

## Social-Emotional Learning Lessons

Developed by the Center on Transition Innovations  
at Virginia Commonwealth University

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Social-emotional learning (SEL) refers to how individuals use what they know in combination with additional instruction on social and emotional competencies to learn how to:

- understand and manage emotions
- set and achieve goals
- feel and show empathy
- maintain positive relationships
- make responsible decisions

SEL is an essential component of comprehensive education. It focuses not only on academic achievement but also on developing social and emotional competencies. Virginia organizes social and emotional learning into 5 categories: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and decision-making. These categories include learning essential skills such as recognizing personal strengths, empathy, gratitude, and communication.

Teaching social-emotional skills to youth with challenging behaviors or who have been involved in court is important for several reasons.

- **Emotional Regulation:** SEL helps individuals recognize and regulate their emotions. This is crucial for managing stress, frustration, and anger. Youth with challenging behaviors often struggle with emotional regulation. SEL provides them with tools to cope.
- **Interpersonal Skills:** SEL fosters the development of skills that include communication, cooperation, and conflict resolution. Teaching these skills is especially important for youth with challenging behaviors. It helps improve their relationships with peers and adults.
- **Empathy:** SEL shows individuals how to develop an understanding of others' perspectives. This is essential for youth with challenging behaviors to build positive relationships. It also helps reduce conflicts and enhance their social interactions.
- **Responsible and Ethical Decisions:** SEL equips individuals with decision-making skills. Youth with challenging behaviors may face situations where impulse control is crucial. SEL provides them with the skills needed to make thoughtful choices.

- **Academic Performance:** Research suggests a positive correlation between social-emotional learning and academic success. Educators can create a more conducive learning environment by addressing the social and emotional needs of students. This includes those with challenging behaviors.
- **Behaviors:** Teaching SEL can lead to a reduction in disruptive behaviors and aggression. By enhancing self-awareness and interpersonal skills, youth with challenging behaviors can better navigate social situations. This can lead to improved behavior in both school and other settings.
- **Long-Term Success:** SEL prepares individuals for the challenges they may face in various aspects of life. This is especially important for youth with challenging behaviors. These skills can impact their personal and professional lives.

In summary, social-emotional learning is important for youth with challenging behaviors and for youth who have been involved with the court system. SEL addresses the underlying factors that contribute to their difficulties. Teaching emotional awareness and understanding supports their academic success. The lessons included here address positive affirmations and gratitude practices. Once students learn these skills, they can use them at home, school, work, and in the community to promote wellness.

## Lessons include

- Positive Affirmations
- Gratitude

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The contents were developed under a contract #881-APE62524-H027A220107 from the Virginia Department of Education. Virginia Commonwealth University, School of Education is an equal opportunity/affirmative action institution. If specific accommodations are needed, please contact the Center on Transition Innovations at [transition@vcu.edu](mailto:transition@vcu.edu).

# Social-Emotional Learning Lesson: Positive Affirmations

This lesson focuses on teaching students affirmations to improve their positivity and feelings of self-worth.

## Lesson Objectives

Students will:

- Understand what affirmations are and be able to create their own affirmations that are meaningful to them.
- Understand that using self-talk can improve our mood, strengthen our emotional resilience, and, like regular breathing practices, protect us from anxiety and stress.
- Practice affirmations and identify when to use self-talk.

## Materials

- Poster paper
- 3 x 5 index cards
- Markers

## Lesson at a Glance

**Focus:** Self-talk is an important tool for emotional regulation. It can help boost confidence, create a more positive outlook on life, and increase choices to respond to situations more effectively. Negative self-talk, on the other hand, can lead to anxiety and depression and is more likely to narrow our options when it comes to decision-making.

With awareness and practice, negative self-talk can be transformed to generate positive feelings and self-worth.

## Lesson Steps

- 1 Prepare for lesson
- 2 Icebreaker
- 3 Review lesson objectives
- 4 Instruction — Activities 1-3
- 5 Close lesson

# Lesson Procedure: Creativity & Innovation

## 1 Prepare

Gather lesson materials.

- Poster paper
- 3 x 5 index cards
- Markers

## 2 Icebreaker

Lead students in sharing “I am” statements. While one student shares, other students need to listen and determine if the statement is positive or negative. If the statement is negative, the other students, or you as the instructor, help the student positively reframe it.

Example:

“I am not good at math” – let’s change it up!  
“I am really good at history” or “I know when I need help in math.”

## 3 Review Objectives

Students will:

- Understand what affirmations are and be able to create their own affirmations that are meaningful to them.
- Understand that using self-talk can improve our mood, strengthen our emotional resilience, and, like regular breathing practices, protect us from anxiety and stress.
- Practice affirmations and identify when to use self-talk.

## 4 Instruction

Throughout this lesson, you will lead students through a series of activities that explain, model, and practice positive affirmations.

### Activity 1: Explaining Positive Affirmations

Say to your students: “As we slow down, breathe deeply, relax, and become more aware of our thoughts and feelings, we can learn to transform our negative thoughts and feelings about ourselves, our abilities, and our performance. Research tells us that our thoughts are as real to the brain as what’s happening in our outer lives. This is one reason why positive affirmations can be so effective.”

1. Use these tips to create effective positive affirmations:

- Use the present tense and the first person, such as “I am enough,” “I am lovable,” or “I am a good friend.”
- Frame affirmations positively. For example, instead of “I am not weak,” try “I am strong.”
- Speak affirmations as if they are facts. This means omitting “mights,” “shoulds,” or “coulds.”
- Repeat affirmations confidently to yourself multiple times a day, especially before going to sleep or before a difficult conversation.

2. Positive affirmations can be reinforced with physical touch. Use these tips to effectively incorporate physical touch into positive affirmations:

- Tap the back of your hand or apply pressure to your temples as you state affirmations.
- Consider affirmations that have four syllables. For example, “I am calm now,” “I can do this,” and “I am ready.” Squeeze your thumb and fingers together one syllable at a time from your index finger to your pinky finger. Repeat several times.

## Activity 2: Modeling Positive Affirmations

Students often learn best by example—the idea of “do as I do, not just as I say.” It is important to let students know what affirmations look and sound like.

1. Share some of your favorite affirmations and talk about their impact. If affirmations are not part of your daily practice, now is a great time to start! Try incorporating positive affirmations first thing in the morning. It is helpful to practice affirmations at the same time every day to turn this into a regular self-care practice.
2. Consider some of the following sentence starters:

- I ... matter, have got this, etc.
- I am ... loved, powerful, blessed, etc.
- I can ... do this, sit in discomfort, change my ways, make a difference, etc.
- I choose ... love over fear, compassion, generosity, etc.

3. Affirm your students, modeling language that they, in turn, can use to affirm themselves. Use their names and look them in the eye as you tell them:

- Marissa, you matter!
- You are cared for, Tamir!
- Rosa, you're working so hard.
- Class/friends, you can do this; you've got this!
- Congrats Louis. Your efforts paid off. You figured it out!

4. Next, Pass out 3x5 index cards to each student. Have students write their name on one side, using markers to design it however they would like.
5. Recollect the cards, shuffle them, and pass them back out to students.
6. Students then read the name on the front of their new card and add a positive comment about that person on the backside.
7. Repeat this process until each student has commented on everyone's card.
8. Recollect the cards and return them to their original owners. Students now have their own card with positive comments on the back. They can refer to this when they need a pick-me-up!

### Activity 3: Practicing Positive Affirmations

If affirmations aren't part of your practice, you can also choose to build one alongside your students. Lead students through the following discussion questions:

- Ask students if they use positive self-talk in their lives. If so, what works for them?
- Brainstorm a list of positive affirmations with students to use as a reference for practicing affirmations throughout the school day.
- Ask students what it feels like to positively affirm themselves. Accept the feelings that come up, from weird, uncomfortable, and embarrassing to happy, exciting, warm, and fulfilling, and everything in between!

## 5 Close Lesson

### Call & Response Affirmations

Ask students to repeat after you a set of affirmations in a call-and-response way. Work with the class to come up with their own affirmations and write them on large poster paper.

Example:

<b>Instructor</b>		<b>Students</b>
"I am enough."	——	"I am enough."
"I am powerful."	——	"I am powerful."
"I am lovable."	——	"I am lovable."

Repeat a second or third time as you see fit. As this becomes part of your classroom rituals, invite student volunteers to lead the call and response, coming up with their own positive affirmations over time. You can start each class this way and/or end the class this way.

## Lesson 2

# Social-Emotional Learning Lesson: Gratitude

This lesson focuses on understanding gratitude.

## Lesson Objectives

Students will:

- Understand what gratitude is and the benefits of gratitude.
- Understand how gratitude can improve mood and add perspective about positive influences in their lives.
- Practice sharing gratitude statements.

## Materials

- Poster paper
- Post-it notes
- Paper and markers
- Jar and index cards (optional)

## Lesson at a Glance

**Focus:** Research shows that one way to take stress down a notch is to cultivate gratitude as a nurturing self-care practice. Practicing gratitude on a regular basis has been associated with enhanced optimism, better sleep, fewer physical ailments, and lower levels of anxiety and depression.

## Lesson Steps

- 1 Prepare for lesson
- 2 Icebreaker
- 3 Review lesson objectives
- 4 Instruction — Activities 1-3
- 5 Close lesson



# Lesson Procedure: Gratitude

## 1 Prepare

Gather lesson materials.

- Poster paper
- Post-it notes
- Paper and markers
- Jar and index cards (optional)

## 2 Icebreaker

Set the tone of the lesson by leading students through the following mindfulness activity.

1. Begin by playing calming music.
2. Ask students to close their eyes and think about a time that they enjoyed or a good day.
3. After a minute, ask them to think about (without saying anything) what made it good.
4. Ask students then to think about how it made them feel.
5. Turn off the music, ask the students to quietly open their eyes, and take turns sharing what they were thinking about and why they appreciated it.

## 3 Review Objectives

Students will:

- Understand what gratitude is and the benefits of gratitude.
- Understand how gratitude can improve mood, and add perspective about positive influences in their lives.
- Practice sharing gratitude statements.

## 4 Instruction

Throughout this lesson, you will lead students through a series of discussions and activities that aid in understanding gratitude and gratitude practices.

### Activity 1: Understanding Gratitude

First, explain to students that gratitude involves taking time to reflect on what one is grateful for.

Show video [The Gratitude Experiment](#) (start at 2:19 and run through 4:43).

Ask students the following discussion questions after watching the video:

- What did you think of this video?
- Which group had the best outcomes?
- Why do you think being grateful and thinking about that is a positive thing?

### Activity 2: Using Gratitude Prompts

Write various gratitude prompts (listed below) on different poster papers and hand out post-its to students. Hang the gratitude posters around the classroom. Then, instruct students to write their answers to one of the prompts on a post-it and add it to the corresponding poster. Repeat the process until students have answered multiple gratitude prompts. To further expand the exercise, ask students why they are grateful for their different answers.

Use the following gratitude prompts for this activity:

#### I'm grateful for

- a person or persons in my life.
- a pet or animals in my life.
- things in my home or in my building.
- things in my yard, my street, or the park.
- things in my neighborhood.
- things I enjoy doing.
- something I can hear.
- something I can see.
- something I can touch/feel.
- something I can smell.
- something I can taste.

### Activity 3: Creatively Modeling and Practicing Gratitude

There are a number of ways to model gratitude for your class and encourage students to practice gratitude. Using their strengths, students can use a variety of creative ways to express gratitude.

- **Gratitude Drawing:** Students use paper and markers to draw what they are grateful for. Use the above prompts to help them get started.
- **Classroom Gratitude Jar:** Get a jar and decorate it. Collect one thing each student is grateful for on index cards. Gather the cards, put them in the jar, and continue the activity daily until it is full. This not only cultivates students' gratitude practice but can serve as a positive reminder for students when needed.

Example: A student is having a hard day or is in need of a pick-me-up. They can ask for a card or two from the jar to help them focus on something positive.

Students can also make their own jars to draw on for positive reminders when they need them.

- **Gratitude Opener/Closer:** At the beginning or end of the school day, invite students to share one at a time what they're grateful for. After everyone has shared, ask students to check in with themselves and reflect on how that made them feel.
- **Appreciations:** Invite students to share what they appreciate about others in the class, encouraging them to focus on meaningful appreciations. Prompt students to talk about specific moments and how they made them feel.

Example: Instead of, "I appreciate Sam for being my friend," ask them what it is about Sam that makes them a good friend.

This practice helps build community and empathy in the classroom. It may take some time for students to get comfortable enough with their peers to open up. As the instructor, modeling meaningful appreciations can help students share meaningful appreciations, as well.

## 5 Close Lesson

### Committing to Gratitude Practices

Lead students in committing to one of the gratitude practices they learned in the lesson.

1. Using poster paper, make a gratitude commitment poster for the classroom.
2. Encourage students to add to the poster how they will practice gratitude.
3. Display the poster in the classroom, providing students with a visual reminder of their commitment to practice gratitude regularly.