

The Friend Effect: Creating Community and Building Positive Relationships

“

I've had great relationships and friendships over the years that pay dividends and give back so much in my life. These friendships affect my mental health, impact my everyday life and really make me happier on a daily basis.

– Kevin Love

”

CREATIVE ACTIVITY – Collage

Lesson Intention:

For decades, researchers who have studied happiness have found that one aspect of life continues to be consistently cited as a primary predictor of well-being: strong relationships. In the 1930's, Harvard psychologists began studying a cohort of participants to explore what kinds of life choices would impact their health and happiness. After more than 90 years of research, the findings were clear. Those who had strong relationships were the ones who experienced the greatest feelings of happiness. The way to develop these connections is to make intentional choices to cultivate friendships with people who feel compatible and aligned with our values. According to Kat Vellos, author of *We Should Get Together: The Secret of Cultivating Better Friendships*, a crucial aspect of building meaningful connections and positive relationships is to understand our own friendship profile, what she refers to as our 'friendship DNA.'

It is important to note that feelings of well-being and happiness are closely tied to feeling a sense of community. People often think of community in terms of close friendships, but it also includes everyday interactions with acquaintances, like a barista at a coffee shop or a front desk employee at a school or workplace. These brief interactions, called 'weak ties,' by Dr. Gillian Sandstrom, can increase feelings of happiness even when they are short or casual conversations.

In this lesson, students will reflect on both of these approaches to happiness – how they choose who to keep close to them, and how they build a sense of community by appreciating the interactions with people who they might not know as well.

Learning Goals:

- Understand that friendships and positive relationships increase well-being, happiness and mental health.
- Consider different methods for building community.

Materials for Lesson:

- [Featured Video \(1\) - Kat Vellos](#)
- [Additional Videos](#)
- [Lesson Plan \(this document\)](#)
- [Lesson PowerPoint](#)
- [Lesson Handout](#)

In Preparation for Lesson:

Prior to teaching this lesson, review the additional videos, and choose which one will resonate with your students. If time permits, play the additional video as well as the featured video.

Create your own photo collage ahead of time that you will share with your students.

If you would like this to be a tech-free activity, invite your students to bring in photos from home to make this collage. Another tech-free option is to ask your students to draw pictures of what friendship means to them, or have them cut out images from magazines.

If you would rather do this activity electronically, ensure that each student has a Canva account or another app for creating photo collages.

Featured Video:

Kat Vellos describes how we build stronger friendships by reflecting on our own preferences and values. Kat encourages us to think about what we contribute to the friendship.

Additional Videos:

1. Kevin Love describes the important role friendship plays in supporting his mental health.
2. Dr. Gillian Sandstrom explains that the casual interactions with the people we encounter in our daily routines, which she calls 'weak ties,' help us to foster a stronger sense of community and belonging.

Lesson Plan:

Display the 'welcome slide' from the Lesson PowerPoint as you begin.

**Slide 2*

Make the suggested language below authentic to yourself and meaningful for your students.

Launching the Lesson:

- Explain that positive relationships are one of the best predictors of well-being and happiness, and that knowing who you want as a friend can help form stronger friendships.
- Understand that a sense of community comes from learning how to appreciate the smaller interactions throughout the day with acquaintances, as well as relationships with friends.

Example of What You Could Say:

"From all of the studies that have been done, there continues to be one primary predictor of well-being and mental health: creating positive relationships. This is truly an important part of experiencing connection and happiness in your life. Yet, we rarely learn how to build these types of meaningful connections in an intentional, purposeful way.

Friendships often develop as a result of proximity (we're on the same athletic team or in the same math class, for example). This is a great way to make friends, but when we pause, and reflect on what we are looking for in a friend, it can allow us to create really positive connections that are supportive and good for us. There is significant research on actions we can take to create this feeling of connection and community in our lives."

Notes on What You Plan to Say:

Introduce Featured video:

Introduce the expert video and explain that you will pause the video to give students time to reflect and respond on the handout.

Example of What You Could Say:

“We are going to watch a video of an expert describing how we can use our values, socializing preferences, and communication style to decide who we want to be friends with.

As I play the video, I will pause at certain points for you to respond to journal prompts on your handout. This will give you time to reflect on the questions being asked.”

Play Featured video:

Kat Vellos shares how we can be self-reflective and intentional about who we can choose to be friends with and offers insight into strengthening our connections and friendships.

Pause the video at the following points and have students answer these prompts on their handout.

- What makes you a good friend?

- Pause at 1:40

What do you want out of a friend? And where might you find them?

- Pause at 2:08

- Write down one thing you learned about communication

- Pause at 3:18

- Compatibility / What’s your socializing style? Interests? Values?

- Pause at 6:09

Introduce Additional video:

If time permits, play Kevin Love’s video, where he shares the way important friendships benefits his mental health.

Example of What You Could Say:

“Kevin Love is an NBA player who has been vocal about the value of being open about mental health. In this video, he explains how crucial his friends have been in maintaining his mental health.”

If you choose to play another video, Dr. Gillian Sandstrom introduces the idea of ‘weak ties’ and the potential to create a feeling of happiness through conversations with casual acquaintances.

Example of What You Could Say:

“Another way to create feelings of happiness and connection is through conversations you have with the people you encounter in your daily life like the barista at your neighborhood coffee shop or a classmate you haven’t spoken with before. Dr. Sandstrom has studied these conversations and describes how they contribute to happiness in this video.”

Notes on What You Plan to Say:

Introducing the Creative Activity:

- Remind students that strong friendships and relationships are a strong tool for well-being. Often, friendships happen in a sort of accidental way based on proximity, someone that they see a lot. This can be a great way of making new friends, but if they want to make friends in a more intentional way, it can be helpful to reflect more about who we are and what we are looking for in a friend.
- Share your photo collage with your students.

Example of What You Could Say:

“The expert in this video shared some different ways of thinking about how and why we make friends, and today’s creative activity will allow us to reflect on this idea. How important is it that your friends share your values? What is your lifestyle – are you outdoorsy or indoorsy? Are you usually playful or serious? Do you like socializing one on one, in a small group, or in a big crowd?”

We are going to think about these questions by reflecting on the friendships and relationships we already have. You will create a photo collage of the people closest to you – friends or family. As you look through your photographs, reflect on what you look for in someone close to you.

I would like to share my photo collage with you. In this collage....*(Share who is in your photo collage and why you selected them.)*”

Notes on What You Plan to Say:

Creative Activity:

**Slide 3*

Students create a collage using pictures of their friends, family and pets that capture happy moments and shared experiences. The collage can either be digital, students can bring photos from home, or students can draw pictures or cut out images from magazines.

Lesson Closure:

Invite students to share their creative projects.

Example of What You Could Say:

“Does anyone want to share their collage with the class? You can also share how it felt to do this activity. Did you think about your friends and family in a new way after the video(s) and conversation we had today?”

Invite a few students to share.

Before we end today, I want you to remember that building positive relationships is one of the strongest ways to support your well-being and mental health. I encourage each of you to try one small action this week to strengthen a friendship—maybe it’s checking in with a friend, saying hi to someone new, or showing appreciation to someone in your life. These small steps can really help us nurture the friendships we have, build new connections, and support our own well-being.”

Notes on What You Plan to Say:

Supplemental Information:

1. UCLA Department of Psychology has a Center for Friendship Research that focuses on building community. Social psychology researcher Dr. Victor Kaufman conducts research on the impact of friendship on happiness and well-being. His articles look at [Unique Ways in Which the Quality of Friendships Matter for Life Satisfaction](#) and [Social Relationships and Well-Being: Rediscovering the Importance of Adult Friendship](#).

2. [Kat Vellos' book We Should Get Together](#) describes methods for cultivating new friendships and gives advice about how to choose friends that are a great fit in terms of values and interests.

3. [A Harvard study](#) that followed the lives of 724 men across 75 years found that having strong relationships was the most important element in experiencing long-term happiness. This study provides robust findings around the way relationships also impact health and long-term well-being.

4. Leah Pearlman's comics offer visual representations of abstract ideas and feelings, and many of them reflect on friendship and relationships. [Students might enjoy this video clip that offers a few examples of her approach](#). Invite students to create a single panel comic about their friendship profile that answers the question "For me, friendship looks like....."

5. Dr. Gillian Sandstrom shares her research on 'weak ties' in her interview on [Hidden Brain](#) and in her book [Once Upon a Stranger](#). If students enjoyed her expert video, they might want to conduct their own 'self-ethnography'. To do this, have students spend one day noticing all of the small connections they have with people in their daily routine. How do they react when they see someone who is a 'weak tie'? Do they smile and wave? Do they ask a friendly question like, "How are you today?" The intention to this exercise is that moving forward the students will have more awareness of these connections and feel more positive as they encounter these interactions throughout the day.