

importance. The *Best Practices* curriculum reaches young adolescents at this critical point in their lives to teach social interaction skills that will help these youngsters build trusting relationships. No preliminary education or skills need to be in place prior to beginning empathy training. The skills that accompany empathy are best learned in a group situation that has been made safe by classroom rules and a teacher's social supervision, and where the rules are enforced socially by everyone in the class.

EMPATHY-BUILDING ACTIVITIES

Best Practices contains many different activities on building empathy. In the activity "Strengths and Weaknesses" (see Appendix B), students explore areas in which they can be successful and realize that everyone has weaknesses. Each student completes the student worksheet, and then the activity is opened for discussion. The curriculum recommends that teachers write worksheet responses on the board, without identifying individual students' responses. The teacher guides the discussion with a series of nonthreatening questions, such as "What do you do well?" "How do you use your strengths to help others?" and "What weaknesses did you have that were similar to other people?" In a foundational way, the exercise teaches students to be sensitive to others' weaknesses and to share a strength if it will help.

Students also get to role-play situations to teach empathy-building attitudes. For instance, in the "What's It Like?" activity (see Appendix C), students are given situations to react to and are given the opportunity to explain or defend their response. Situations might include being chosen last for a team sport, being singled out by a teacher for misbehavior, and receiving a compliment or an unexpected gift. When more than one student gets to react to the situation, other students can see that there is no correct response. Students are encouraged to react truthfully, and the audience is directed to be nonjudgmental and helpful in closing the situation with the least amount of turmoil, which teaches empathy building through cooperation, compassion, and a focus on positive outcomes.

Conflict resolution, refusal skills, anger management, and similar areas build on the foundations of empathy. Using topic-specific activities teaches the skill and also promotes a way for empathy to be integrated into typical situations. For example, *Best Practices* has several activities in anger management and conflict resolution. In class after class, teachers choose a learning assignment that illustrates to students how a parent or other adult coped with peer pressure. Although children gain ideas about useful refusal skills, the underlying message is that their parents can be resources and are excited about helping teach life skills to them. In "Thoughts on Peer Pressure," a refusal skills homework assignment, students interview a parent, guardian, or other adult using the following questions:

1. Did you feel peer pressure when you were in school?
2. Do you still feel some pressure to conform to a group? In what ways?
3. Did you ever want your parents to tell you that you could not do something so that you would have a reason to tell a friend no?
4. What do you think are the best ways for a person to resist peer pressure and be herself or himself?

In these and many other activities, students learn to interact in small groups and as part of the larger group to build personal skills and support their classmates. This climate of SEL can become the normative behavior in the classroom and beyond, when students internalize the empathy-building lessons. Amber, a seventh-grade student, wrote in her evaluation, "I would like Deb [the teacher] to come again because she was fun and gave us good tips for life."

An important benefit to be noted in empathy training is the decreased likelihood of problem behaviors, such as drug involvement, aggressiveness, and violence. Researchers have catalogued risk and protective factors, which are those characteristics, behaviors, skills, and situations that increase or decrease the chances, respectively, that a child will engage in destructive or delinquent behaviors. Empathy training is a protective factor that crosses individual, peer, and school domains. Empathy bolsters the protective factors of positive social attitudes, the ability to build close peer and social bonds, heightened school and community attachments, and decreased interpersonal conflict. When protective factors outweigh their risk counterparts, the likelihood of drug use, violence, and delinquency declines (Drug Strategies, 1998; Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 1995). Empathy-based skills can promote protection by teaching students to handle conflict nonviolently, use nondrug coping strategies, build and sustain close friendships, strengthen learning skills that bolster academic success, and more.

FOSTERING A PEACEABLE CLIMATE

The *Best Practices* curriculum has many benefits, some resulting from the curriculum's format, some from the topic content, and some from different styles of learning that occur with the curriculum. *Best Practices* uses a preventive approach, teaching skills that preclude or short circuit a student's involvement with violence or substance use. Among these skills are empathy training, anger management training, conflict resolution strategies, goal setting, and setting personal boundaries. When a student has the skills to avoid either entering or escalating a situation, then that student can remain a healthier and safer individual. Furthermore, the consistent use of healthy choices, particularly in public situations, acts as reinforcement of these as normative behaviors, rather than exceptions to the norm. Consequently, the use of these behaviors fosters a buildingwide climate of peace, cooperation, and mutual respect. Another benefit of using the curriculum is that it encourages diversity through acceptance and regard for people, traditions, races, and traits that are different from our own.

EVALUATING PROJECT OZ CURRICULA

Evidence-Based Structure

Best Practices was developed by educators and preventionists, and the curriculum uses many of the critical ingredients for a successful prevention program. Among these ingredients, identified in various research publications and reports

APPENDIX A

Feelings Survey

Objective:

To allow students to compare their own feelings with those of other students.

Directions:

1. Give each student a Feelings Survey worksheet and instruct them to complete the statements.
2. Collect the completed worksheets.
3. Give each student an extra worksheet and instruct him or her to use it to interview another person, recording the answers.

OR

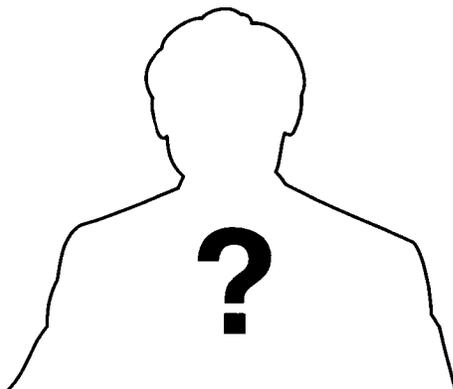
Have another class fill out the Feelings Survey worksheet and allow your students to compare their own answers with those of the other class.

Discussion:

1. Did everyone complete the statements in exactly the same way?
2. Is it OK for different people to have different feelings? Why or why not?
3. Why is it important to know how you usually feel in certain situations?

Evaluation:

Guided discussion of the completed worksheet that allows students to compare their feelings with those of other students.



Differences
Similarities
Surprises

Feelings Survey

Complete the following statements:

1. I am best at _____

2. People hurt my feelings most by _____

3. I get angry when _____

4. In school, I do best when _____

5. People who know me well think I am _____

6. I need to improve most in _____

7. I have never liked _____

8. When my family gets together _____

9. I am proud that _____

APPENDIX B

Strengths and Weaknesses

Objective:

To enable students to explore areas in which they can be successful and realize that everyone has weaknesses.

Directions:

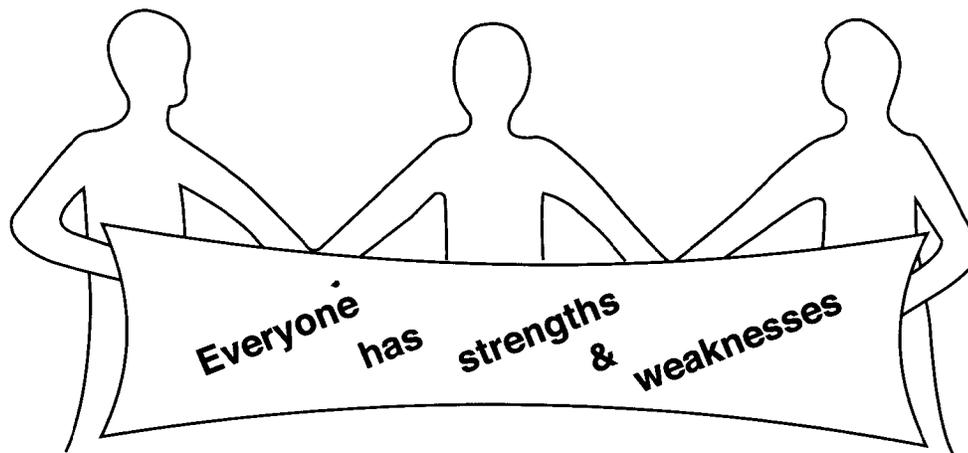
1. Have each student complete the Strengths and Weaknesses worksheet (which consists of a piece of paper with two columns, one for Strengths and one for Weaknesses, and lines on which to make multiple entries for each). Depending on the ability of the students, you may need to generate a list of strengths on the blackboard.
2. Have each student share their responses.
3. Hold a discussion.

Discussion:

1. What do you do well?
2. What do you have to do to improve your weaknesses?
3. How do you use your strengths to help others?
4. What are some strengths you admire in other people?
5. What strengths did you have that were similar to others?
6. What weaknesses did you have that were similar?

Evaluation:

Guided discussion to determine if students realize that everyone has weaknesses.



APPENDIX C

What's It Like?

Objective:

To express feelings and reactions to certain situations.

Directions:

1. Have the students discuss how it feels to be in the situations described on the What's It Like worksheet.
2. Instruct the students to focus on how they would feel in or react to the situations.
3. Have the students role-play the situations.
4. Have the students give suggestions to each other for more positive reactions.
5. Role-play the positive scenario.
6. You may want to write the suggestions on the board.

Evaluation:

Completed role play.

What's It Like? Worksheet

What's it like . . .

1. when you are the last one chosen for a game?
2. when people yell at you?
3. when someone doesn't do what he or she said he or she would?
4. when someone compliments you on a job well done?
5. when you get a gift you didn't expect?
6. when the teacher tells you to be quiet?