

LESSON PLAN

Gossip, Rumors, and Identity

Compelling Question: What are rumors and gossip and what impact do they have when social identity groups are targeted?

Grade Level		Time	Common Core Standards
K-2	3-5	45-60 minutes	Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening, Language
6-8	9-12		



Web Related Connections

Lesson Plans

[Identity-Based Bullying](#)

[Intent vs. Impact: Why Does it Matter?](#)

[Teens, Tech, Connect: How Technology Impacts Teenagers' Friendships](#)

Other Resources

[6 Ways to be an Ally](#)

[11 Ways Schools Can Help Students Feel Safe in Challenging Times](#)

[The Power of Gossip](#)

Key Words

- bias
- envy
- gossip
- identity
- misunderstanding
- power
- projection
- reflection
- rumor
- social identity group
- stereotypes

LESSON OVERVIEW

Gossip and rumors are commonplace in our society, taking place and often escalating in workplaces, online, among friends, in the political world, in neighborhoods, community groups and schools. There is a great deal of gossip and rumors that circulate among young people in schools and in digital spaces. Gossip and rumors can be harmful not only to the subject or target of those rumors, but also to others who identify in the same way, those who participate in the rumors and gossip, and the school community as a whole. Oftentimes, the subject of the rumors are people in vulnerable and marginalized identity groups, which can result in the rumors and gossip causing additional or sustained harm, alienation, isolation, and bias.

This lesson provides an opportunity for students to understand what gossip and rumors are, reflect on their own experiences with gossip and rumors and explore how some social identity groups may be more vulnerable to and marginalized by rumors and gossip.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Students will understand what gossip and rumors are.
- Students will reflect on their own experiences with gossip and rumors.
- Students will explore how some social identity groups may be more vulnerable to and marginalized by rumors and gossip.
- Students will consider the impact of gossip and rumors by exploring scenarios.

MATERIALS AND PREPARATION

- [Gossip and Rumors Scenarios](#) (one copy for each student)
- [Quotes about Gossip and Rumors](#) (one copy for each student)



What are gossip and rumors?

1. Start the lesson by asking students: "What is gossip?" Record their responses on the board/smart board. Then ask, "What are rumors?" Again, record their responses on the board/smart board. Read aloud the words and phrases on the board/smart board and then elicit/provide definitions for gossip and rumors as follows:

Gossip: Information that is shared about the behavior and personal lives of other people. It may or may not be true.

Rumor: Information or a story about someone that is spread that has not been proven to be true.

Ask students to share an example of gossip and an example of a rumor, reminding them not to include names or specific situations that could highlight students in the class or school. You can also have them share an example drawn from a TV show or movie, or around celebrity culture.

2. Next, engage students in silent reflection. Read aloud the following questions, one at a time, and invite students to reflect on their responses, quietly to themselves. You can encourage students to jot down notes if they want to.
 - When was the last time you heard or shared gossip?
 - When was the last time you heard or spread a rumor?
 - What feels good or positive about sharing or hearing gossip and rumors?
 - What feels bad or harmful about sharing or hearing gossip and rumors?
 - Have you ever been the subject or target of gossip or rumors? What was that like? How did you feel?

After giving students a few minutes to consider all the questions, ask if anyone would like to share something they reflected on. Then ask the whole class: "What did you learn or discover by thinking about these questions?"

Why do people spread gossip and rumors?



1. Explain to students that there are a lot of reasons why people in general, and young people specifically, share gossip and spread rumors. Ask students, "Why do you think people share or spread rumors and gossip?"

As students share their responses, put their reasons/responses in a chart that includes the following categories: (1) Positive, (2) Negative and (3) Not Sure/Neutral. It may look something like this:

Why do people share or spread rumors and gossip?		
Positive	Not Sure/Neutral	Negative
To learn about others.	To convey information quickly.	To get revenge.
To feel part of a group.	Don't really think about it.	To be more popular or gain social power.
To feel "in the know," relevant or important.		Because you don't like someone.
To test out whether the rumor is true.		"Drama" is entertaining and exciting.

As you are filling out the chart and placing students' reasons in each category, there may be disagreement about whether a reason is positive, negative or neutral. Therefore, as you categorize students' responses, ask them where they think the reason should be placed. Ask others, "Do you agree with this?" If there is disagreement among the students, place the reason in the "not sure/neutral" column. Dig deeper and ask students who have different perspectives to share why they think the reason is positive, negative or neutral.

2. Engage students in a brief discussion by asking:

- As you look at this chart, what do you notice? What do you wonder?
- What do you think about the impact of the 'positive' reasons people share rumors and gossip? Are these positive impacts on individuals? On groups? On our school community?
- Does it matter if the reasons are positive, negative or neutral? Please explain.
- Who is impacted by gossip and rumors? What does the impact look and feel like?

Social Identity Groups and Rumors/Gossip

1. Ask students, "What is identity?" Elicit/explain that identity is defined as "the qualities, beliefs, etc. that make a particular person or group different from others."
2. Then ask students, "What are social identity groups?" Explain that social identity groups include race, ethnicity, gender and gender identity, sexual orientation, (dis)ability, age and generation, socioeconomic status, religion, etc. These social identity groups often represent the most significant aspect of identity and influence how people relate to each other, in communities and within society. These categories are referred to "social identities."

Explain further that social identities describe the identity groups that carry significance and, at times, shared experiences within a society, for the people who belong to them. Within each category of social identity, there is one identity group that is treated with more respect, or power, has accumulated advantages and/or is treated as the default or "norm." And there are one or multiple identity groups that experience discrimination and harmful stereotypes, and/or are treated as "other."

Share with students that rumors and gossip sometimes, and maybe often, focus or revolve around someone's social identity. Also, certain social identity groups in a school may be more likely to become the subject of rumors and gossip. These social identities may represent people and groups that have less power or are in the minority in a school. For example, there may be very few Asian students in a school and because they are in the minority or have less social power, they may be more likely to be the subject of rumors and gossip. On the other hand, you could have a group of students at school who are well represented, like girls/young women, but who are more often the subject of gossip and rumors compared to boys/young men.

You can also explain that rumors and gossip may take hold and "stick" more readily for people who are already socially vulnerable or marginalized in some way. The rumors and gossip may "stick" because the stereotypes people hold about those identity groups make the gossip or rumors more believable.

3. Have students turn and talk with a person sitting near them and respond to the following questions: "Are there certain social identity groups in our school that are more often the targets of rumors and gossip? Are there certain identity group members who are more likely to be believed when they share rumors or gossip?" Remind students not to share specific names or situations.
4. Reconvene the students and explain that they will delve more deeply into social identity groups, rumors and gossip in a small group scenario activity.

Impact of gossip and rumors: small group discussion

1. Engage students in a discussion by asking:

- How do rumors and gossip impact the person who is the subject or target of those rumors?
- How do rumors and gossip impact others who may identify in the same way?
- How do rumors and gossip impact the school community?

2. Explain to students that they are going to work together in small groups to discuss scenarios that involve gossip and rumors. Divide students into groups of 4–5 students each. Distribute a copy of the [Gossip and Rumors Scenarios](#) to all students. Then, for each small group, assign one of the scenarios or allow them to choose the one they want to discuss.

[Note to Teacher: You may choose to eliminate some of the scenarios if they do not resonate, if they are too similar to recent events in your school community and may cause harm, or if you decide to have all students focus on only one of the scenarios on the handout.]

3. When students are situated and have their scenario identified, have them read their scenario silently and then discuss the scenario guided by the following questions. Have them assign someone in their group to take notes (recorder) and someone to report back to the larger group (reporter).

Questions for Discussion:

- What’s happening in the scenario?
 - Are there specific social identity groups that are impacted? How does identity or bias play a role in this scenario?
 - What is the impact on the person who is the target/subject of the rumors and gossip?
 - How are the gossip and rumors harmful to the person in the situation? How are they harmful to others? How are they harmful to the school community?
 - What are other possible negative consequences of this situation?
 - What could the people in this situation have done to stop the rumors or gossip?
4. Reconvene the class and, if time permits, have each group share some highlights of their small group discussions. If time is limited, invite a few responses to the question: “What is your biggest takeaway from doing this activity? What did you learn?”
 5. Based on ideas generated by the small groups, together, create a list of strategies or ways people can avoid, decrease or prevent rumors and gossip from happening. The list might look something like this:
 - Don’t participate in spreading rumors or gossip; don’t amplify it.
 - Talk to the person spreading the rumors or gossip and explain why it’s harmful, and encourage them not to do it.
 - Organize an anti-gossip campaign at school.
 - Push back on what is being said about the person who is the subject of the rumors or gossip and say something positive about that person.
 - Correct false information that is being shared.
 - Act as an ally to the person being targeted by gossip and rumors.
 - Consider the reasons why people gossip and try to come up with other ways to help them meet those needs (for connection, friendship, etc.).
 6. If time permits, have students explore one of the ideas in greater depth. They can either write an essay that explores the idea, talk to other students to solicit their feedback about the idea, or create a poster or a short video (or TikTok, if permissible) that promotes the idea or suggestion. Invite students to share what they produce with the class.

Closing

Distribute a copy of the [Quotes about Gossip and Rumors](#) to each student or write them on the board/smart board. Invite students to pick one quote they are drawn to and then have them write a few words about whether they agree or disagree with the quote, what it means to them and how it relates (or not) to something they’ve experienced.

Additional Reading and Resources

- [Rumor Has It: Why People Gossip and How You Can Cope](#) (Psychology Today, March 4, 2021)
- [The Science Behind Why People Gossip—And When It Can Be a Good Thing](#) (Time, September 25, 2019)
- [Understanding the Impact of Rumors and Gossip](#) (Very Well Family, July 18, 2020)

Common Core Anchor Standards

CONTENT AREA/STANDARD
Reading
R2: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.
Writing
W1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence. W2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.
Speaking and Listening
SL1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively. SL3: Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.
Language
L4: Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate. L5: Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.

CASEL's SEL Competencies

COMPETENCIES
Self-Awareness: The abilities to understand one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior across contexts.
Social Awareness: The abilities to understand the perspectives of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds, cultures, & contexts.
Self-Management: The ability to manage one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations and to achieve goals and aspirations.
Relationship Skills: The abilities to establish and maintain healthy and supportive relationships and to effectively navigate settings with diverse individuals and groups.
Responsible Decision-Making: The abilities to make caring and constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions across diverse situations.

Gossip and Rumors Scenarios

SCENARIO #1

Julia and Kiran have been friends since kindergarten and were best friends all through elementary school. Over the past few years while in middle school, Kiran has made new friends who all live in the wealthier (i.e., rich or affluent) part of town. In trying to impress her new friends, Kiran tells them that she doesn't like Julia anymore, and also gossips with them about the way Julia dresses and her sexual behavior. In reality, Kiran still likes Julia but doesn't want her new friends to know. Some of these new friends told other people what Kiran has been saying and it gets back to Julia.

SCENARIO #2

Carlos likes another seventh grader named Matt. Only Carlos' closest friends know that he likes Matt and he made them promise not to tell anyone. Carlos doesn't want Matt to know and he also doesn't want his sexual orientation to become public right now. One of Carlos' friends named Molly tells another friend of hers and tells her not to tell anyone. Before you know it, several other people have been gossiping on a group text that Carlos likes Matt and it even starts spreading on social media until Matt finds out. Matt isn't gay and doesn't want anyone to think he is, so he starts talking to a girl named Molly to let everyone know he likes girls.

SCENARIO #3

Nadia is one of the few Muslim students at her school. She is the only one among her group of friends who wears a hijab (head scarf). Nadia has always had to deal with questions about her religion and why she wears a hijab. The situation has escalated recently. Other students and even a few adults at school have asked questions about whether some of her family members are terrorists. One of Nadia's friends tells Nadia that she's been seeing offensive texts and memes on social media about Nadia having relatives who are terrorists and that they were involved in September 11 terrorist attack. Nadia has gotten withdrawn and has talked to her parents about not wearing a hijab anymore. She doesn't want to stop wearing it, but she doesn't know what else to do.

SCENARIO #4

In the middle of sixth grade, Anthony switches middle schools within the same town. He only told his small group of friends about the move. A day after Anthony left his old school, some students started telling other people different stories about why Anthony left the old school because they wanted to look like they were "in the know." Some of the stories included: that Anthony got kicked out of his old school because his grades were so bad, Anthony was getting bullied because of his special needs and transferred, or that Anthony never wanted to go to the old school (this was the actual reason). Anthony heard what people were saying and was really upset and concern

SCENARIO #5

Ethan and his friends are comparing scores from their recent math test. Ethan got a 96%, while all his friends scored in the 70s. They start teasing Ethan, saying he's the "teacher's pet," a "nerd," and that the teacher favors him because he's Jewish and she is also Jewish. Ethan feels uncomfortable and therefore lies and says he copied someone's answers; that is how he did so well. His friends start to tell other people that Ethan cheated and it starts spreading around school that he cheated and got away with it.

Quotes about Gossip and Rumors

Words are powerful. Don't let it be the knife that hurts someone.

We all need to be talked about once to learn how to "uncare" what others think of us.

Those who gossip with you will later gossip about you.

A coward talks to everyone but you.

Be less curious about people and more curious about ideas.

Most gossip is envy in disguise.

Rumor travels faster, but it doesn't stay put as long as truth.

Make it a habit of shutting down conversations that aim to tear others down.

What other people say about you is not the real you but a reflection of them.

A friendship built on gossip will end on gossip.

Rumors are mostly a projection of the individual who started them.

Never waste your time trying to explain yourself to people who are committed to misunderstanding you.

Rumors are the oldest form of mass media.

Fake friends believe in rumors. Real friends believe in you.