

Empathy and understanding

June 15-21 is Refugee Week. During this week, we come together to think about why and how people seek refugee status in other countries. This year we are thinking about the theme of “Imagine” through the topics of kindness and empathy.

These resources challenge learners to “imagine” what it is like to be a refugee or someone fleeing their home country and seeking refugee status elsewhere. Use this set of resources and accompanying PowerPoint document to take learners through a journey to imagine, understand and empathise with the different challenges refugee and asylum seekers might have to cope with.

These activities start by exploring the meaning and importance of empathy and understanding for young people to become kinder more resilient people.

Learning objectives

Learners will:

- discover the meaning of and build empathy
- explore how understanding others can be a kind act
- reflect on how empathy can create a kinder world

Primary ages (7-11)

Definition activity: what are understanding and empathy?

Think about the word “understand”. What does it mean to understand something or someone?

Understanding how people feel is sometimes called “empathy” - this means you can imagine how they feel. You can watch this [Sesame Street](#) video about empathy to help you think about it.

Do you think it is kind to try to show empathy and understand how people feel? Why is it kind?

What can you do to help you understand how someone feels?

Roleplay activity: Imagine it was you...

After watching the video above, look at the examples below. Imagine how these people might feel and write it down. Has this ever happened to you? Have you ever felt this way?

- > your friend doesn’t understand the homework, they think it is too difficult for them. The teacher has explained but, they still don’t understand. The teacher won’t explain it again in a different way.
- > your family member wants to share a story with the family about something important to them. Nobody is listening to them.
- > someone in your class is being told off for something they didn’t do. The adult won’t listen to their side of the story. They are blaming them because they just think they are a “troublemaker”.
- > someone is calling your friend names. Other people are laughing.

Can you understand how these people might feel?

How does understanding them help them to feel better? If you understand how they feel, can you help support them better?

Reflection activity: We could be friends

Think about this sentence:

“If we try and understand each other, we may even become friends”

What do you think this means?

How can understanding someone help you to be friends with them?

Think about the friends you have. What kind of things do you do for your friends? Draw a picture of you and your friends and write the things you know about them. What kind things do you do to help them and to show you understand them?

Creative activity: The empathy tree

Imagine that empathy is a seed. That seed can grow into a tree. It has roots and also branches.

Draw this seed on a piece of paper. Underneath draw the roots. Write five kind things we can do to build empathy and understanding with others inside or underneath each root. Use the notes from the other activities you have done.

Now draw the tree. Draw branches and leaves. On each leaf write a positive thing that can come from understanding people. Think about how it can be positive for you, for the other person, the community and the wider world.

Think about empathy, kindness and understanding. What did you learn?

Secondary ages (11-19)

Definition activity: What is empathy?

Empathising with someone means imagining how you might feel if it was you in their situation. It is more than just feeling sorry for them, it is understanding how they feel.

What does this word mean to you?

Write all the things you associate with this word. You could create a mind map to help you visualise empathy.

Now think about a time when you needed someone, a friend or a parent or a teacher, to understand you and how you felt. Think about how it felt not to be understood, and then how it felt when someone did understand you. Can you imagine it?

Now imagine if you couldn't speak the same language or the other person wasn't listening. How would it feel?

Imagine that someone needed you to listen and understand them. How could you support them?

Reflection activity: Empathy and kindness

Think about this quote from the poet Maya Angelou:

“If we try and understand each other, we may even become friends”

What do you think this means?

How can understanding someone help you to be friends with them?

How is understanding and empathising with others an act of kindness?

Creative activity: The empathy tree

Imagine that empathy is a seed. That seed can grow into a big tree. It has roots and also branches.

Draw this seed on a piece of paper. Underneath draw the roots. Write five kind acts we can do to build empathy and understanding with others inside or underneath each root.

Now draw the tree. Draw branches and leaves. On each leaf write one positive thing that can come from understanding and empathising with people. Think about how it can be positive for you, for the other person, the community and the wider world.

Think about empathy, kindness and understanding. What did you learn?