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Putting Down Put-Downs: Help Students Talk to Each Other in More Civil Ways

Middle school students often live in a put-down culture. Some of this stems from their own search for identity and their attempts to reaffirm who they are by putting down others they perceive as different or threatening. Some stems from what they see in the media, and some comes from their tendency to form cliques. Regardless, put-downs are related to bullying and are toxic to creating a safe group and learning environment. A special focus is therefore needed to ensure that students have tools both to reduce their use of put-downs and to build their tolerance of put-downs from others.

OBJECTIVE

- To show students how to recognize put-downs and begin to discriminate levels of how these harmful words or actions can hurt another person.

MATERIALS AND PREPARATION

Chalkboard or easel pad

Copies or whole-class displays of the "Put-Down Tracker" (Worksheet 3.1) and "Put-Down Pain Scale" (Worksheet 3.2)

NOTE: During the week before presenting this topic, record an estimate of the number of put-downs that you hear being exchanged during the day or during a set period of time (such as during lunch, recess, or free period).

LEADER'S GUIDE

1. Review the preceding topic.

2. Introduce the concept of put-downs.

Write the word *put-down* on the chalkboard or easel pad. Tell the students that today they will be discussing put-downs—what they are and how they are harmful to others. Briefly mention your own personal definition of put-downs—for example, deliberately harmful words or actions toward another person. An example may help—but remember to direct your comments to an empty chair or some other object, rather than to a student who might wonder if you really mean it personally.

3. Motivate students.

Say:

Getting along with others is an important part of being successful as a member of a music group, athletic team, business, or classroom. When people start putting each other down, groups break up, teams tend to lose, people get fired from their jobs, and classrooms become unhappy places. So if you really want to learn to be part of a group, you need to recognize when you are giving or getting a put-down and eventually figure out a way to prevent it from ruining your group.

4. Define the concept.

Elicit from the students their ideas of what a put-down is and write these ideas on the board. A full definition of a put-down can eventually include the concepts that are listed on the “Put-Down Tracker.”

5. Present practice activities.

Look at current television programs or movies for examples of put-downs. Show students a short video clip that exemplifies put-downs. Ask the students to notice the put-downs so they can write them down within the appropriate category on the Put-Down Tracker. Alternatively, you or a student can be the official scribe for a whole-class display of this worksheet.

Discuss with students how put-downs feel to a person. For this, the Put-Down Pain Scale, used as a student worksheet or presented in a whole-class format, can help. Select several of the put-downs that were identified in the video, nominate some yourself, or, if the students are ready, ask them to volunteer some of their own feelings and then rate them on the pain scale.

Read comic strips that illustrate put-downs and the feelings they create in others and use these as sources for this topic's worksheets. You can also, as a part of an art class, have the students draw their own comic strip examples of put-downs and then analyze these in a similar fashion.

Present pictures from magazines or books, one at a time, and add an impromptu story line, such as "Hey, you're pretty strong for a girl." Ask students to decide whether the comment is a put-down or not. If it is, they can then categorize and note the severity of the put-down.

6. Report on current behavior.

Tell the students how many put-downs you counted in the week or other time period before this session and challenge them to reduce the total by a set number. For example, if you count an average of twenty put-downs in a day, challenge the students to reduce the number to fifteen or ten. Be mindful not to set an unrealistic goal—the students may give up if they see it as impossible to achieve. Keep daily records of the put-downs and report on progress each day. This can be done on a wall chart. Be sure to praise the students for their progress. Once the first goal is reached, it is possible to set a new goal to cut the number of put-downs even further.

7. Provide a summary.

Ask students to review their ideas about put-downs.

Establish a cue word or prompt: "Put-down." Encourage familiarity with this word and prepare students for what will happen during the next topic. Ask the students to look for put-downs between now and the next session. Tell them that you may stop the group to point out an interchange between two students that includes a put-down. In the following week, stop the group to point out any put-downs that occur in exchanges between students.

Student _____ Date _____

Put-downs are words or actions that deliberately hurt someone. Give examples of the following kinds of put-downs.

- 1. Ignoring someone (deliberately not paying attention to someone) to make that person feel uncomfortable.**

EXAMPLES _____

- 2. Disrespecting or insulting someone (teasing a person by joking about their skills or appearance).**

EXAMPLES _____

- 3. Threatening someone (deliberately frightening someone by promising to do that person harm).**

EXAMPLES _____

- 4. Starting rough physical contact (different from self-defense, this refers to provoking a fight).**

EXAMPLES _____

- 5. Other categories**

Student _____ Date _____

Think about how someone might feel who received the put-down. Then rate the put-down by writing it next to the number that tells how painful the put-down was. Remember, each person may rate each put-down differently, and that's OK.

(REALLY PAINFUL)

10 _____

9 _____

8 _____

7 _____

6 _____

5 _____

4 _____

3 _____

2 _____

1 _____

(NOT SO PAINFUL)

7

How to Be a Good Decision Maker and Problem Solver: FIG TESPN

In school, with friends, during after-school activities, and with parents and other adults, students need good social decision making and social problem solving skills. Without them, it's hard to pursue goals and have satisfying relationships with others. Further, problem solving underlies health decision making, scientific and historical inquiry, and the writing process. It is a basic intellectual skill. This series of activities introduces students to a powerful strategy for decision making and problem solving that they can use throughout their time in middle school, and beyond.

OBJECTIVES

- To introduce students to FIG TESPN
- To show students how to use the steps together and in sequence
- To provide students and teachers with a prompt for use of this strategy

MATERIALS

Whole-class display of the steps in FIG TESPN (Worksheet 3.9)

Copies of "FIG TESPN: My Social Problem Solver"
(Worksheet 3.10)

Newsprint and markers

NOTE: After you have introduced FIG TESPN, keep a whole-class display of the steps posted in the classroom.

LEADER'S GUIDE

1. Review preceding topics.

Go over "YOUR Keep Calm," "BEST," and the Trouble Tracker, and discuss how students have used them.

2. Introduce the new tool.

Refer students to the whole-class display of FIG TESP. Tell them:

Today we are going to learn to use a new tool called "FIG TESP" (after the first letter of each of the steps). FIG TESP helps you solve problems and figure out how to do things in the best way possible. It helps you use your own resources and abilities so you don't need me or anyone else to do it for you. FIG TESP helps you think before acting and decide the best thing to do to get what you want. It is something you bring on the scene when your feelings become strong and you have difficulty deciding what to do.

Generate examples of what such a tool might be like. If the students are having difficulty, talk about people who have the job of providing guidance and helping others succeed without acting directly for them. If students cannot generate examples, suggest local or national sports coaches or managers and relevant television or movie characters (Obi Wan Kenobi and Yoda from *Star Wars* or Jiminy Cricket from *Pinocchio*). Stress that FIG TESP does not solve the problem for the student or tell the student what to do; instead, FIG TESP helps the student solve the problem.

3. Distribute and personalize the FIG TESP worksheet.

Explain that people can help themselves solve problems by using FIG TESP to remind them to be good problem solvers and decision makers.

Give each student a copy of Worksheet 3.9. Encourage them to develop their own visual image of FIG TESP. Have them discuss their ideas in small groups, and then each create a personal visual reminder of FIG TESP that they can draw on their FIG TESP handout. Then have them share their images with the full group.

4. Illustrate the use of FIG TESP.

Model a problem-solving situation using FIG TESP to show how it guides your decision making. Use something suitable from your own

life: a time when you had to solve a problem, make a decision, or resolve a conflict with someone—for example, deciding which activities to present to the class to help them understand a concept, what to do on a Friday afternoon, whether or not to assign something for homework, or how to cope with two conflicting meetings or responsibilities.

5. Conduct a practice activity.

Present a situation for students to deal with by using FIG TESPN. Divide the class into groups. Give each group a piece of newsprint and a marker. Here is a sample situation you can use, or you can substitute any situation you like, as long as it is hypothetical:

Imagine you just moved into a new house, a house you have really wanted. It seems perfect in every way. The first night, after a day of unpacking, you lay your head on the pillow to go to sleep and you hear a dog barking. It barks and barks for almost an hour, but you are so tired, you fall asleep. Next day, you do more unpacking and the place is starting to look really good. At the end of the day, you again get ready to sleep, and again, the dog starts barking, for over an hour. The same thing happens every night for five nights.

Then say to the students:

Take out your FIG TESPN worksheets. I want you to use FIG TESPN to try to solve this problem. Take one step at a time and write out your responses on the newsprint. One person should be the recorder for the group, and then we will share ideas.

Use this as a time to reinforce students' using their SDM/SPS skills to work as a team and as a diagnostic to see their problem-solving strengths and weaknesses. Don't worry about correcting students at first; focus on helping them enjoy and value the problem-solving process. Then, in the future, when a problem arises, you can have them work it out in subgroups or as a full group, using the FIG TESPN format.

IMPLEMENTATION TIPS

1. Have students draw a comic strip involving FIG TESPN.
2. Show the film *Pinocchio* or videos of the old television show *The Wonder Years* and discuss comparisons between FIG TESPN and

Jiminy Cricket or between FIG TESPN and the voice that helps the main character think through his problems.

3. Give a writing assignment with a beginning (feeling and problem) and an end. Have the students fill in the middle of the story, using FIG TESPN.
4. Use FIG TESPN as a prompt for problem solving. For example, you might ask, "How could FIG TESPN help you with this?"
5. Do not expect that students will completely understand or be able to use FIG TESPN after this brief introduction. Remember that FIG TESPN will be learned through repetition. Also, in subsequent activities, always do a complete run-through of FIG TESPN at least once in the activity.

Steps in FIG TESP

F —Feelings cue me to problem solve.

I —Identify the problem.

G —Goals give me a guide.

T —Think of many possible solutions.

E —Envision outcomes.

S —Select the best solution.

P —Plan the procedure, anticipate pitfalls, and practice.

N —Notice what happened and remember it for next time.

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Draw your personal FIG TESPN.