

## Establishing a Safe Learning Environment



In many of ADL's lesson plans and activities, students are challenged to explore and articulate their personal feelings about sensitive topics including segregation, discrimination, and the value of diverse school communities. Talking about themes related to diversity requires that students demonstrate maturity and compassion for others. In conjunction with social justice curricula, it is therefore recommended that teachers use service learning, conflict resolution, cooperative learning and other educational models that foster the group cohesion and trust needed to discuss sensitive issues safely and productively. The article entitled, [Creating an Anti-Bias Learning Environment](#), provides useful strategies for raising

issues of diversity and bias in the classroom, and making such topics an integral part of daily practice.

The activities included in this guide range from basic historical awareness to more complex explorations of race and discrimination. While ADL's lessons are intended to increase empathy and broaden students' perspectives, certain discussions may cause prejudices and stereotypes to surface. In addition, some students may express discomfort or have difficulty accepting others' viewpoints. It is therefore recommended that you introduce activities in sequence and selectively depending on students' readiness to delve into sensitive content. You may also choose to adapt or omit particular activities in order to provide the most safe and developmentally appropriate experience for your students. In addition, make sure to monitor responses to each lesson and provide adequate time to debrief and process students' feelings. Consult school mental health professionals to discuss student behavior about which you are concerned and utilize instructional techniques that provide the structure and support your particular group of students require.

For example, make sure that a teacher or other qualified adult facilitates all small group discussions until your students show they are prepared to engage independently in small group or partner dialogue. If your students are not prepared to discuss personal experiences or examples of bias in respectful ways, use literature or other tools that provide a safe distance from which to talk about such issues. Likewise, if your students cannot yet engage in role play with sensitivity and maturity, opt for structured writing and discussion until they are comfortable enough to act out scenarios responsibly.

It is also useful to introduce working agreements or ground rules (see [Establishing Ground Rules](#)) for group discussions that communicate an expected standard of behavior. Encourage your students to collaboratively develop working agreements that ensure safety and respect. Suggest one or more of the following as examples.

- **Respect Others:** You will hear ideas that may be new or different for you, and opinions with which you may disagree. As you participate and interact, try to take in new information without judgment and to keep an open mind. Make sure that your words and body language reflect a respectful attitude toward others. Learn by listening to others.
- **Speak From the "I":** Speak from your own personal experiences and do not judge the thoughts or experiences of others. Use I-statements such as "I feel..." or "In my experience..." Avoid "You should" statements and generalizations of any kind.
- **Ask Questions:** Much of the information we will cover will be new to many of you. Please feel free to ask any questions that come up for you without fear that they are too "silly" or "stupid." Make sure to phrase all questions in respectful and value-neutral ways.
- **Respect Confidentiality:** Please make sure that everything said in the room stays in the room. When sharing personal anecdotes, make sure to avoid using the real names of other people.
- **Share "Air Time":** While you are encouraged to express your ideas and opinions, please do not monopolize the group's time. Help create a safe space in which everyone can speak. No one, however, is obligated to speak. "Passing" is okay.