

LATE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

CHAPTER 6

Compassion for Self & Others

Overview

Young children can recognize that animals constantly seek out well-being and avoid suffering. They seek food and warm shelter, and they avoid predators. Some can be befriended by those who are kind to them, but they will flee those who seek to harm them. Animals prefer kindness and compassion to meanness and cruelty, as do human beings.

This chapter focuses on how we can learn to be more kind to each other and to ourselves. This comes not just from wanting to be kind, but knowing how. Principally, this involves helping students increase their awareness of their own emotional lives and those of others. If students are able to understand others' emotions and behaviors in context, they will be able to empathize with others better. This in turn can lead to feeling more connected with others, and thus less isolated and lonely. Moreover, the ability to understand others better and cultivate a caring attitude towards others parallels the same process of understanding and caring for themselves better.

The overarching theme of this chapter is therefore compassion and self-compassion. Dr. Thupten Jinpa, a noted scholar on compassion, defines compassion as “a sense of concern that arises when we are confronted with another person’s suffering and feel motivated to see that suffering relieved.”¹ Compassion therefore depends on awareness of the other’s situation and an ability to empathize with them, combined with a sense of affection or endearment towards that person. These qualities are also important for self-compassion. Psychologist Dr. Kristin Neff, one of the world’s leading experts on the topic, writes that self-compassion means being “kind and understanding when confronted with personal failings.”² It is important to help young students explore self-compassion, because they are just entering a stage in life where they will be increasingly evaluated in numerous ways by their teachers, their parents and guardians, and their peers. It is therefore critical that they learn that any setbacks they encounter in learning or in life do not reflect any lack of personal worth on their part, but can serve as learning experiences for their future development.

Learning experiences 1 and 2 introduce self-compassion by showing that many of the behaviors and types of speech that one would use to encourage a friend in their difficulty can be used to encourage and help oneself. Moreover, it encourages students to cultivate a “growth mindset” that recognizes that learning takes time and that setbacks are natural and not a reason to give up or feel bad about oneself. Relaxing unrealistic expectations (such as that everything will come easily, that one will always be the winner, or that one will never experience failures or setbacks) is an essential

¹ Jinpa, Thupten. *A Fearless Heart: How the courage to be compassionate can transform our lives* (Avery, 2016), xx.

² <https://self-compassion.org/the-three-elements-of-self-compassion-2/>

component of self-compassion, because it undermines the foundation for the self-criticism and low self-worth that can come when students meet with adversity.

Learning experiences 3 and 4 then turn to compassion for others. For compassion to arise, one must be aware of others' needs, and one must also feel some kind of emotional connection with them. As noted in the SEE Learning Framework, compassion therefore depends on awareness, and leads towards engagement in the interests of the other.

Learning experience 3 explores this through a story of compassion and forgiveness. In the story, three friends are treated badly by a boy called Teddy and get angry with him. Later, however, upon learning about Teddy's family situation, they develop empathy for him. They end up deciding to take personal action to reach out to Teddy in friendship and forgiveness.

This learning experience introduces a few key concepts regarding forgiveness and compassion. It introduces the idea that forgiveness involves a releasing of negative emotions towards another person, and that this can be helped through understanding that person's situation in context. Furthermore, it shows that "active compassion" involves a sense of responsibility towards the other person that translates into a decision to help them.

It is important, however, that students realize that compassion and kindness do not mean that one always has to go along with others, say yes to everything, or give people everything that they want without any consideration for the consequences to them or to oneself. If so, compassion could be quite self-destructive. Rather, compassion must be combined with discernment. If giving someone something they ask for would harm them, then compassion in that situation might dictate that one must say no.

Therefore, the final learning experience involves cases where compassion means saying no or setting limits and boundaries. The example given is that of a teacher who explains that the students cannot climb trees, since they could harm themselves. Students should explore other ways in which they will sometimes need to stand up for themselves or others, and how, when adults sometimes set limits or boundaries for their own safety and happiness, this is also a manifestation of compassion.

Earlier chapters introduced the idea of an ethics of restraint, meaning refraining from harming others. In this chapter, a further level of ethics is introduced: an ethics of care. When properly understood and exercised with discernment, genuine care for oneself and others naturally leads to greater happiness and flourishing. On the basis of this sense of caring for the long-term interests of oneself

and others, many other qualities beyond compassion and forgiveness can be cultivated, such as generosity, self-discipline, honesty, integrity, love, and so on.

Student Personal Practice

Many of the skills and practices that have been taught in SEE Learning are actually practices of self-compassion and compassion for others. For example, the resilience skills of grounding, resourcing, and Help Now! in Chapter 2 are practices of self-compassion. Navigating one's emotions can also be a practice of self-compassion, as can forgiveness, since it releases one from strong negative emotions that disturb one's happiness and peace of mind. Similarly, mindful listening and paying attention to others can be acts of compassion and kindness. By pointing out what skills students are already developing and naming them as acts of self-compassion and compassion, you can help your students to recognize how they are already practicing self-compassion and compassion for others, and encourage them to engage in this even more.

Teacher Personal Practice

The expectations on educators, and those that educators place on themselves, can sometimes be extraordinarily high. You may wish to take this time to explore your own self-talk. When do you encourage yourself and when do you notice instances of negative self-talk? Are there unrealistic expectations that you place on yourself or your students, and if so, how could you make them more realistic? What practices of self-compassion and compassion for others are you already engaged in, and how could you build on these and practice them more, or add to them?

Further Reading and Resources

- Kristen Neff's book *Self-Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself* (William Morrow, 2015) is an excellent introduction by the leading researcher on the topic of self-compassion and is also available in audiobook format. Neff's website also contains a number of helpful resources: www.self-compassion.org
- Also recommended is Thupten Jinpa's book *A Fearless Heart: How the Courage to Be Compassionate Can Transform Our Lives* (Avery, 2016), where the section on self-compassion is especially relevant for this chapter of SEE Learning.

Two story books on forgiveness and compassion that may be useful, if they are available in your region, are:

- *The Forgiving Lion* by Efrat Haddi.
- *Friends through Sand and Stone* by A.M. Marcus and Lizbeth Jane Amantillo.