

Session 82: Taking Responsibility for Mean Words

personal responsibility • conscience • compassion • respect

Session 82 guides students to take responsibility for hurtful words they might have spoken to another person.

Students will

- understand how mean words hurt and lead to conflict
- reflect on how they want to be regarded by others
- take greater responsibility for their words and actions and refrain from treating others in mean ways

Materials

- chart paper and marker or sign from Session 16 (see page 52 and Preparation, below)
- handout: "Jenna's Story: 'I Said Something Really Mean'" (page 192)

Preparation. If you haven't done so before, on chart paper write: *"Our words and actions today create memories that will fill others' memory banks tomorrow."*

Introduction. Ask for a volunteer to read the sign. Ask students what these words mean to them. Briefly discuss, emphasizing that when we're hurtful to another person, we risk creating in him or her a negative memory of us that can last forever. Say: **Today you'll be hearing a real story from a girl named Jenna whose mean words deeply hurt a classmate named Renee. (These aren't the girls' real names.)**

Discussion and Activity. Distribute the handout. Ask for a volunteer to read Jenna's story aloud to the class.

Afterward, ask students if they've ever been in a situation similar to Jenna's. Discuss briefly.

Ask: **Have you ever said something mean that ended up hurting someone? Why did you say what you said? Discuss briefly. Can you remember ever having someone say mean things about you? How did it make you feel? Briefly share responses.**

Then ask: **What important insight did Jenna gain from this experience? What did she learn?**

Emphasize that Jenna ended up taking responsibility for what she did. Ask why this is so important.

Refer to Win/Win Guideline 4: *Take responsibility for your role in the conflict.* Say: **By taking responsibility, Jenna was able to make things better. If she had denied what she'd done, what might have happened? How might she have felt inside?**

Ask students to turn to a partner and share about a time they said or did something hurtful that they still

need to take responsibility for. Let students know this might relate to a conflict with a friend, a sibling, a family adult, or someone else.

After several minutes, ask students what they might say to the person they hurt if that person were here right now. Some examples are: "It was wrong of me to say what I did. I'm really sorry and I hope you'll forgive me." Or, "I feel really bad that I hurt your feelings before. I was having a stressful day, but it was still wrong for me to take it out on you." The latter is an excellent example of truly taking responsibility without trying to excuse one's bad behavior. (In contrast, the following attempt at self-justification cancels out any good done by the apology: "I feel really bad that I hurt your feelings before. I was having a stressful day, and you should have known better than to annoy me.")

Encourage students to seek out the person later and make amends. Have them practice doing this with their partners. Circulate and give help where needed.

Reconvene in the circle and say: **Jenna realized that she didn't want to say mean things about people behind their backs. How else could she have handled the resentment she felt toward Renee? What can she do differently if a situation like this comes up again?** Discuss. Remind students that I-messages are an ideal alternative to hurtful words. Say: **If you have an issue with someone, try speaking to the person directly, starting from "I," instead of resorting to name-calling, sarcasm, put-downs, or talking behind the person's back.**

Ask students to think of an I-message Jenna could have used had she chosen to talk directly to Renee about how she felt.

Wrap-Up. Refer back to the sign: *“Our words and actions today create memories that will fill others’ memory banks tomorrow.”* Ask: **How do you want to be remembered by others? Discuss.**

Affirm students for their willingness to take responsibility, and for any acts or words of kindness, insight, and integrity during this session.

Follow-Up. Have students observe themselves as they go through their day, taking note of how they speak to others at school and at home. If someone gets on their nerves, do they react with a mean comment? If they do, are they willing to take responsibility afterward without making excuses for themselves?

Jenna's Story

"I Said Something Really Mean"

At the beginning of the year, I said something really mean about Stacy, this girl in my class who used to be my friend. I was mad at her because it seemed like she was the teacher's favorite kid. The mean thing I said got back to her during recess.

When we got inside I started crying because I knew I had done something really wrong. I found Stacy and told her I was sorry. I told her about 1 million times, but she was still mad. (I know I would be, too).

Later I started crying again and went to the girls' bathroom. There was Stacy. She was crying, too.

When she saw me crying, she realized how bad I really felt. She finally accepted my apology. Now she and I are good friends again.

The lesson I learned is that it's bad to talk about people behind their backs, because then you're just being like a bully. It is so true that no one is perfect. And it really hurts people when they find out you were talking about them. So why do it?

Think About It

How would you answer the question Jenna posed at the end of the story?

If you have the urge to talk behind someone's back, what can you do instead?

