

The Five Skills

Outcomes

When students have completed the core set of *No Putdowns* lessons, they will be able to:

- Recognize and understand the effects of putdowns on themselves and others
- Recognize that putdowns are used for a variety of reasons
- Develop strategies to reduce their own use of putdowns
- Recognize and use alternative communication skills
- Develop peaceful, nonabusive strategies to deal with putdowns and other conflict situations
- Demonstrate strategies for calming down
- List attributes, achievements, abilities of which they are proud
- Recognize that they have choices about how to respond in any situation
- Recognize and express appreciation, encouragement, or compliments
- Demonstrate increased levels of respect in youth-youth and youth-adult interactions.

Defining Putdowns

No Putdowns for Grades 6-8 defines putdowns as negative or belittling words or actions that show disrespect toward a person or groups of persons. This definition is deliberately broad and allows the teacher to address a range of behaviors, from “You’re a jerk” to hate crimes.

Putdowns may be used because of fear, anger, ignorance, jealousy, need for power, frustration, lack of alternative communication skills, insecurity, habit, modeled behavior or humor. (Putdowns are often disguised as

humor—as seen in television sitcoms.) Verbal putdowns are used both directly (to another person’s face) and indirectly (to a third person about someone else).

Putdowns by adolescents take many forms, both verbal and nonverbal, including

- Dismissal or rejection, in the form of critical or slighting remarks
- Body language—rolled eyes, curled lip, shrugged shoulders, sneer
- Mimicking or mockery
- Words or actions used as weapons
- Self-putdowns
- Tone of voice, such as sarcasm or insincerity
- Stereotyping
- Hate language and intolerance
- Graffiti and hate symbols
- Harassment (including sexual)
- Physical violence

Putdowns have a situational quality. Not only does a person’s reaction depend on the source of the putdown, it also depends upon circumstances. Putdowns hurt most when

- They are used in front of peers
- A loved one or someone you respect uses them
- They are used because of prejudice
- They are used repeatedly to harass
- They hit a vulnerable area, something about which you are already insecure (family, appearance, abilities, body image, sexuality)
- You are already sad, upset, frustrated or discouraged

Activity 4

Think About Why

Stepping Over the Line

Time Needed: 25-30 minutes

Purpose: Students will make choices about what they consider offensive statements (put-downs, hate language, derogatory language or jokes).

Main Idea: People have different opinions about what is offensive, and that can lead to conflict. Sometimes, we privately think something is offensive or hurtful, but we don't say anything because others seem to tolerate it. Sometimes, we are too sensitive and take offense when none is intended.

Materials: Tape or chalk

Teacher Preparation: Find a space where students can move in a large group. Designate a line on the floor with chalk or tape.

Using this Activity:

1. Ask students to line up on one side of the line. Explain that you will read some statements or categories to them. When they hear something they consider offensive, they will take a step forward, signifying that the speaker would be "stepping over the line" by saying it. Continue to read. When they hear another offensive item on the list, they can take another step forward. If they think the statement or category is neutral or positive, they will stay where they are.

Phrases or comments

- Your sneakers are stupid.
- Your hair looks like your mom did it.
- Nice shirt!
- That sweater is so gay.
- You really understand me!
- Thanks for listening.
- You're really skinny.
- You're really fat.
- You're so stupid.
- You throw like a girl.
- Too bad you're so ugly.
- That was a lame excuse for not meeting us after school.
- You're always late.
- I can't stand it when I have to wait for you.
- When are you going to stand up for yourself?
- Nobody wants to be around you.
- Your breath smells like a sewer.
- Your lunch looks disgusting.
- What a crybaby.
- He's just a dumb jock.

You can use comments you hear around the school instead of the putdowns listed here.

Try reading some statements in a neutral voice. Then change your tone of voice, facial expression or body language and repeat that statement. Do students interpret the statement differently now?

Discuss how tone of voice (sarcasm or fake sweetness), facial expression or body language can change the meaning.

Activity 4**Think About Why**

Discuss the role of peer pressure in acknowledging putdowns or remaining silent.

Did students feel they couldn't move without looking around first to see if someone else thought the comment was a putdown, too? Did anyone step forward or stay in place just because everyone else did?

Are there degrees of putdowns? Would they have stepped farther over the line depending on the degree of putdowns?

Do people have different ideas of what a putdown is?

Some students may be many steps over the line while others are still behind the line. Differences in sensitivity can lead to conflict when one person doesn't know that his or her language or beliefs are hurtful to others.

If time permits, raise the issue of putdowns, swearing, hate language, and stereotyping in television and music. Are we more tolerant of derogatory language or jokes about certain groups because we hear them so often?

Stepping Over the Line—continued*Categories*

- Ethnic jokes
- Graffiti that says, “White People Rule!”
- Swastika on the cover of a notebook
- Making fun of someone’s sexual orientation or religious beliefs
- Anti-female music lyrics
- Anti-police music lyrics
- TV show portraying all teens as shoplifters

2. After reading five or six comments or categories, discuss where students are standing in relation to the line. Ask “Was it easier to say, ‘that’s a putdown’ when others also stepped forward? How did you feel if you stepped forward when almost everyone else stayed in place?” (Or stayed in place when others stepped forward?)
3. Now that the issue of peer pressure has been raised, read several more comments or categories. Give feedback about whether you noticed students looking around more. Did they seem more willing to make up their own minds?
4. Discuss issues of sensitivity. Were there disagreements about what was a putdown and what wasn’t? Discuss the implications of having different levels of sensitivity or perceptions about what is offensive.
5. Sum up, as necessary, using the Main Point above.