

Teacher Resource for How to Be Human by Florida Frenz

Social Skills/Compassion Training

Step 1: Figure out faces

Many children on the spectrum either experience face blindness or find eye contact difficult. Telling them to “look at me!” is rarely effective. There are many ways to encourage kids to cue in on facial expressions:

Download pictures from the internet, use books or magazines; have the students tell or write one sentence about how that person or character is feeling. To extend this activity have students role play a scene where they act out the feelings. Have the students write about a time that they felt that way. Another exercise that I do is to say the same sentence with varying expressions and have the student describe the difference.

Step 2: Figure out Feelings

For young children figuring out their own feelings and those of others can be difficult. There are many ways to encourage children to understand their feelings and the feelings of others. One good way to do this is to role play a situation and then to switch characters. For example, set up a scene where two friends are disagreeing about what game they want to play. Have the students act out what they are thinking from their perspective and then have them switch roles and act out how the other character is feeling.

Make word pictures the way Florida does. Draw the words so that they look like what they mean. Pick words that are descriptive, like Happy, Silly, Angry, Scared.

Step 3: Match the feelings to the faces

Florida actually experienced physical issues as well as social emotional delays so when the issue was physical we would draw a body chart and write how different parts of her body felt like and then we would practice making our expressions match the way we felt inside. Another activity would be to write down different feelings and emotions, i.e. stomach ache or excitement on index cards. Have the students pick a card and then act out that feeling/emotion. Try to guess what they are depicting. If there is a mirror available have the students watch themselves as well.

Step 4: Figure out fake feelings

One of the best ways to teach kids about “fake feelings” is to read great books with a lot of illustrations in them, like the Amelia's Notebook series or the Popularity Papers. Discuss when the characters have different feelings than what they express. Do the facial expressions match the internal feeling?

Step 5: What kind of human are you?

Have the students role play different situations where making a good decision is important. Write down different situations on index cards. Have the kids pick a card and say what they would do in that situation then discuss as a group.

Step 6: How do you decide to act?

All students can have a difficult time resisting peer pressure. This can be especially hard for children with learning disabilities. Have the kids draw a cartoon or write a story about a time when they followed along with a peer's bad behavior. Have them do the same for a time when they resisted negative peer influences. Discuss how each situation may feel and the consequences of making good verses bad decisions.

Step 7: Figure out behavior and emotions

Meters are used by a variety of educators and therapists in a variety of ways. Have the student decide what scale he or she wants to use. Florida usually chose to rate things on a scale of 1-10 but at times she used symbols or facial expressions. The facial expression meter is especially appropriate when exploring social skills and emotions. Do a chart of what makes a good day, what makes a bad day, rate something from exciting to boring, from terrifying to hohum, from super important to barely worth a glance.

Step 8: Avoiding the perfection trap

Have one student play the role of a "cop" for a pre-set amount of time. Have him or her give tickets to any other student who is not behaving "perfectly." Then have the students discuss, write or draw about the experience. What is perfect? Why? Is something always perfect or does it depend on the context? For example, being silent may be perfect behavior in a library, but not in choir.

Step 9, 10 and 12: Friendship

Read a story about friends – the Amelia series, Popularity Papers, or the Ivy and Bean books have many good examples of different friends. Discuss what it means to be a good friend. Are there different types of friends?

Make a collage about what type of friend you want to have and what type of friend you want to be.

Step 11: How to handle your enemies

Sometimes drawing or writing about something that bothers you is an effective way to get it out of your head. Often once the problem is on paper, it's not as burdensome inside you anymore. Draw or describe an issue that bugs you. Maybe it's something small, like a pebble in your shoe.

Maybe it's something big, like a fight with your best friend. Use as many adjectives as you can think of to describe what you're feeling and try to figure out where the feelings come from. Sometimes you may think you're mad, but really you're scared. Or you may think you're scared, but really you're worried. This is a good place to use the word pictures the way Florida does in Step 2.

Step 12: How not to make enemies

There are many ways to address appropriate behavior with different friends. Try role playing or start a co-operative story with 2 or more kids where the topic is what to do when 2 friends want to do 2 different things. Brainstorm ways to include the “shy kid”.

Step 13: Fear of Bullies

First discuss the difference between bullying and unkind words. Unkind words can be ignored but constant teasing should be addressed. Have the kids write about different times when they felt teased or bullied. Make a meter of ways to respond to bullying or teasing. For example, The “1” on their meter might be to ignore it. A “10” might be to get as much help as possible.

Step 14: Bullying Yourself

Self-esteem is an important issue. Florida liked for us to talk about the worst case scenario and then brainstorm possible feelings and solutions. Other children like to make list of their good qualities. One of my kids named the negative voice in her head and told her to be quiet and yet another child kept a journal of things that he was proud about.

Step 15: Mega Cool People

Society tells us that popularity is desirable but in reality many people don't actually want or need to be popular; they just need meaningful relationships. I had Florida research different essays on popularity and then we discussed them. It helped her to define the categories by drawing cartoons but some other ideas would be to act out different social groups, watch a video about high school students and discuss whether or not there are clear social groups.

Step 16: Cool People to you

Have the student bring pictures of different people in their lives. Either talk or write about why that person is important or likable to you.

Step 17: What makes a bad friend

Sometimes we can work so hard on making friends that we fall into a false belief that any friend is a good friend. Make a collage of traits that you would want in a friend and another of traits

that you would NOT want in a friend. What are “deal breakers” for you, traits that make someone not good friend material?

Step 18: How to grow up

You can use the timeline idea, write a story about what the student’s life might be like in the future or make an “aging” meter which shows the different benefits that come with each year of getting older.

Step 19: Consequences

This is really a logic problem – if A, then B. If I don't close a water bottle well, water will spill. Once you take away the sense of blame or angry, peel away the emotions, then you can see that the consequences are completely predictable. Have students make a Rube Goldberg or Mousetrap type machine where one action sets off another action which sets off another action. Talk about why and how the actions are set off.

Step 20: Juggling

Florida can get overwhelmed with the amount of work she has to do and then she will forget to have fun which makes her more stressed. It is very important to have balance in one’s life. Make a list of everything that needs to get done and another list for what one wants to do. Cross off any unnecessary items and make a schedule for everything that is important to get done. Remember, it is important to have fun and healthy habits as well as to get all the work done.