

Teaching Empathy through Read Aloud and Role-Play

by Darla Salay and Jennifer Brittin

Educators agree that there is a pressing need to teach empathy in schools. Bullying statistics remind us of this imperative. Heartbreaking headlines demand we pay attention. While whole-school climate initiatives and programs are being implemented with some success, there is a need to bring the message closer. Make it personal.

Why Books? Why Read Aloud?

First, the *simple act of read aloud creates community*. The experience of sharing a text connects students with multiple backgrounds. The common ground of read aloud creates safe spaces to think aloud, offer personal insight, and ask questions. It brings a group of individuals with differing experiences together around the shared experience of the story.

Secondly, *books offer “windows and mirrors”*. Students may see themselves on the pages of a book, when they feel completely alone in the real world. Or, a book may offer a unique look into the heart and mind of an individual who is completely unlike the reader. Empathy begins with understanding another’s experience. Books give us this opportunity.

Finally, *stories present readers with situations to role-play*. Whether mentally playing out a scene or acting out a scenario with classmates, role-play helps students consider *what ifs* and the *should have beens* of a story. Play allows for a closer relationship with a text, and more importantly, with a situation that requires empathy.

Getting Started

We made it a priority this year to offer our students reading experiences that would help them realize the importance of kindness and empathy. The first course of action was to develop a “kindness library” with thoughtfully chosen texts that would allow readers to explore the values, behaviors, and needs of fictional characters similar to them. Next, we developed the protocol below for a read aloud lesson that could work with any of the texts. Of course, these ideas can be stretched into a unit plan or adapted for chapter books. For this example, we use Trudy Ludwig’s book *The Invisible Boy* to help students understand the problem of feeling left out and alone.

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1. Introduce the Text and Set a Purpose for Reading:

When we share books to foster empathy in students, the primary purpose for reading is for students to notice the feelings of the character in the story and to try to experience those same feelings.

“Boys and girls, today when we read The Invisible Boy, your job is to notice specifically how Brian feels, and also to think about why he is feeling that way. I will stop at a few important places in the book and you’ll talk in your partnerships about what you noticed.”

Turn and talks reveal that students were eager to share times when they had experienced similar situations. Students also notice that the secondary characters in the text aren’t always purposely being cruel, and there are a variety of reasons why someone may feel left out or hurt.

To close the read aloud students either write their noticings and ideas in their Writer’s Notebooks or we move directly into layered role-play.

2. Teach Layered Role-Playing Around Key Scenes in Texts

Either immediately after reading (or returning to the text the next day) **students work in small groups to role-play** those key parts of the story when Brian is feeling left out.

For example, students might role-play the scene where a group of students is discussing a party that everyone attended except Brian. In another scene, Brian isn’t chosen for a kickball game during recess and ends up watching from the sidelines.

To help students get into character, we coach them in small groups, choosing questions that focus on using expressions, tone of voice, and gestures to show feelings. For example:

Expressions: *How was Brian feeling at the lunch table? Can you show that feeling on your face?*

Tone of Voice: *How can you use your voice to show the feelings of the students at the lunch table during their conversation about the pool party?*

Gestures: *What movements will help show how they were feeling?*

Some students catch on more quickly than others, but allowing them to switch roles (everyone in the group played Brian, for example) allows them to observe one another. This modeling by their peers deepens understanding of both the purpose of role-play and of the characters in the story. Because the scenes are short, students act them out multiple times. This also helps them to internalize the characters’ feelings.

3. Coach Small Groups To Rewrite Scenes

Next, we ask students to “rewrite” the scene in a way that has a more desirable outcome for the character experiencing negative emotions. Students don’t actually do any writing—they discuss how the scene from the book could be different. Then, they act it out with the new outcome.

To support them, we ask the following questions and/or offer the conversation starters below:

What would have been a better way to handle this? How should have the other characters acted in this situation? If you were Brian, how would you want this part to end? This time we should ... A better way to act this out is... or It would have been nicer if ...

Initially, we find that young students understand that there is a better way to handle the situation. However, they aren’t very specific in their thinking or talk. It is important to coach students to discuss action-oriented ideas for the second part of role-play. With our youngest students we don’t want to assume that the appropriate action is obvious.

Teacher: So, you told me that you think the characters should be nicer to Brian. What could they do to be nicer?

Student: They could stop talking about the party so he doesn’t feel bad.

Teacher: That’s a good start. Do you think there is anything else that they could do? I notice that Brian is all by himself at the table. What would you like someone to do if you were sitting by yourself at the lunch table?

Student: Someone could say, Come sit with us!

Student: Or maybe they could move by him.

Student: I would invite him to my next party.

Once students have an action plan, they act out the new scene using their ideas. This helps them to see how their actions can affect someone else, for better or worse. We hope it also gives them tools to act when they encounter real life situations—to show kindness rather than indifference.

4. Lead Whole-Group Discussion on Cues and Actions

In the end, we want our students to translate what they learned to their world. We culminate the lesson by bringing students together to discuss places and ways that people get left out in school, on the bus, or in their neighborhoods. Then, we create a chart together with cues and actions, explaining that cues are things to look for in others and actions are what we can do to show kindness and empathy.

Ways to Show Empathy

Cues	Action
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Someone is by himself, away from the group.• Someone isn't talking at all in a conversation.• Someone's head is down or he looks sad.• Someone is watching a game, not joining in.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Move to him and ask him to join the group.• Think about something she would like to talk about and ask her a question.• Ask him what's wrong and what he would like you to do to help.• Stop the game and invite the person to play. OR ask what she would like to play next.

As much as we might assume that this might come naturally for our youngest learners, it is important to help students make specific plans. *If someone is walking around the playground with her head down, what is one thing you will do? If you get picked for team captain in gym, how will you make sure no one feels left out?*

Without plans and action tools, our students may very well remain passive by-standers when they confront unkindness or even bullying. Read aloud and role-play with the right books can make the abstract term of empathy relevant to students' lives. It can give them concrete skills they might need to walk in someone's shoes, to possibly change the course of someone else's life.

Mentor Texts

Following is a short list of mentor texts that can be used for teaching empathy through read aloud and role-play. We use picture books in every grade level, but chapter books are excellent for extended work with older students.

Picture Books

Freckle Face Strawberry by Julianne Moore

Each Kindness by Jacqueline Woodson

The Other Side by Jacqueline Woodson

Otis and the Scarecrow by Loren Long

The Farmer and the Clown by Marla Frazee

Wilfred Gordon McDonald Partridge by Mem Fox

Thank you, Mr. Falker by Patricia Polacco
Here I Am by Patti Kim
Chrysanthemum by Kevin Henkes
Spaghetti In A Hot Dog Bun by Maria Dismundy

Chapter Books

The Hundred Dresses by Eleanor Estes
Every Living Thing by Cynthia Rylant
Wonder by R. J. Palacio
Absolutely Almost by Lisa Graff
Fish in a Tree by Lynda Mullaly Hunt
Freak the Mighty by Rodman Philbrick
One for the Murphys by Lynda Mullaly Hunt
Rain Reign by Ann Martin
Rules by Cynthia Lord
Handful of Stars by Cynthia Lord



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