

Future Ready Pathways for School, Work and Life

Building Better Connections

Healthy Relationships & Empathy

*Lessons for upper elementary
students, aged 8-11*

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*Lessons for upper elementary students
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Editors:

Janna Nobleza
Suresh Korapati
Andrew Culley
Emelen De Jesus

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Teacher/Parent Guide

Building Better Connections

Learning Objectives

This workbook is designed to support students in grades 3–5 as they develop the skills needed to build, maintain, navigate, and repair healthy relationships in increasingly complex social situations.

By the end of these lessons, students will be able to:

- Recognize how emotions, thoughts, and experiences influence their reactions and choices in relationships.
- Demonstrate empathy by considering others' feelings and perspectives, even during disagreements or misunderstandings.
- Contribute to a sense of belonging by making inclusive choices and recognizing how group dynamics affect others.
- Build and maintain healthy friendships by understanding trust, respect, and mutual responsibility.
- Set, communicate, and respect personal boundaries related to space, time, emotions, and belongings.
- Make thoughtful, independent decisions in peer and group situations, including when facing peer pressure.
- Use clear, respectful communication strategies to express needs, listen to others, and navigate differences.
- Resolve conflicts fairly using problem-solving strategies that promote understanding and cooperation.
- Take responsibility for mistakes by repairing harm, making amends, and working to rebuild trust over time.
- Recognize when relationships are unbalanced or unhealthy and make choices that support personal well-being.

Teacher/Parent Guide

Building Better Connections

Learning Rationale

The upper elementary years are a crucial bridge between early childhood and adolescence. During this time, students move beyond simple friendships and begin navigating more complex social dynamics, including group work, peer influence, shifting friendships, and increased expectations for independence. While students at this age are often expected to “know how to get along,” many are still developing the skills needed to manage these situations effectively.

Without intentional instruction, students may rely on trial and error to navigate relationships, leading to misunderstandings, conflict escalation, exclusion, or difficulty repairing harm. Social challenges at this stage can affect students’ sense of belonging, confidence, and ability to engage fully in learning environments.

Building Better Connections exists to provide students with the tools they need to understand relationships as ongoing processes that require awareness, communication, and responsibility. Rather than assuming these skills develop automatically, this workbook makes relationship skills visible, teachable, and practice-based.

The workbook is grounded in the understanding that:



Relationships are shaped by everyday choices, not just big moments



Belonging is created through consistent, inclusive actions



Boundaries help relationships feel safe and caring



Choices can be thoughtful, even in challenging situations



Conflicts are a normal part of relationships and can be solved peacefully



Mistakes do not end relationships — they can be repaired



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An Introduction for Teachers & Parents

These lessons are designed for upper elementary students (ages 8–11) and can be used in classrooms, homeschool settings, or small instructional groups. Each lesson includes a teacher lesson plan, a student-friendly reading with an anchor text, guided practice activities, and optional at-home extensions.

Across the five lessons, students develop essential relationship skills that help them build belonging, maintain friendships, navigate conflict, and repair relationships when harm occurs. These skills become increasingly important in grades three through five, as social interactions grow more complex and students are expected to manage peer relationships with greater independence.

The lessons are:

Structured yet Flexible – Each lesson can be taught in a single session or extended across multiple days through discussion, modeling, role-play, or real-world practice.

Skill-Focused – Each lesson targets a specific phase of the relationship cycle—building belonging, maintaining healthy friendships, communicating through differences, navigating conflict, and repairing relationships—so students can understand how relationships develop and change over time.

Developmentally Aligned – Lessons reflect the social realities of upper elementary learners, including group work, changing friendships, peer pressure, and increased responsibility for managing emotions and behavior.

You do not need to be a specialist to teach these lessons. Each one includes clear objectives, step-by-step guidance, and support notes for diverse learners. Student pages use accessible language to help learners understand not only what healthy relationship skills are, but why they matter and how to apply them in everyday situations.

As students prepare for middle school, these lessons support the development of empathy, communication, accountability, and resilience. The goal is to equip students with practical relationship tools they can use at school, at home, and in their communities—now and as they grow.



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An Introduction for Teachers & Parents

Table of Contents

Pre-Assessment – A brief check-in to understand how students currently navigate friendships, communicate across differences, handle conflict, and respond when relationships are challenged.

Lesson 1: Building Belonging – Establishing the foundation for healthy relationships by exploring empathy, inclusion, and the role everyday choices play in helping others feel valued and respected.

Lesson 2: Maintaining Healthy Friendships – Learning what helps friendships feel balanced and respectful by examining trust, boundaries, and responsibility within changing friendships and group dynamics.

Lesson 3: Peer Pressure & Making Healthy Choices – Practicing how to be an upstander and making healthy choices when feeling negative peer pressure.

Lesson 4: Navigating Conflict – Developing strategies for managing disagreements calmly and fairly by regulating emotions, problem-solving, and working toward solutions that respect everyone involved.

Lesson 5: Repairing and Strengthening Relationships – Understanding how to take responsibility for mistakes, repair harm, and rebuild trust through meaningful apologies, accountability, and follow-through.

Post-Assessment – Reflecting on how students' relationship skills have grown and how they can apply these skills in friendships, group work, and family interactions.

Resources – Additional ideas and supports for teachers, parents, and students.



Universal Design for Learning

Overview

This workbook is designed using Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles to ensure that all students—with diverse strengths, needs, learning preferences, and backgrounds—can access, engage with, and benefit from the lessons.

UDL recognizes that students learn in different ways. Some learn best through discussion, others through visuals, movement, or hands-on practice. This pack intentionally offers multiple ways for students to engage with content, demonstrate understanding, and practice skills, allowing adults to adapt lessons without changing the learning goals.

Multiple Means of Engagement

(How students stay interested and motivated)

- Lessons include a variety of activity types such as sorting, scenario analysis, drawing, role-play, movement, and discussion to support engagement.
- Students are offered choices whenever possible (how to respond, which scenario to explore, or how to demonstrate understanding).
- Activities are designed to be flexible in length and format, allowing adults to adjust pacing based on attention, energy, or emotional readiness.
- Content is grounded in realistic social situations students commonly experience, making learning meaningful and relevant.

Adult Tip: If a student seems disengaged, try changing the response format (for example, drawing instead of writing, or role-play instead of discussion) rather than repeating the same task.

Multiple Means of Representation

(How information is presented and understood)

- Key ideas are presented using clear language, visuals, icons, examples, and anchor texts.
- Short readings and scenarios introduce concepts before moving into reflection or discussion.
- Consistent routines, sentence starters, and guided questions support comprehension and confidence.
- Concepts are intentionally revisited across lessons to reinforce understanding and application over time.

Adult Tip: Read instructions aloud when needed, reference visuals during explanations, and model one example before asking students to work independently.



Universal Design for Learning

Multiple Means of Action and Expression

(How students show what they know)

Students are offered multiple ways to demonstrate understanding, including:

- Writing short responses
- Drawing or visual representation
- Sorting, matching, or categorizing
- Acting out scenarios or role-play
- Speaking or participating in discussion
- Dictating responses to an adult, when needed

Writing is supported but not required to demonstrate understanding. Lessons emphasize expression of ideas over perfection, allowing students to choose formats that match their strengths.

Role-play, discussion, and hands-on activities provide opportunities for students to practice relationship skills in low-pressure, supportive ways.

Adult Tip: Accept responses in multiple forms. Focus on the thinking or skill being demonstrated rather than the format used to express it.

Flexible Use Across Settings

This pack is designed to work in:

- classrooms
- homeschool environments
- counseling or small-group settings
- one-on-one adult–child work

Activities can be:

- used as written
- shortened
- combined
- revisited multiple times

There is no required order for activities within a lesson.

Emotional Safety and Developmental Support

Lessons avoid shame, punishment, or labeling behavior as “bad.”

- Mistakes are framed as part of learning and growth.
- Students are never required to share personal experiences.
- Adults are encouraged to observe and listen rather than correct or judge responses.

Adult Tip: If a topic feels sensitive, allow children to respond using story characters or pictures instead of personal examples.



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Universal Design for Learning

Supporting Diverse Learners

This workbook is designed to support a wide range of learners, including:

- Emerging and developing readers and writers
- Multilingual learners
- Neurodivergent learners
- Students with varying levels of emotional regulation and social confidence

Differentiation strategies embedded throughout the lessons include:

- Sentence starters and guided prompts
- Visual supports and graphic organizers
- Movement-based and hands-on options
- Partner and small-group activities
- Adult modeling and think-alouds

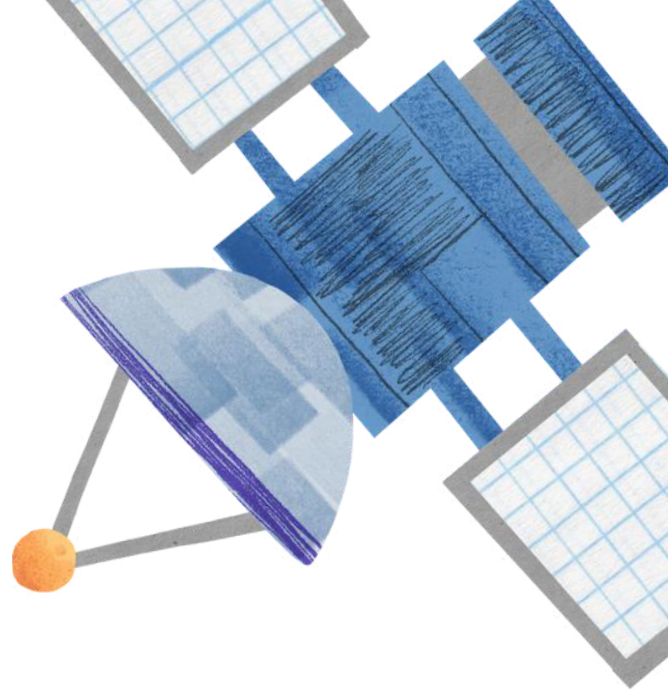
These strategies allow students to access content, participate meaningfully, and demonstrate understanding in ways that align with their individual strengths and needs.

Final Note for Adults

You do not need to be a specialist in social or relationship skills to use this pack. Your role is to:

- Read or review content with students
- Guide discussions gently and thoughtfully
- Listen carefully to student responses
- Model calm, respectful communication

The goal is not perfection, but practice. With consistency, flexibility, and support, all students can strengthen the skills needed to build, maintain, and repair healthy relationships—now and in the years ahead.



Pre-Assessment



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Lesson Plan: Pre-Assessment

Learning Objectives

By the end of the pre-assessment activity, students will:

1. Show what they already understand about empathy, inclusion, communication, and respectful behavior in relationships.
2. Share how they currently approach friendships, group work, and interactions with peers.
3. Demonstrate the strategies they naturally use when disagreements, misunderstandings, or hurt feelings occur.
4. Reveal how they communicate needs, respond to differences, and take responsibility when mistakes happen.
5. Establish a baseline for key relationship skills before beginning the lessons, helping teachers and parents understand where students are starting from.

Learning Rationale

The pre-assessment helps teachers and parents understand how upper elementary students currently navigate friendships, communication, and social challenges. Because relationship skills develop through experience and maturity, students in grades 3–5 often enter with a wide range of strengths and needs.

This activity is not a test. Instead, it provides an opportunity to observe how students think about relationships, interpret social situations, and respond to moments of difference, conflict, or misunderstanding.

By exploring what students already know and do, adults can:

- Tailor instruction to meet students where they are, strengthening the relationship skills needed for upper elementary and preparing them for the social demands of middle school.
- Identify patterns that may interfere with healthy relationships, such as avoiding conflict, escalating disagreements, or struggling to communicate needs clearly.
- Document student growth across the unit in empathy, communication, conflict navigation, and accountability.
- Encourage self-awareness by helping students recognize their current relationship strategies and begin thinking about how to refine or expand them.
- Create a supportive learning environment that normalizes social challenges and highlights the skills students will be building throughout the lessons.



Lesson Plan: Pre-Assessment

Step 1: Set the Tone (3–5 minutes)

- Say to students: “Today we’re going to look at how people handle different social situations. There are no right or wrong answers. Everyone thinks differently, and this is just a way for me to understand how our class thinks so I can support you better.”
- If students ask, “What’s the right answer?” reassure them that you are not looking for perfect behavior — you are looking for honest thinking.

Step 2: Independent Completion (10–15 minutes)

- Students read each scenario and select the response that best matches what they would most likely do.
- Encourage students to answer quickly and honestly.

Step 3: Optional Pair or Whole-Group Reflection (5–10 minutes)

Choose 2–3 questions to briefly discuss (not all 15).

Sample prompts:

- “Did anyone notice that different people chose different answers?”
- “Why do you think people might handle the same situation in different ways?”

Do not ask students to defend their choices.

Step 4: Close the Activity (2–3 minutes)

Say: “This was just the starting point. Over the next few lessons, we’ll learn new ways to handle situations like these. It’s okay if your answers change later — that means you’re learning.”

Teacher Reflection & Insight Guide

Rather than scoring answers, look for patterns.

- Do students notice others’ feelings or overlook them?
- Do responses show initiative or passivity?
- Are students more likely to give in or assert needs?
- Do they recognize unfair or uncomfortable situations?
- Do students express ideas or avoid speaking up?
- Do they rely on adults to step in quickly?
- Do students escalate, avoid, or problem-solve?
- Do they pause before reacting?
- Do students see repair as necessary or optional?
- Do they understand that trust takes time?



Pre-Assessment

Directions: Read each question and pick the answer that most describes you right now. There are no right or wrong answers.

1. You notice a classmate sitting alone during group time. What are you most likely to do?
 - A. Sit with your usual friends and assume they want to be alone
 - B. Ask them if they'd like to join you
 - C. Tell the teacher someone is sitting alone
 - D. Ignore it and focus on your own work
2. Someone in your group seems upset but hasn't said why. What do you usually do?
 - A. Give them space and wait for them to speak
 - B. Ask if they're okay
 - C. Get annoyed because it slows the group down
 - D. Talk to someone else about it
3. A new student joins your class and doesn't know the routines yet. What are you most likely to do?
 - A. Let them figure it out on their own
 - B. Offer to help or explain what to do
 - C. Tell them they should already know
 - D. Avoid working with them
4. A friend wants to copy your work. What do you usually do?
 - A. Let them copy so they don't get upset
 - B. Say no and suggest helping them instead
 - C. Ignore them
 - D. Tell the teacher right away
5. A friend wants to play a game you don't enjoy. What are you most likely to do?
 - A. Play anyway so they don't feel bad
 - B. Say what you prefer and suggest another idea
 - C. Refuse and walk away
 - D. Let them decide every time



Pre-Assessment

6. Someone keeps teasing you, but says they're "just joking." What do you usually do?
 - A. Laugh along even if it bothers you
 - B. Tell them to stop
 - C. Tease them back
 - D. Ignore it completely

7. You and a classmate disagree during a group project. What do you usually do?
 - A. Stay quiet and let them decide
 - B. Explain your idea calmly
 - C. Argue until one of you wins
 - D. Stop working on the project

8. Someone misunderstands something you said and gets upset. What are you most likely to do?
 - A. Get defensive
 - B. Explain what you meant
 - C. Say nothing and move on
 - D. Blame them for misunderstanding

9. During a discussion, someone keeps interrupting you. What do you usually do?
 - A. Stop talking
 - B. Ask them to let you finish
 - C. Interrupt them back
 - D. Wait for the teacher to notice

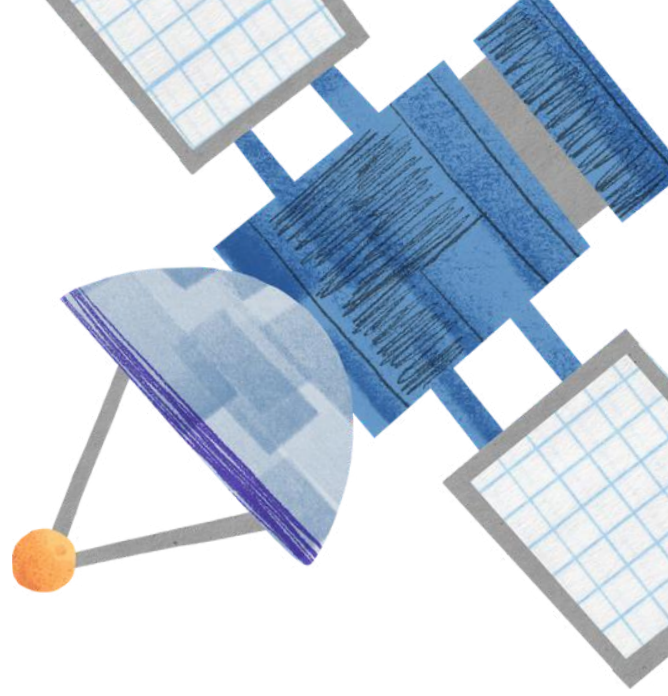
10. You and a friend both want the same role in a group activity. What do you do?
 - A. Argue until one of you gives in
 - B. Try to find a compromise
 - C. Let them have it every time
 - D. Quit the activity

11. You feel really angry during a disagreement. What do you usually do first?
 - A. Say whatever comes to mind
 - B. Take a moment to calm down
 - C. Walk away without saying anything
 - D. Blame the other person



Pre-Assessment

12. A disagreement starts to turn into an argument. What are you most likely to do?
- A. Try to solve the problem
 - B. Raise your voice
 - C. Get someone else involved immediately
 - D. Ignore it and hope it goes away
13. You realize you hurt someone's feelings. What do you usually do?
- A. Apologize and try to make it right
 - B. Say sorry quickly and move on
 - C. Avoid them
 - D. Assume they'll get over it
14. After an argument, a friend is still upset with you. What do you do?
- A. Give them time and check in later
 - B. Keep asking them to forgive you
 - C. Act like nothing happened
 - D. Stop being friends
15. Someone apologizes to you, but you're still hurt. What are you most likely to do?
- A. Accept the apology right away
 - B. Tell them you need time
 - C. Stay angry and ignore them
 - D. Pretend it doesn't matter



Lesson 1

Building Belonging & Empathy

Essential Question

How do my actions help others feel included and understood?

Core Idea

Belonging doesn't happen by accident. It is built through everyday choices—how we notice others, how we respond to their feelings, and how we include people in what we say and do.



Lesson Plan: Building Belonging & Empathy

Learning Objectives

By the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

1. Explain what belonging means and why it matters in relationships and group settings.
2. Identify actions that help others feel included, respected, and valued.
3. Recognize how empathy involves both understanding others' feelings and responding thoughtfully.
4. Describe how intent and impact can be different in social situations.
5. Apply empathy and inclusion strategies to realistic peer scenarios.

Learning Rationale

A sense of belonging is the foundation of healthy relationships, especially in the upper elementary years. At this stage, students are navigating more complex friendships, group work, and social expectations. They are becoming increasingly aware of inclusion, exclusion, and how their actions affect others within a group. These experiences shape how students communicate, participate, and engage with peers throughout the school day.

This lesson intentionally places belonging at the center of relationship learning by helping students understand that:

- Belonging is created through everyday actions and choices
- Empathy involves noticing others' feelings and responding thoughtfully
- Differences in perspectives, preferences, and emotions are a normal part of being in a group

By focusing first on empathy and inclusion, this lesson establishes a shared understanding that all students contribute to the social environment. When students recognize their role in creating belonging, they are better prepared to navigate disagreements, communicate respectfully, and support others during challenging moments.

Rather than focusing on rules or expected behavior, this lesson encourages students to reflect on impact, intention, and responsibility. It builds awareness and care for others—key skills for creating classrooms and communities where students feel respected, included, and connected, and where stronger relationship skills can continue to develop throughout the unit.



Reading Guide: Building Belonging & Empathy

Why use a reading guide?

This guide helps you connect the goals of Lesson 1: Building Belonging & Empathy to any text your students are already reading. By examining how characters include others, respond to differences, or misunderstand each other, students deepen their understanding of the lesson's core idea.

Guiding Questions for Any Text

Use these during read-alouds, literature circles, partner reading, or after independent reading.

Noticing Belonging & Exclusion

- How does the character feel in this part of the story—connected, left out, or unsure?
- What clues (actions, words, body language) show how the character is feeling?
- Who seems included in this scene? Who might feel left out?

Empathy & Perspective

- What might this character be feeling, even if they don't say it directly?
- Do different characters experience the same situation differently?
- Does anyone misunderstand someone else's feelings or intentions?

Choices & Impact

- What choices does the character make that affect others?
- How do those choices help or hurt a sense of belonging?
- Is there a difference between what the character meant to do and how it affected others?

Growth & Awareness

- Does the character become more aware of others' feelings as the story continues?
- How does belonging (or lack of it) affect the character's actions or confidence?
- What might the character do differently next time to help others feel included?

Connecting to Students' Thinking

- Have you seen a situation like this in another story?
- What can we learn from this character about including others?
- What kinds of choices help groups work better together?



Reading Guide: Building Belonging & Empathy

Suggested Books

Teachers may use any text they are already reading. The titles listed are optional suggestions that align well with the goals of Lesson 1: Building Belonging & Empathy.

Picture Books (Strong for Read-Alouds, Short Text Analysis)

These work well even in grades 4–5 because the themes are sophisticated, even if the format is simple.

- *Each Kindness* by Jacqueline Woodson
- *Those Shoes* by Maribeth Boelts
- *The Invisible Boy* by Trudy Ludwig
- *Last Stop on Market Street* by Matt de la Peña
- *The Day You Begin* by Jacqueline Woodson

Short Chapter Books / Novels (Great for Literature Circles)

These allow deeper discussion around perspective and belonging over time.

- *Wonder* by R.J. Palacio
- *Fish in a Tree* by Lynda Mullaly Hunt
- *Out of My Mind* by Sharon M. Draper
- *Save Me a Seat* by Sarah Weeks & Gita Varadarajan
- *Because of Mr. Terupt* by Rob Buyea

Graphic Novels (Excellent for Visual Learners)

Highly effective for empathy and perspective discussions.

- *New Kid* by Jerry Craft
- *El Deafo* by Cece Bell
- *Smile* by Raina Telgemeier



Universal Design for Learning (UDL) Supports

Lesson 1: Building Belonging & Empathy

Engagement — Multiple Ways to Motivate & Sustain Interest

- Normalize differences in feelings, perspectives, and social comfort to reduce shame and increase openness.
- Emphasize that belonging is built through small, everyday choices, not grand gestures.
- Offer choice in how students engage with scenarios (discussion, writing, drawing, or sorting).
- Use short, focused activities (2–5 minutes) to keep discussions purposeful and accessible.
- Invite students to set a simple intention, such as: “Today I will try to notice how my actions affect others.”

Representation — Multiple Ways to Understand the Skill

- Use visual icons or symbols to represent key concepts (belonging, empathy, inclusion, impact).
- Provide clear verbal and written explanations of what empathy and belonging mean in everyday situations.
- Model the skill by thinking aloud about a social scenario, including intent vs. impact.
- Share examples and non-examples of inclusive behavior to clarify understanding.
- Connect the skill to characters in books or classroom read-alouds using the Lesson 1 reading guide.

Action & Expression — Multiple Ways to Show Learning

- Allow students to respond to scenarios by writing, drawing, or explaining their thinking verbally.
- Provide sorting or matching activities for students who process best visually.
- Use role-play or “what would you do?” activities to practice noticing feelings and making inclusive choices.
- Offer sentence starters to support expression, such as:
 - “A choice that helps someone feel included is...”
 - “This character might be feeling ___ because...”
- Invite students to choose one inclusion or empathy strategy to try during group work or discussion.