

Open•Up

Tools of Friendship

During the school years, children start to choose their friends more deliberately. This activity asks students to look beyond symptoms and behaviors of mental health disorders and appreciate people for their best qualities, not just their most obvious (and sometimes most annoying) ones.

Mental Health Highlight: We don't often think of friendships as things we have to "build" or as things that take "work." However, the older we get the more we realize that all relationships, even friendships, take work to develop and maintain.

The discussion that develops in response to your presentation of this activity will depend largely on the maturity of your students. Very young students will, of course, have a more simplistic view of what it means to be "friends." They may base their relationships on things like what color someone likes or if they have the same kind of backpack. In fact you may have seen children "bonding" over their Thomas the Tank engine backpacks. As children get older, they establish friendships with people they have more in common with through things like sports activities, music lessons, or church events. It isn't until adolescence that they begin to forge relationships based on common views and values. During all these stages, children are also highly influenced by peer pressure—they will include or exclude others based on what their friends think (this is sometimes true of adults too!).

Just as the discussion about building friendships will develop according to the maturity of your students, the examples you use to describe mental health disorders and accompanying behaviors should also be age-appropriate. For example, very young students will be able to understand the distractibility of a student with AD/HD, middle school students should be able to relate to the persistent sadness that is associated with depression, and teens will be able to identify the signs of bulimia such as frequent trips to the bathroom/induced vomiting.

Keep in mind the overall goal of the activity is to encourage students to consider forming friendships with people who they might overlook.

Primary Activity	Additional Activities	Open•Up Activities
 "Building" Friendships	 Make a Class Handshake  Make "Qualities of Friendship" Masks	 Write a Story about "Nancy the Amazing Carpenter"  Write a Non-Discrimination Policy

Activity Key	
 Visual Arts	 Creative Movement and Music
 Experiential and Role-Playing	 Conversations and Discussion
 Creative Writing, Storytelling, and Drama	 Research/Service Projects

This activity was adapted from *MACMH's Children's Mental Health Classroom Activities*, Volumes 1 and 2, Combined and Revised.

Tools of Friendship

During the school years, children start to choose their friends more deliberately. This activity encourages students to look beyond symptoms and behaviors of mental health disorders and appreciate people for their best qualities, not just their most obvious ones.

Objectives

- To promote the inclusion of students who have mental health needs.
- To encourage students to accept, respect, and be friendly to students who have difficulty “fitting in” because of a mental health disorder or an emotional or behavioral disorder.

Materials

- toolbox with tools (hammer, nails, wrench, saw, large screwdriver)
- a collection of old computer parts



Core Lesson/Activity

Begin the lesson by placing a toolbox on the table. Remove the tools and ask the students to identify the purpose of each item. Explain to the class that they are going to construct something for the classroom using the tools in the toolbox. Tell them how important it is to have the just the right tools and materials when building so that the product they build will perform all the functions it needs to very quickly and effectively. Inform the class that they have about an hour, so they will have to work efficiently. Then place the computer parts, some nails, and the tools on the table and announce that the item they are going to build is a computer—preferably one that is wireless and internet ready! The students will quickly point out that it is impossible to build a computer with the assembled tools and computer parts. Ask them to list the tools and materials that would be required. Then ask if it would take more than an hour. Discuss with the students why it is important to have the correct materials and take the appropriate time to build something as valuable as a computer.

Then talk about other things of value that take time to build—students may start with other tangible things like a bike, a pool, a skateboard ramp, or a house. List all these examples on the board, but help the students identify other, less materialistic things like friendship. Then ask the students what tools they need to construct a solid, reliable friendship. Students usually mention things like honesty, trust, sense of humor, loyalty, compassion, and common interests.

Once the group has listed the more observable elements of friendship, encourage them to think about the less obvious but equally important aspects such as patience, tolerance, understanding, and empathy. Be sure the students also talk about how physical appearance, social status, and clothing can often influence how they form their friendships.

Now ask them to think about and discuss the qualities they consider to be barriers to friendship. Encourage the students to be honest and open, but make sure they do not become hurtful or disrespectful in their comments. During this segment of the lesson, lead the students into a discussion about how behavioral differences can sometimes affect how they choose a friend. Describe for the students some of the behaviors that may accompany some of the more common mental health disorders (for example, someone with AD/HD may have difficulty sitting still and someone with obsessive compulsive disorder may count something repeatedly), and have the students consider whether these behaviors would deter them from initiating a friendship with someone who exhibited such behaviors.

It is important to help students understand that no one gets to choose the color of their hair or eyes, whether they are tall or short, or if they excel in certain areas like sports or art. Point out that this is also true about physical, emotional, and mental conditions that a person may have. When we develop relationships based on just one or two superficial qualities of a person, we are likely to miss opportunities to get to know very interesting, special people.

As the discussion continues, use the following questions to further challenge the students' concept of friendship:

What does "honesty" (or trust, or compassion, or loyalty) look like?

What qualities does it take to be a friend to someone who may be different from oneself? What about someone who has a disorder that causes them to touch things repeatedly, wash their hands repeatedly, or move around a lot?

What stereotypes do we have about people who have mental health disorders? How might these ideas influence our willingness to establish a friendship with a person who has a mental health disorder?

Some people may act like they don't need or want friends—what might they really be feeling and how might you respond to them?



If you had a friend whose appearance, speech, or behavior changed, how might your friendship with that person change?

What is the difference between being friends and being friendly?

As you begin to conclude the lesson, talk to the students about the importance of looking beyond stereotypes when developing friendships. Let them know it is normal to want to know why certain people have disorders and how those disorders may affect them. The answer to this is not to ignore a person with a mental health disorder, but to learn about the disorder and find out more about the person.

The bottom line is that we *all* have feelings and we *all* need understanding and friendship.

Additional Activities

Write a Story about “Nancy the Amazing Carpenter”

The Facts about Nancy (ask the class to fill in the blanks)

Name:	Nancy
Age:	_____
Special talent:	Carpentry...can build ANYTHING out of wood
Hometown:	_____
Best friend’s name:	_____
Pet’s name:	_____
# of brothers/sisters:	_____
Favorite color:	_____
Favorite food:	_____
Favorite game:	_____
Favorite TV show:	_____
Mental health disorder behaviors	Measures things repeatedly Washes her hands a lot Organizes her tools and materials very often
Other facts about Nancy:	_____

Using the information they have created about Nancy as a starting point, have the students write a story about how she uses her amazing carpentry skills to save the day! Stories can be illustrated and/or acted out.

Write a Non-Discrimination Policy – Before writing the policy, first introduce the concept of discrimination—the unfair treatment of one person or group that is usually based on a perceived difference in appearance or behavior—and discuss with the students the ways that discrimination, both intentional and unintentional, can negatively affect a school community.

Now generate a list of qualities with which the group agrees to not pre-judge people. Have the class write a non-discrimination policy using the list they have generated. They might want to

look at other non-discrimination policies to get ideas about wording. It may begin something like:

“Mrs. Reilly’s Fourth Grade Class at Sunshine Elementary does not discriminate when making friends on the basis of:

- Gender
- Clothing
- Physical appearance
- Social status
- Interests or hobbies
- Mental health disorders
- Race
- Physical disabilities
- Preferred language”

Have the students transfer the policy onto a poster-sized paper and give all the students an opportunity to either decorate and/or sign the policy. Display the finished policy in the classroom.

 **Make a Class Handshake** – Creating a handshake sequence with an upbeat rhythm that everyone can do is one way of building community identity within the classroom.

Have the students generate a list of qualities that define friendship (for example, loyalty, honesty, and trust). Put the list in an order so that it can be chanted in tempo or in a fun rhythm.

Next, guide the students through the process of creating a sequence of actions that can be done with a partner as the rhythm is chanted.

Some movement possibilities are:

- Shaking hands
- Clapping hands
- Snapping fingers
- Touching elbows
- Stomping feet
- Actions that illustrate the words

Have students keep switching partners through the creation and practicing process so that students get a chance to do the handshake with as many other people in the class as possible.

 **Make Qualities of Friendship Masks** – Have students select one of the qualities they listed for friendship. Using paper plates taped to a paint stick, have students create a mask that illustrates that quality. Depending on how much time you have for this activity, you may want to do papier mache masks, which allow for a little more expression.