PE class teams **then** they may feel left out or unwanted and may not perform as well as they would if they were selected earlier. How can we change things to make sure that doesn’t happen?
* **If** a student is sitting outside the class circle, **then** that student may not feel like they belong and are part of the class. What can we do to change that?
* **If** the student can’t tie a tie or do up buttons on their uniform shirt **then** that student may not feel good about getting dressed for school and wearing the school uniform. How can we overcome that?
* **If** we choose to go to the museum with lots of steps for a class excursion, **then** a student who uses a walking frame may not want to go because it will be hard to move around the museum. How can we make it different?

Draw on Experiences

Everyone has that memory of when they were the new student or have just joined a club or walked into a room where it seems like everyone has known each other forever. Adults can help young people to draw on this memory pausing and thinking about how it felt and what would have made it easier. A conversation like this is a powerful tool for school staff to encourage students to look out for others who may be left out or finding it hard to join in.

The following questions were suggested for parents to use when chatting with their young people about how school is going, however they are also useful for school staff to help students draw on their own experiences to motivate inclusionary behaviour:

* *Are there any new kids in your class this year?*
* *Do you remember when you were the new kid? That was hard, right?*
* *How can you help this new kid feel welcome?*
* *You had a good day. Do you think anyone in your class may have had a tough one today? Why?[[6]](#footnote-6)*

Teach Looking out for Others

Schools can teach students ways to scan and read an environment/situation to look for someone who is alone and might need a friend. Teaching students how to meet and interact with new people is a good place to start. For example, teaching students how to introduce themselves and strike up a conversation, even if it feels awkward, will support them to become includers. School staff can role model conversation skills; showing how easy it is, students will be more likely to give it a go. School staff can also create awareness by pointing out when someone is playing alone and encouraging another student to ask them to join in the activity. Adults can show how easy it is to look out for others, and how good it feels to be an includer. “Sometimes kids are simply oblivious. But they don’t have to stay that way. We can teach our kids to be aware of those who may feel lonely, left out, or simply too shy to reach out.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

Teach ‘Friendly Invitations’

Children need to be taught how to and get into the habit of including others, otherwise they tend to assume that others will join in if they want to.[[8]](#footnote-8) School staff can teach students to scan for peers who might be left out, in and out of the classroom, and seek them out with ‘friendly invitations’ such as:

* *Come join us! There’s lots of room.*
* *Do you want to sit with us for lunch?*
* *Do you like football? You can join our team!*
* *Do you want to play chasey with us?*
* *We always need extra players.*
* *Are you looking for a game to play? Play with us![[9]](#footnote-9)*

The above ‘friendly invitations’ can be taught and roleplayed with students in class and school staff can encourage students to practice using them. Students will become more comfortable with ‘friendly invitations’ when they are practiced regularly in and out of the classroom and they will find their own language for inviting others to join.

Provide Opportunities for Connection

Some schools have implemented ‘[Friendship Seats](https://www.betterbuddies.org.au/cms-ideas-from-schools/friendship-seat-agps.phps)’ or ‘[Buddy Benches](http://buddybenchaustralia.com.au/buddy-bench-schools/canberra-buddy-bench/)’ (<http://buddybenchaustralia.com.au/>) to provide opportunities for connection especially for those who may be feeling isolated, bullied or are struggling to make friends.[[10]](#footnote-10) This teaches young people to reach out to other students who may be excluded and also, encourages those who feel excluded to put themselves in a position to connect with others.[[11]](#footnote-11) School staff can provide deliberate opportunities in and out of the classroom for students to connect with peers outside their friendship group; this is particularly important for students who struggle to make friends or aren’t part of a group. Other ideas for school staff to provide students with opportunities for connection including mixing up student learning partners or groups, setting up social clubs, or giving students an inclusion role.

Another idea that some classes have adopted is to challenge each student to talk with someone they don't know well each week and make the effort to get to know them. The educator can then run activities with the class such as having students record and discuss what they discovered about their new friend including their strengths, interests, and hobbies.

Another idea is to use this powerful video to help students see what Jack Kornfield describes as the “goodness in another being”: <https://youtu.be/0F2CF4Jc2mg>. The video could be shown in class and discussed or the activity described in the video could be run (each student writes one thing they admire or like about each of their classmates).

Encourage Kindness

A Canadian study with 9-to-11-year-old students found that the group who were asked to perform acts of kindness after reported higher levels of happiness, greater acceptance from their peers, and more friendships in the classroom.[[12]](#footnote-12) Research supports the vast benefits of teaching young people to be kind and compassionate.

*Kids get a lot of corrective feedback when they make mistakes, but they don’t always get positive feedback for acts of kindness and compassion. When kids learn to empathize with others and show compassion for their peers, being an “includer” becomes automatic. They learn to look for the lonely and consider how kids on the outside of the group might feel, and this motivates them to be the positive change who invites others into the fold.*[[13]](#footnote-13)

Schools can support students to develop kindness and inclusion by ensuring they recognize not only academic achievement but acts of inclusion and other prosocial behaviours. Students will feel proud when they are acknowledged for acting in ways that make sure the same child isn’t always picked last or for actively including other students during recess and lunch.

Teach the Difference Between Cliques and Friendships

In addition to parents and families, school staff play an important role in teaching young people to be ‘includers’; helping them understand that “Favorite friends are okay. Cliques are not.”[[14]](#footnote-14) “A clique tends to be a close-knit group that clearly communicates “you aren’t welcome” or “you aren’t as good as we are” to those outside the group.”[[15]](#footnote-15) School staff can help students by having a conversation about the difference between friendships and cliques and about the impact of exclusion; encouraging them to keep their friendships clique-free.

Schools can also teach students about ‘friendship social skills’ such as conversation skills, listening skills, playing fair, accepting others, and conflict resolution (e.g., Friendship Social Skills Group Counseling Program <https://shop.counselorkeri.com/products/friendship-social-skills-group-counseling-program>).

## More Information

There are various blogs on this topic, some of which are written by and/or for parents, but their ideas and information are also relevant and useful to school staff:

https://www.pbs.org/parents/thrive/how-to-teach-your-child-to-be-an-includer

https://www.huffpost.com/entry/how-to-raise-includers\_b\_9430036

https://www.lisamccrohan.com/2014/09/raising-girls-who-are-includers-instead-of-mean-girls/

https://www.pbs.org/parents/thrive/raising-includers-5-tips-to-help-your-kids-be-kind-and-compassionate

https://www.schoolmum.net/parenting/parenting-tips/how-to-encourage-your-child-to-include-others/

https://www.scarymommy.com/teaching-inclusivity-kids/

https://www.thecourage.com/teach-your-kids-to-be-includers-this-year/

## Acknowledgement

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1. Hurley, K. (2018). Raising includers: 5 tips to help your kids be kind and compassionate. PBS KIDS for Parents. Retrieved from <https://www.pbs.org/parents/thrive/raising-includers-5-tips-to-help-your-kids-be-kind-and-compassionate> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Slater, A. (2018). Teach your kids to be includers this year. TheCourage. Retrieved from <https://www.thecourage.com/teach-your-kids-to-be-includers-this-year/>; Meier, R. (2017). How to encourage your child to include others. School Mum. Retrieved from <https://www.schoolmum.net/parenting/parenting-tips/how-to-encourage-your-child-to-include-others/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Hurley, K. (2018). Raising includers: 5 tips to help your kids be kind and compassionate. PBS KIDS for Parents. Retrieved from <https://www.pbs.org/parents/thrive/raising-includers-5-tips-to-help-your-kids-be-kind-and-compassionate> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Slater, A. (2018). Teach your kids to be includers this year. TheCourage. Retrieved from <https://www.thecourage.com/teach-your-kids-to-be-includers-this-year/> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Hurley, K. (2018). Raising includers: 5 tips to help your kids be kind and compassionate. PBS KIDS for Parents. Retrieved from <https://www.pbs.org/parents/thrive/raising-includers-5-tips-to-help-your-kids-be-kind-and-compassionate> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Meier, R. (2017). How to encourage your child to include others. School Mum. Retrieved from <https://www.schoolmum.net/parenting/parenting-tips/how-to-encourage-your-child-to-include-others/> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Meier, R. (2017). How to encourage your child to include others. School Mum. Retrieved from <https://www.schoolmum.net/parenting/parenting-tips/how-to-encourage-your-child-to-include-others/> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
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13. Hurley, K. (2018). Raising includers: 5 tips to help your kids be kind and compassionate. PBS KIDS for Parents. Retrieved from https://www.pbs.org/parents/thrive/raising-includers-5-tips-to-help-your-kids-be-kind-and-compassionate [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Slater, A. (2018). Teach your kids to be includers this year. TheCourage. Retrieved from <https://www.thecourage.com/teach-your-kids-to-be-includers-this-year/> [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)